

“You know what I’d miss the most when you leave on the morrow?” Harry asked as he jumped back from a sweeping strike aimed at taking his legs from underneath him by Nymeria.

“What? Getting beaten up by a girl?” Nymeria asked with a growl as she swiped and jabbed persistently with her spear poking holes into the defences created by her opponent.

“No. Your charming personality and these wonderful talks we have before I lay you low into the ground like this...” said Harry as he caught and deflected a few of Nymeria’s jabs but suddenly, he managed to trap her spear using his sword and armguard.

He was quick to force her spear into the ground and he managed to put his foot on it. Predictably, Nymeria went for her dagger fastened on her hip and slashed aiming for his heel. He somersaulted over her leaving his sword but in the air, he freed his dagger from his waist. When his feet touched the ground, he quickly caught Nymeria by her hair and pulled her down with his dagger poised at her neck.

“So, who’s getting beaten up by whom?” Harry asked cheekily.

Nymeria scowled before she smoothed out her expression and took on a coy smile on her lips.

“If you wanted a view down my dress, you could’ve said so Lord Stark. You need not have been so... forceful.” Nymeria winked suavely.

“Nice try you wily snake.” Harry scoffed, increasing the pressure he was exerting on the dagger so that its tip dug in a little into Nymeria’s skin.

“Hmph! You’re a spoilsport.” Nymeria complained, seeing as her natural charms were not working in distracting Harry.

“You’ve to say the magic words to get up.” Harry insisted when she looked at him with doe eyes.

“Fine.” Nymeria let out a sigh of disappointment. “I forfeit.”

“You should’ve led with that instead of your usual tricks.” said Harry, removing the dagger and giving her space to climb to her legs.

Nymeria lay there flat on the ground before she did a perfect kick up to land on her feet. Harry was distracted for a bit as her stunt did interesting things to several parts of her body.

“You’re staring.” Nymeria teased.

“You’re no longer engaged in combat with me. I can stare all I want.” Harry said shamelessly, eyeing her when she laughed before his eyes once again went back to staring at her upper body.

“You’re doing it again.” Nymeria teased.

Harry just shrugged as he remained immune to her attempts to push his buttons. She was the one intent on trying to get a reaction out of him using her body. He just happened to appreciate the view whenever outside of their bouts contrary to Nymeria’s intentions. That was her problem, not his.

“Oh, I’m going to miss this banter between you two. It’s like watching one of those Norvosi plays. At least, I can leave knowing that I managed to impart some valuable lessons into your head Harrion Stark.” said Oberyne smirking proudly.

“You taught him too much father. He was a cute little wolf cub when I first met him. Now, he thinks too much of himself.” said Nymeria, dusting off the sand from her breeches.

“Really? I think you remain the same Flying Sand who screamed her heart out for the whole castle to hear.” Harry japed.

“Wha...? You!” Nymeria lunged at him with her bare hands leading to a lot of grappling on the sandy floor.

The next day the whole castle was assembled outside to see off Prince Oberyn and his Dornish party.

“You’ve been a splendid addition to the castle and an entertaining guest Prince Oberyn. I also thank you for the valuable lessons you imparted.”

“No. Thank you. Thanks to you I touched the clouds, a privilege only dragonriders could claim. Not to mention the wonders of magic that you showed me should last me a lifetime of warm memories about this place.” Oberyn embraced Harry and patted him on his head. “Don’t slack on your training. A good swordsman never stops training and a good soldier never stops preparing for war.”

“There is no war.” Harry pointed out.

“Maesters claim peacetime comes after war. Those who believe it is peacetime will lose the next war. Peacetime is the time when men prepare for the next war. Keep that in mind young Stark. Peace is an illusion mentioned in history books written by victors over the blood of their defeated enemies.” Oberyn said, his tone turning a tad serious before his carefree smile was back in place.

