The visitors poured through the castle gates in a river of gold and silver and polished steel.

The king had come to Winterfell.
NED! IT'S GOOD TO SEE THAT FROZEN FACE OF YOURS! YOU HAVE NOT CHANGED AT ALL.

EDDARD COULD NOT SAY THE SAME. IN THE NINE YEARS SINCE THEY'D LAST MET, ROBERT HAD GAINED EIGHT STONE.

YOUR GRACE, WINTERFELL IS YOURS.

ONCE THE SMELL OF LEATHER AND BLOOD CLUNG TO HIM LIKE PERFUME, NOW IT WAS PERFUME THAT CLUNG.

TAKE ME DOWN TO YOUR CRYPT, EDDARD. I WOULD PAY MY RESPECTS.

HUSBAND, WE HAVE BEEN RIDING SINCE DAWN. SURELY THE DEAD CAN WAIT.

COME, SISTER.
I trust you enjoyed the journey, Your Grace?

I thought we'd never reach Winterfell. The way they talk about my seven kingdoms, a man forgets your part is as big as the other six combined.

Boars and forests and fields. Where are all your people?

Likely too shy to come out. Kings are a rare sight in the North.

Winters are hard, but the Starks endure. We always have.

More likely they were hiding under the snow.

Snow, Ned. What will this place be like in winter?
YOU NEED TO COME SOUTH. GET A TASTE OF SUMMER BEFORE IT FLIES. EVERYONE IS FAT AND RICH AND DRUNK.

AND THE GIRLS, NED! I SWEAR, WOMEN LOSE ALL MODESTY IN THE HEAT.

YOU GRACE.

SHE IS DOWN AT THE END, WITH FATHER AND BRANDON.

IT WAS ALWAYS COLD DOWN HERE. THEIR FOOTSTEPS RANG OFF THE STONES AND ECHOED IN THE VAULT OVERHEAD AS THEY WALKED AMONG THE DEAD OF HOUSE STARK.

BY ANCIENT CUSTOM, AN IRON LONGSWORD HAD BEEN LAID ACROSS THE LAP OF EACH WHO HAD BEEN LORD OF WINTERFELL TO KEEP THE VENGEFUL SPIRITS IN THEIR CRYPTS. THE OLDEST HAD LONG SINCE RUSTED AWAY.

NED WONDERED IF THOSE GHOSTS WERE FREE TO ROAM THE CASTLE NOW. HE HOPED NOT.
AND BRANDON, THE TRUE HEIR, ELDEST, BORN TO RULE, STRANGLED BY THE ORDER OF MAD KING AERYS TARGARYEN ONLY A FEW DAYS BEFORE HE WAS TO MARRY CATELYN TULLY OF RIVERRUN.

I WAS WITH HER WHEN SHE DIED.

Promise me, Ned.

“She wanted to come home.”

She was more beautiful than that. Did you have to bury her in a place like this?

She was a Stark of Winterfell. This is her place.

I vowed I would kill Rhaegar for what he did to her.

You did.

Only once.
Tell me about Jon Arryn.

I have never seen a man sicken so quickly. It was like a fire in his gut. It burned right through him.

I loved that man.

We both did.

I'll take him as ward, if you wish. Catelyn and Iysa were close as girls.

That's because you do not sleep with a Lannister.

Ah, Ned. You're too serious.

"Catelyn fears for her sister. How does Iysa bear her grief?"

"Not well. She's taken their boy back to the Eyrie. Eel, Sickly, and Lord of the Eyrie, I'd wanted to foster him with Lord Tywin Lannister, but she refused to even hear of it."

"A generous offer, but too late. Lord Tywin's given consent. Fostering the boy elsewhere would be an affront."

"I have more concern for my nephew than for Lannister pride."

"A generous offer, but too late. Lord Tywin's given consent. Fostering the boy elsewhere would be an affront."

"I have more concern for my nephew than for Lannister pride."

"Tell me about Jon Arryn."
YOU MUST WONDER WHY I FINALLY CAME NORTH TO WINTERFELL.

FOR MY COMPANY, SURELY.

