

Eddard stared at the map of the Westerlands with some trepidation. The scouts he had sent forth had returned empty-handed. It was a huge disappointment and a blow to the planned invasion into the Westerlands. The scouts the Riverlords had sent forth were still searching for an alternate route. Should the Old gods be merciful, the scouts would return with good news.

If not, he'd have to choose either a siege or approach Lord Lannister with a marriage proposal. The problem was that a siege on Golden Tooth would delay the advance of the Northern army into the Westerlands. It'd also be a bloody affair with thousands of his men dead in the field. If he could help it, Eddard thought to avoid any needless deaths.

The second option was untenable for him or his bannermen. The Northern lords would be rather cross with him if he betrothed his heir to the daughter of a southern lord of little importance. He had already received many betrothal offers for Robb and Sansa from Houses Karstark, Cerwyn, Ryswell, Manderly, Tallhart, Forrester, and even some of the Mountain clans. If he were to promise Lord Lannister that his daughter could become the Lady of Winterfell or Avalon, he'd be attracting the ire of his bannermen. There was already discontent amongst his men for involving the North in what they considered 'southern' affairs. They wanted the North to return to isolation, similar to the times before Cregan Stark.

Eddard was not ignorant of the attractiveness of the idea. The North was now largely independent of the southernmost kingdoms. His people no longer depended solely on the Riverlands, the Vale or the Reach for grain. The Northern mountains, Deepwood Motte, Winterfell and White Harbour, produced enough grain to feed the North. With the yield of Dustin and Ryswell lands added in, they had more than enough to store away for the winter or even trade away to foreign merchants. The last report he read from Lord Manderly suggested that Northern grain was sought after by Pentosi and Braavosi merchants for their cheap price.

The winds of change unleashed by his son were turning the North into a better place for his people. While the North was reaping those benefits, Eddard was aware that the rise of the North did not sit well with all their neighbours. The most affected were the Riverlords. It was one of the reasons why several houses of the Riverlands refused to join him in battle. The Freys, Mallisters, Mooton, Whent, the Vances of Atranta, and Wayfarer's Rest have all ignored the King's call. At the same time, Houses Bracken, Blackwood, Ryger, Piper and Darry have all pledged their support in the invasion of the Westerlands. Considering the fact that Houses Darry and Ryger were staunch Targaryen loyalists during the Rebellion, Eddard considered their support a good sign for Robert's rule.

That doesn't mean he considered the cold shoulder their old allies were showing hadn't impacted his or Robert's standing in any manner. His own bannermen were discontent with the attitude of his wife's family. House Tully holds Paramountcy over the river lords. The open defiance shown by his godfather had enraged some of his Northern lords like Glover and Umber. Not a day goes by without Lords Umber and Glover asking him repeatedly to march back into the North and leave the southern problems to the southern lords.

He'd have preferred not to meddle in the affairs of other the southern kingdoms, but the duty to his king and honour of House Stark was at stake. He swore he'd defend his king, and that was a vow he'd not break callously. He sat up straight and looked at the entrance of his tent when his ears picked up footsteps closing in. His tent flaps parted, and Eddard saw his son step inside, making him let out a quiet sigh of relief. For a moment, he feared it was Lord Umber or Glover coming to him with their appeals to abandon the war front.

"Robb." Eddard nodded at his son, who walked further into his tent to stand beside him.

"Are you going to offer terms to Lord Lefford?" Robb asked, not taking his eyes away from the map.

"Yes. Sometimes, a battle can be avoided through dialogue." said Eddard, squeezing his son's shoulder. "Remember this lesson, Robb. Not all issues can be solved with steel. Sometimes, words are far more effective than steel in war."

"Is it true that we can't breach Golden Tooth? Is it an impenetrable castle?" asked Robb, frowning at the map.

"No castle is unbreachable, Robb. It's just that an army commander must decide whether it is worth the price of sacrificing thousands of men to take a castle when there are other alternatives."

"Does that mean you'd offer to make Lord Lefford's daughter the lady of Avalon?" Robb asked, making Eddard look at his son with wide eyes.

"Where did you hear that?" Eddard asked forcefully, staring down at his son with an intensity that made Robb shrink back.