“I’ll be missing our training sessions and friendly banter, Harrion Stark. Though peculiar and annoying as you can be I consider you a friend.” Nymeria leaned in and hugged him while whispering into his ears, “It’s a shame that you are so young. When you grow up a little more find me in Dorne.”

“Hmm. Maybe I’ll take you up on that offer someday.” Harry nodded, keeping their ‘banter’ on even ground.

“Hmm.” Nymeria smiled at him coyly. “You should visit Sunspear. My cousin Arianne will like you.”

“What is there not to like?” Harry asked, raising his chin superciliously.

Nymeria giggled shaking her head before climbing on her horse. The Dornish party rode away on their horses with an escort from his guard detail. He didn’t want the trouble that’d fall upon him and his family if a Prince of Dorne somehow winds up dead while travelling in the North. The situation in the south was already precarious enough.

“Maester Marwyn. Come.” he called for the Archmaester once the Dornish party disappeared in the distance.

“My lord?”

“Any word from the south about the capital?” Harry asked, keeping his true worries confined to his mind.

He had not shared the strange meeting he had inside the Dragonmont with anyone else. In fact, he’d like to keep it that way. There was no point in bringing up some quasi-divine entities into his daily troubles. He got the feeling it was going to eventually crop up anyway and he was putting off that particular can of worms into the future as far as possible. Perhaps, the Old Gods would just settle down after some initial shenanigans and go back to whatever godly thing they were supposed to do.

“Nothing good, my lord. The Citadel is not happy about my self-appointment as the maester of Avalon and they’re showing it by being petty in sharing their usual knowledge of events transpiring

in the capital. Nonetheless, I happen to have a good relationship with many maesters working in the Crownlands. They tell me the situation is dire.”

“Dire as in no-hope dire or just a recoverable dire?” Harry asked.

“The smallfolk from the city are fleeing. They are of course flocking to the closest safe havens which happen to be near castles like Rosby, Duskendale, Hayford, Antlers and many other locations throughout the Crownlands. Some have even taken to migrating to the Reach and perhaps in time to the Riverlands as well.”

“That’s quite a lot.” Harry admitted.

“It is I’m afraid. It seems the people of King’s Landing feel the city is no longer going to be the capital city. They feel King Robert has abandoned them.” said Marwyn.

“Has he?” Harry asked with a frown.

“In a sense, yes. The King has shifted himself, his family, and the royal court to Storm’s End. While the smallfolk in King’s Landing are grappling with the loss of crops and livelihood his grace seems to be having the time of his life by throwing balls, feasts, and tourneys in Storm’s End. There is some serious discontent among the Crownland lords as they are saddled with the burden of accommodating the fleeing smallfolk from King’s Landing.”

Harry’s frown only deepened. He didn’t have any stake in the Baratheon dynasty but King Robert seems to be a reasonable man which was deeply beneficial on occasions. He hardly saw any tyrannical tendencies in the Baratheon king and that was a plus in his books despite the man’s frivolous spending of gold and unhealthy trysts outside his marriage bed. If some sort of power struggle happens and the Baratheon dynasty falls the replacement on the Iron Throne might not necessarily be a considerate ruler in sync with his interests. Maybe even a regency could be established for Joffrey Baratheon should King Robert get deposed. He could see the Lannisters making a play for the control of the throne or even one of Robert’s brothers should they gather more support.

The natural succession laws of the Iron Throne had become redundant with the overthrow of House Targaryen. The flimsy claim Robert Baratheon has raised for his claim on the throne would not stand for long. Sooner or later someone with more power will go for the throne and the cycle will continue until a dynasty manages to hold on to the throne of the Seven Kingdoms long enough to forge some traditional bonds over the succession. Economic and political instability was not exactly good news for a place like Avalon or even the North where much of the economy was not as active as compared to the rest of the Seven Kingdoms.