AND THERE IS THE WALL. YOU NEED TO SEE IT, YOUR GRACE. THE NIGHT’S WATCH IS A SHADOW OF WHAT IT ONCE WAS. BENJEN SAYS—

THE WALL HAS STOOD FOR WHAT, EIGHT THOUSAND YEARS? IT CAN KEEP A FEW DAYS MORE.

THESE ARE DIFFICULT TIMES. I NEED GOOD MEN AROUND ME. JON ARRYN SERVED AS LORD OF THE EYRIE, AS WARDEN OF THE EAST, AS HAND OF THE KING. HE WILL NOT BE EASY TO REPLACE.

IS A CHILD, NOT A WAR LEADER. A MERE BOY CANNOT HOLD THE EAST.

THOSE YEARS WE SPENT AS JON ARRYN’S WARDS TOGETHER. GODS, THOSE WERE GOOD YEARS. SITTING ON A THRONE IS A THOUSAND TIMES HARDER THAN WINNING ONE.

I AM SURROUNDED BY FLATTERERS AND FOOLS. I WANT YOU AT MY SIDE AGAIN.

LORD EDDARD STARK, I WOULD NAME YOU HAND OF THE KING.
Your Grace, I am not worthy of the honor.

Damn it, Ned, you might at least humor me with a smile. Come South, I'll teach you how to laugh again. You helped me win this throne, now help me hold it. We were meant to rule together.

If Lyanna had lived, we would have been brothers.

If I wanted to honor you, I'd let you retire.

I'm planning to make you run the kingdom and fight the wars while I eat and drink and wench myself to an early grave.

It's not too late. I have a son. You have a daughter. My Joff and your Sansa can join our houses.

Sansa's just a girl.
She's old enough for betrothal. The wedding can wait a few years.

Now say Yes, curse you.

These honors are so unexpected, Your Grace. May I have some time? I need to tell my wife...

Yes, yes. Tell Catelyn. Sleep on it if you must.

For a moment, Ned was filled with a terrible foreboding. This was his place, here in the North.

Just don't keep me waiting too long. I am not the most patient of men.

Breathing the chill silence of the crypt, he could feel the eyes of the dead. They were all listening, he knew.

And winter was coming.
There were times—not many, but a few—when Jon Snow was glad he was a bastard.

It was the fourth hour of the welcoming feast. Jon's brothers and sisters had been seated with the royal children. His lord father would doubtless permit each child a glass of wine.

Down here on the benches, there was no one to stop Jon from drinking as much as he had a thirst for, and he was finding that he had a man's thirst.
HUNGRY AGAIN?

His brothers and sisters hadn’t been permitted to bring their wolves to the banquet, but there were more cubs than Jon could count at his end of the hall. No one had said a word about his pup.

He told himself he was fortunate in that too.

GRRRR
A very quiet wolf. He’s not like the others. It’s why I named him Ghost. That, and because he’s white.

Is this one of the direwolves I’ve heard so much about? Uncle Benden!

There are direwolves beyond the wall. We hear them on our rangings. Don’t you usually eat at table with your brothers?

Lady Stark thought it might give insult to the royal family to seat a bastard among them.

Ah. I see. My brother doesn’t seem very festive tonight.

The Queen is angry too. Father took the King down to the crypts today, and she didn’t want them to go.
You don't miss much, do you, Jon? We could use a man like you on the wall.

Then take me with you, Father. I'll give me leave to go if you ask him.

The Wall is a hard place for a boy.

Daeren Targaryen was only fourteen when he conquered Dorne.

A conquest that lasted a summer and cost sixty thousand men, and Daeren Targaryen was eighteen when he died, or have you forgotten that part?

I've forgotten nothing. I want to serve in the Night's Watch, Uncle.

How much wine have you had, Jon?

No, never mind. I was younger than you when I first got well and truly drunk.

You don't know what you're asking. The Night's Watch is a sworn brotherhood. We have no families. None of us may father sons. Our wife is duty. Our mistress is honor.
I'm ready to swear your oath.

Until you have known a woman, you don't understand what you'd be giving up.

You might be less eager to pay the price, son.

I'm not your son!

More's the pity.

Come back to me when you've fathered a few bastards of your own, and we'll see how you feel.

I will never father a bastard.

Never!

I must be excused.