"I... I heard it..." Robb stuttered anxiously.

But before Eddard could make Robb say anything coherent, Ser Marq Piper barged into his tent brimming with excitement.

"Lord Stark, you have to see this. I've found something amazing."

"Did the scouts return with a way around Golden Tooth?" Eddard asked hopefully.

"I'm afraid our scouts have not returned. But, this will be much more satisfying for you, my lord. That, I assure you." said Marq Piper, beckoning him outside the tent.

Eddard decided to indulge the young knight and followed the heir of Pinkmaiden outside of the tent, with Robb closely following him.

When Eddard finally stepped out of his tent, he could not see anything out of the ordinary. He was about to ask Ser Marq what the man was on about when his ears picked up on the sound of riding horses from the east of their camp.

"Is someone coming?" Eddard muttered, looking to the edge of his camp.

"Don't worry, my lord. We have some more friends coming over from the Riverlands joining our fight against the lions." said Ser Marq, the young knight's blue eyes alight with excitement.

Eddard realised the cause of Ser Marq's excitement when he saw the banners of House Tully approaching his camp. On the front of the column was his goodbrother Edmure and his wife's uncle Brynden. Edmure was wearing gleaming steel armour fashioned out in the likeness of fish scales, while the Blackfish had donned a black armour with the same design.

"Ser Edmure, ser Brynden. I did not expect to see you two here after Lord Tully decided to stay out of the war."

"My father is a complicated man, my lord. He has his reasons to ask us to stay put, and we have our reasons to disobey him." Edmure smirked, climbing down from his horse.

"Aye. Family, Duty and Honour are the words of House Tully. Family comes first before anything else. Lord Stark, we'll not let you ride alone into the lion's den. Besides, I hear young Robb is also with you. Where is he, by the way?" Brynden asked, climbing down from his horse.

Eddard couldn't help but smile at the two Tully men.

"Come. Let me introduce you two to my eldest." Eddard invited them in, relieved that something was going his way in this blasted war. He supposed it was a good omen as any.

XXXXXX

"So, you two defied Lord Hoster's wishes by riding here taking a portion of House Tully's sworn men." said Eddard, looking at his wife's brother and uncle with concern. "Should I be concerned Lord Hoster holds me or Cat responsible?"

"Oh, he'd be holding the both of us responsible for a long time." said Edmure dismissively. "Father will forgive us in time. What can we do you help you, Lord Eddard?"

"I've sent scouts for a way around Golden Tooth. The natural defences of the castle will prove to be a hindrance in a siege. Our best chance lies in finding a way around the castle and accessing the kingsroad from the other side." Eddard explained.

"I see." Ser Brynden muttered thoughtfully. "It's a good strategy. But the scouts have to deliver you an alternate route wide enough for your army to safely cross the hills of Westerlands for your strategy to work."

"I know. The scouts I sent have already returned empty-handed. I've also asked some Riverlords to send some of their best scouts. Perhaps, they'll succeed where my scouts failed." said Eddard.

"Hmm. In that case, we need to persuade Lord Lefford to side with us over House Lannister." said Edmure.

"I'm told it won't be easy to convince Lord Leo Lefford to turn against his siege lord. Tywin Lannister's fearsome reputation holds much sway among the lords of the Westerlands." Eddard said morosely.

"I think you'll be surprised how cooperative Lord Lefford can be when he hears of Prince Stannis' victory over Ser Kevan Lannister in the Reach." Ser Brynden said with a vindictive smile.

Eddard looked at the two Tullys with wide eyes.

"Is it true?" he asked hopefully.

"It is, Lord Stark." Ser Brynden nodded firmly. "Word came from King's Landing about Prince Stannis' great victory over the Lannister army attacking the Reach. It's said Lord Randyll Tarly trapped the Lannister army led by Ser Kevan Lannister and Ser Addam Marbrand outside the walls of Appleton. Prince Stannis led a Crownland host and took the Lannister army from their back. It was a rout. Ser Kevan was taken prisoner as well as many valuable hostages from the Westerlands."

"This changes things. Lord Lefford might be more amenable to accept the King's peace." Eddard said excitedly at the prospect of peace and a quick end to this war.