Harry was not surprised to find out that the most attractive and lucrative profession in the North was hunting and brewery. It was to be expected of course. The people of the North cannot live without good furs that can ward against the biting cold and ale to drown in their sorrows. Most Northern families go through a very skewed diet that was almost completely dependent on meat. The harvests were hard to come by thanks to a hostile climate and those few harvests that gets some yields were squirrelled away in castles. The commoners hardly get any say and they tend to suffer the brunt of any decisions taken by the lords of the North. Ole men of the North leave their families when winter arrives on their doorsteps. They wander among the snowy plains of the North becoming food for shadowcats so that the young in their family could survive the winter.

There was even a saying in the North that spoke volumes of the true state of the largest kingdom of Westeros.

‘The snows take the old in winter while war takes the young in summer.’

The only advantage as far as he can see from the North’s prominent profession was that it gave the North a surplus of extremely competent soldiers in times of war. But having good warriors for throwing into the bloodbath of war was not exactly an attractive prospect in Harry’s eyes. That was why he was focused on investing in diversifying the human resources of Avalon. There were other ways of maintaining the martial culture of the North rather than depending on the current system. So, as a first step to demolishing hunger in Avalon and increasing nutritional intake, he introduced rationing for the poorest households. So far only a handful of families could avail the benefits of rationing because of the lagging survey process that identifies poor households near Avalon.

Forming the guilds was a crucial step in collecting data about people settling in Avalon, their professions, and the income they generate. He was also hoping to develop the guilds as a platform for trade disputes, quality management, wealth generation and as a means of increasing productivity.

“Has the survey made any strident gains?” Harry asked knowing the difficulties the surveyors were facing in the field.

“I’m afraid not my lord. The population of Avalon is less but growing. We lack enough literate men for the surveys to gain traction.”

“Prince Oberyne has left Avalon. There is no more need for the Alchemists to hide in their tower. We could use them as surveyors as a temporary measure.” Harry suggested.

“They won’t be happy but they’ll follow your orders.” Marwyn mused aloud. “Speaking of the Alchemists they have a request, my lord.”

“Oh.” Harry raised an eyebrow. “What do they want?”

“Some of the Alchemists have family back in the capital. They inquired whether it’d be possible to have their family resettle here in the North.”

Harry was thoughtful for a moment. He could understand their concerns but at the same time, he didn’t have the resources to pull off a stunt like that without raising red flags in the capital. No doubt the families of the absconding Alchemists were most likely kept under watch.

“I’ll consider it,” Harry said reluctantly. “Tell them to formulate a list of their family members. I need detailed descriptions and their place of residence. Not an iota of information should be left out.”

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Edric Storm had never felt like an outsider in Storm’s End except for now. When he had learned from Ser Cortnay Penrose that his father the King was travelling to Storm’s End with the royal family and court of King’s Landing. He was so excited to meet his father the demon of the Trident. His father was the man who laid low the Last Dragon at the Trident in a battle that has all the bards sing songs

on his father's prowess. Edric aspired to be a warrior like his father and that was why he cherished the gift of a small warhammer he received on his namesday from his kingly father.

He was there when his father rode in his black horse with a crown atop his brow. His father was the epitome of a warrior and king and he was happy that he would get to meet the man every bard in the Stormlands sings songs of tribute. However, it didn't take long for Edric to realize that his father did not hold any interest in seeing him. He had tried so many times but the guards and knights surrounding his father always sent him away calling him names. His last desperate act was to gain the friendship of his half-brother but that plan left him in his current state.

Edric whimpered touching the sore spot on his cheek where Boros Blount struck him on the orders of the Queen.

"Bastards like you dare to speak to my son! Joffrey is the Crown Prince of the Seven Kingdoms. You don't deserve to look upon my son much less speak to him." the Queen shouted at him.

Tears gathered in his eyes as he felt many eyes being trained on him. He could not understand why he was not even allowed to speak to his half-brother.

"I... I just wanted to speak to my brother." he whimpered.