'Mayhaps, if the gods were kind, Lord Tywin would be amenable to surrender and end this war.' Eddard thought.

At that moment, messengers from Lord Bracken and Blackwood arrived regarding the findings of their scouts. The men could not find a path around Golden Tooth, which made it crucial to secure the allegiance of Lord Lefford.

With no other choice left, Eddard sent messengers to Lord Lefford, inviting the man to his tent to talk peace. He was pleasantly surprised Lord Lefford readily agreed to meet, which was a good sign. He thought the Lord of Golden Tooth would insist on the meeting inside the man's castle. Yet, nothing of the sort happened.

It took them only a few hours to prepare, and soon they were hosting Lord Lefford and an assortment of knights the Lord of Golden Tooth brought forth for the meeting. To allay any fears of Lord Lefford and his companions, Eddard ensured proper guest rights were observed by offering bread and salt to his guests. When the traditions were appropriately observed, Eddard convened the meeting in his tent in the presence of all the principal lords of the North and the Riverlands.

"Lord Lefford. I shall speak freely and not bore you with empty words. You know why we are here. King Robert has declared that House Lannister is in open rebellion, and he will see justice served on House Lannister for their crimes. I'm honour bound to aid my king in this war, as are you. I'd request your cooperation in this matter."

"I'm also honour bound to serve my lodge lord, Lord Stark. Do not imply I'm without honour." Said Lord Lefford.

"Aye, you have your oaths to Lord Tywin. But tell me, my lord. Shouldn't adultery be punished? Cersei Lannister has tried to pass off her bastards as the King's children. Isn't King Robert justified in throwing the Lannisters behind bars for this betrayal? Even the Citadel has confirmed the validity of Joffrey's and Myrcella's illegitimacy." Eddard argued fiercely in favour of his friend.

"Come now, Lord Leo. You know as well as I do that Lord Tywin will lose this war. The Stormlands, the Riverlands, the Crownlands, the Reach, the Vale, and the North have assembled against the lions.

Even Lord Tywin, as powerful and rich as he is, cannot withstand the combined might of the Crown and four kingdoms." Tytos Blackwood reminded the westerners.

"It's only a matter of time before the Martells also come for the blood of Tywin Lannister. Face the reality Lord Lefford. House Lannister's days are numbered." Lord Bracken said.

"I hear you all, my lords. But understand my position. As you say, it might be true that King Robert may triumph over the Old Lion. Even if that's the case, what's stopping the next Lord Lannister from exacting their vengeance upon my family? I have no sons to lead my men into battle. If I were to open the gates of Golden Tooth for your armies, my daughter's life would be in jeopardy." Lord Lefford said anxiously.

Eddard could not argue against the man's worries. He could not promise Robert would attain the castle and lands of House Lannister. That'd be the ideal punishment for their crimes, and he'd argue for it should the opportunity arise. But he could not give his word that'd happen and thereby assure Lord Lefford's safety from any future Lannister retribution.

"Surely, you worry too much, Lord Lefford. If Tywin falls, the rest of the Lannisters would be weakened. They won't dare to raise a finger against you under King Robert's reign. That is assuming any Lannisters would remain to rule from Casterly Rock when the war is won." said Edmure.

"You do not understand House Lannister Ser Edmure. Lord Tywin has instilled in them his brutality. You all saw what they did when they sacked King's Landing. The Lannister army sacked the city by Lord Tywin's order. They even killed Princess Elia and her children. Should I turn my cloak, they won't hesitate to do the same to me and my daughter." Lord Lefford said fearfully, his brown eyes holding nothing but fear in them.

By now, Eddard realised Lord Lefford would be of little help. The man feared House Lannister more than the army camped outside his walls. He supposed he shouldn't have been surprised to see Lord Lefford fearing House Lannister despite most of the Seven Kingdoms being arrayed against them. His eyes strayed to Robb, who was holding a jug full of wine at the tent's corner. He thought of the idea Lord Bracken and Blackwood suggested.

Eddard was troubled with what was happening, and then an idea struck his mind. There was merit to the advice lords Bracken, and Blackwood provided him a few days back. But a Stark marrying Lord Lefford's daughter would not secure the safety of House Lefford because House Stark of Winterfell and Avalon were hundreds of leagues away from Golden Tooth. The simplest and most helpful solution would be Lord Lefford tying his family to a powerful Great House closer to his castle.

"I have a solution to your worries Lord Lefford. You need not face the wrath of House Lannister alone in the future. What if you and your daughter are protected by not one but three Great Houses of Westeros." Eddard spoke up, plunging the tent into silence as all eyes turned on him.

"What do you mean, Lord Stark?" Leo Lefford asked, his confused green eyes trained on him with a smudge of hopeful glint.

"Ser Edmure Tully is the son of Lord Hoster Tully, the Lord Paramount of the Trident. He is also the brother of my wife, the Lady of Winterfell. He remains unmarried to this day. He has proven his mettle in many tourneys, earned his knighthood through good deeds, and stayed true to his vows as

a knight to this day.” Eddard said, keeping his eyes firmly on Lord Lefford as he could see the look of utter confusion coming from his goodbrother.

“I propose you betroth your daughter, Lady Alysanne Lefford, to Ser Edmure Tully. In time, Lady Alysanne shall become the Lady of Riverrun and aunt to my children. As the lady of Riverrun, your daughter also becomes goodsister to Lady Lysa Arryn and aunt to the future heirs of Eyrie. Should Golden Tooth be ever threatened by anyone, three Great Houses with the backing of the entirety of the North, the Vale and the Riverlands shall come to your aid.”

“Now, wait just a minute. Who’s marrying who?” Edmure spluttered, looking between a beaming Lord Lefford and a Northern lord who was consciously trying to avoid looking at the confused heir of Riverrun.

Eddard hated these games, and that was why he preferred to stay in the North, where men didn’t play games with words. He knew how to play these games of the south as Lord Arryn raised him, but he detested it passionately. If he could help it, he’d not force his children to play these detestable games of the south. That was why he suggested Edmure’s name instead of offering his own sons as viable candidates for the hand of Lady Alysanne Lefford. The game was detestable, but as long as it secured his children’s future, he was willing to play it despite how intolerable he found it.

Now, it was a matter of convincing Edmure to go through with his plan. He doubted it’d be that difficult. Lord Lefford seemed happy enough, and that was half the battle won.

XXXXXX

Harry keenly observed the script drawn on the parchment and then looked at the eager eyes of his little sister.

“So, what do you think?” Sansa asked eagerly, with Arya also looking at him with an impatient look by her side.

“Hmm.” Harry grunted and went back to staring at the runic script his sisters had brought to him for inspection.

Harry supposed he shouldn’t have been surprised by Sansa’s exemplary skill in the subject of runes. Ever since he had shown the fireworks runestone on a harvest feast, Sansa was obsessed with learning runes. He was forced to write up lessons and exercises that allowed Sansa to expand upon her capabilities regarding the subject of runes. He was sure Sansa only became more skilled when she started teaching Arya most of what she learned.

“I think this runic cluster should work as you intended.” Harry eventually said, after studying the runes closely and finding no fault in them.

“Yay!” Sansa shouted excitedly, scaring a few small birds hanging around in the Godswood to fly away in fright.

Sansa and Arya hugged each other happily as it was collaborative work between the two.

“So, we can start the work on the runestone, right?” Sansa asked excitedly.

“Have you learned to shield your carved runes from the disintegration of the stone?” Harry asked, raising an inquisitive eyebrow at his sister.

“No, but...”

“Have you learned to hide your rune scheme so they won’t be subject to theft?” Harry’s voice cut across, not allowing his sister to argue.

“No.” Sansa said disappointedly.

“Then, you’re not ready to make a runestone. Not yet. This is splendid work, you two. But you are not ready to make runestones.” said Harry.

Harry watched his two sisters take their leave from the Godswood with their shoulders down in disappointment. He could only shake his head at the genius of his two sisters when it came to magical arts. He had it on good authority that his sisters were natural wargs going by their stories of strange dreams where they occasionally see many of Winterfell’s towers from a higher vantage point or even from the view of horses or hunting dogs. He was holding back on giving them proper instructions till they reached the age of eleven, but as days went by, he did not see much logic in waiting that long.