"My Joff is not your brother you silly child. You are nothing but a mistake born of sin from my idiotic husband's flings. Haven't your whore of a mother taught you anything bastard?"

"Don't...don't call my mother mean names." Edric cried.

"You dare to order me around, bastard? Ser Boros, the bastard has yet to learn his lesson." The Queen smirked cruelly at him.

He closed his eyes when the Kingsguard knight raised his hand to strike him again but the blow never came. When he opened his eyes he saw the knight's arm was stopped by his uncle. It was not his uncle Renly but Uncle Stannis!

"You dare to strike a child carrying Baratheon blood in Storm's End!" Stannis growled coldly.

"The Queen..."

Edric watched with wide eyes as his uncle Stannis punched the kingsguard knight square in the jaw. The knight crumbled down with a pained shout,

"What is the meaning of this? Ser Boros was acting on my orders. I'll have your head for this!" the Queen let out a shrill scream.

Edric shrank back in fright at the scary look on the Queen's face.

"Do what you must." Stannis said coldly before stomping hard on the Ser Boros' face against the wall which made the kingsguard knight let out a pained howl and proceeded to fall unconscious.

Edric was hauled out of the corridor by his uncle all the while the Queen continued to scream threats at them both.

"You need not fear nephew. Nothing will happen to you."

Edric had never considered his older uncle a warm man like Uncle Renly. But today he truly felt warmth as he clung to his uncle's arm even though his cheek was throbbing in pain.

Later that day, he was getting treated by Maester Jurne for his injury when the doors to Maester's chambers were pushed open by his younger uncle Renly.

"Edric! What happened?" Renly gasped at the sight of his nephew in bed with his cheek being treated with oil.

"He was received with the hospitality of our dear Queen." Stannis said blandly.

"Brother! Word has been spreading that you attacked Ser Boros Blount of the Kingsguard." said Renly, hoping that his brother would explain the situation but as usual Stannis merely scoffed before standing up.

"I should've taken the man's head for striking a child carrying Baratheon blood in Storm's End. Ser Boros is alive because I'm not the lord of Storm's End." said Stannis, before moving past Renly to leave the Maester's chambers.

"Ser Boros did this?" Renly asked with wide eyes looking at the injured Edric. "Why did he strike you nephew?"

Edric remained silently on the bed as the maester worked on his wound unable to make up the words. He could not say that he desperately wanted to speak to his father and the only way he saw was through befriending Prince Joffrey.

"Boy if you wanted to speak with your father, you should've asked one of us to take you to Robert." said Stannis who paused at the doorstep looking intently at Edric making him squirm. "You didn't have to go begging the Queen or Prince Joffrey."

"Is that why Ser Boros struck you, nephew?" Renly asked a rare look of rage on his face.

Seeing Edric nod Renly became more enraged.

"I'll have that knight expelled from Storm's End for this!" Renly growled.

"Do you wish to see the King, nephew?" Stannis suddenly asked making Edric look from Stannis to his uncle Renly.

"Say the word nephew. We'll present you before Robert." Renly said earnestly.

"Not just presenting him is enough." said Stannis, coming to stand beside Renly. "Robert has turned a blind eye to the child for too long. I think it is time our brother notices there are other things than whores and wine in Storm's End, don't you think?"

"Oh!" Renly was pleasantly surprised to see a glint of defiant spirit in his brother's eyes.

'Maybe having a child of his own has changed Stannis in more ways than I imagined.' Renly thought.

"I'm curious to know what kind of plan you are formulating in that head of yours, brother?" Renly asked chuckling lightheartedly.

"If you must know..." Stannis proceeded to lead Renly out of the Maester's chambers while speaking in a lower tone.

Edric watched his two uncles concoct plans to have him get an audience with his father. A warm fuzzy feeling settled in him that made him grin.

'I'm not alone. I'm not an outsider in Storm's End.' he thought happily.