In his old world, eleven was the age when magic sort of settled down and flowed in streamline through a young wizard’s body. But here, he could see Sansa’s and Arya’s, to a certain extent, achieved a stable magical aura which should’ve been impossible for a typical young wizard. Sansa was just eight years old, while Arya was just on the cusp of reaching six years old. Yet, their magical auras were stabilising much faster than he imagined possible. Harry was beginning to wonder whether the rise of Old Gods was also empowering the First Men in ways unseen in the continent in the last four-thousand years or so.

Harry picked up a random red leaf from the floor of the Godswood. He could feel an echo of magical energy, not there a few years back. Every blade of grass in the North was getting magically saturated in ways that were unseen. He had no idea what the consequences would be with magical energy teeming in every animate and inanimate thing in the North. He had tried to establish contact with the Old Gods through the Weirwood trees, but they’ve so far ignored him.

‘Maybe, they’re a bit touchy because I called them magical leeches in the past.’ Harry thought with some amusement.

Harry sat up straight when his senses went haywire for a moment. At first, he assumed the wards around Winterfell were triggered or something, but a minute passed, and he realised something was changing inside him. His magical energy was fluctuating and condensing into itself for some odd reason. He could feel his magical power withdrawing from his skin and gathering at the base of his spine for some odd reason. It was an odd phenomenon as magical energy only coils around at the base of the spine of a wizard in their sleep, never when they were awake.

‘Yet, it is happening to...’

Harry didn't get to finish the thought as he felt magical energy surging out in the form of uncontrollable waves. He didn't feel it was threatening in any way, but it was as if his magic was trying to assert itself on the fabric of reality itself in preparation for something. Before Harry could discern adequately what was happening, he got distracted by a voice in the Godswood.

"Harry!"

To his surprise, it was none other than Jon who was walking into the Godswood. Then, he remembered that he was supposed to join Jon for training in the archery range. When Jon finally managed to find him, Harry's hands were glowing with a bright silver light.

"Wha...? What's happening?" Jon asked fearfully, seeing the strange light in his brother's arms.

Harry was not in a condition to speak, as he was overwhelmed by the dense magical power manifesting outside as glittering silver light. The energy in his arms reached a peak, and then it died down, leaving a feather-light material in his arms.

"Huh. So that's what happened." Harry muttered as his eyes traced the thin silvery fabric of the Invisibility Cloak.

"What's that?" Jon asked curiously.

Harry ignored his brother as he became thoughtful for a moment. He summoned the Elder Wand into his hand with a will of his mind. The Resurrection Stone was already comfortably sitting on his power ring encased in shards of ice dragon crystals. With all three Deathly Hallows in his possession, Harry realised his body was now at the peak of his power. It also meant that he was now strong enough to wield magic without the aid of the Elder Wand or his power ring.

Harry waved his free hand in the general direction of the Heart Tree of the Godswood, vanishing all the dry leaves piling up beneath the humongous tree with a thought.

"Hmm. That felt surprisingly easy." Harry muttered to himself, looking thoughtfully at his left arm. "I'll have to experiment on this further with other spells."

"Harrion!"

"Why are you screaming?" Harry frowned at his brother. "Are you trying to make me go deaf?"

"Why am I...? You...! Just what is happening? What was that silver light? What's with that silver cloth on your hands? And why are you looking at me like that?" Jon fired off question after question, looking like he was about to pop a blood vessel or something.

Harry climbed to his feet and patted his brother's shoulder to comfort the troubled kid.

"Don't you worry your little head about anything, brother. Everything is under control." Said Harry before walking away, leaving a stunned Jon behind.

"Wait! Was that the Old Gods? Or was it...you know..." Jon suddenly became afraid and whispered, "Was it the ghost of the Builder?"

Harry got the urge to laugh, but he forced up a severe expression on his face and looked down on Jon in the most snobbish way possible.

“I’d have told you, but then I’d have to kill you.”

The way Jon’s face became pale white, and his grey eyes shifted around in fear was quite funny. He hoped Jon never let go of his fear of ghosts. It was one sure way of keeping his brother on his toes.