Laughter boomed around him, and Jon felt hot tears on his cheeks.
THE SOUNDS OF MUSIC AND SONGS SPILLED THROUGH THE OPEN WINDOWS.

THEY WERE THE LAST THINGS HE WANTED TO HEAR.

BOY?

IS THAT ANIMAL A WOLF?

A DIREWOLF. WHAT ARE YOU DOING UP THERE? WHY AREN'T YOU AT THE FEAST?

TOO HOT, TOO NOISY, AND I'D DRUNK TOO MUCH WINE. I LEARNED LONG AGO THAT IT IS CONSIDERED RUDEN TO VOMIT ON YOUR BROTHER.

MIGHT I HAVE A CLOSER LOOK AT YOUR WOLF?

CAN YOU CLIMB DOWN, OR SHALL I BRING A LADDER?

OH, BLEED THAT.
I believe I've frightened your wolf. My apologies.

He's not scared. Sit, Ghost.

You can touch him now. He won't move until I tell him to. I've been training him.

Nice wolf.
IF I WASN’T HERE, HE'D TEAR OUT YOUR THROAT.

IN THAT CASE YOU'LL BETTER STAY CLOSE. I AM TYRION LANNISTER.

I KNOW.

YOU'RE NED STARK'S BASTARD, AREN'T YOU?

DID I OFFEND YOU? SORRY, DWARFS DON'T HAVE TO BE TACTFUL. GENERATIONS OF CAPERING FOOLS IN MOTLEY HAVE WON ME THE RIGHT TO DRESS BADLY AND SAY ANY DAMN THING THAT COMES INTO MY HEAD.

YOU ARE THE BASTARD, THOUGH?

LORD EDEARD STARK IS MY FATHER.

LET ME GIVE YOU SOME COUNSEL, BASTARD.

NEVER FORGET WHAT YOU ARE, FOR SURELY THE WORLD WILL NOT MAKE IT YOUR STRENGTH. THEN IT CAN NEVER BE YOUR WEAKNESS. ARMOR YOURSELF IN IT, AND IT WILL NEVER BE USED TO HURT YOU.
What do you know about being a bastard?

All dwarves are bastards in their father's eyes.

Am I?

Do tell my lord father, my mother died birthing me and he's never been sure.

You are your mother's trueborn son of Lannister.

I don't even know who my mother was.

Some woman, no doubt. Most of them are.

Remember this, boy. All dwarves may be bastards...
Yet not all bastards need be dwarfs.
Of all the rooms in Winterfell’s great keep, Catelyn’s bedchambers were the warmest.

The castle was built over hot springs, and the scalding waters rushed through the walls and chambers like blood through a man’s body.

It drove the chill from the stone halls and filled the glass gardens with a most warmth that kept the earth from freezing.

That was a little thing in summer. In winter, it was the difference between life and death.
I will refuse him. You cannot. You must not.

My duties are here in the north. He will not understand that. If you refuse him, he will wonder why, and sooner or later he will begin to suspect that you oppose him.

Can't you see the danger that would put us in?

Robert would never harm me or any of mine. We were closer than brothers. I know the man.

You knew the man, the king is a stranger to you, and pride is everything to a king. You cannot throw these great honors back in his face.

Honors?
HE OFFERS HIS OWN SON IN MARRIAGE TO OUR DAUGHTER. SANSＡ MIGHT SOMEDAY BE QUEEN.

ARDS. CATELYN. SHE'S STILL A GIRL, AND JOFFREY IS...

JOFFREY IS CROWN PRINCE, AND HEIR TO THE IRON THRONE.

AND I WAS ONLY TWELVE WHEN MY FATHER PROMISED ME TO YOUR BROTHER BRANDON.

YES. BRANDON WOULD KNOW WHAT TO DO. IT WAS ALL MEANT FOR BRANDON. YOU. WINTERFELL. EVERYTHING.

HE WAS BORN TO BE A KING'S HAND AND FATHER TO QUEENS.

I NEVER ASKED FOR THIS CUP TO PASS TO ME.

BUT BRANDON IS DEAD, AND THE CUP HAS PASSED, AND YOU MUST DRINK FROM IT, LIKE IT OR NOT.

MY LORD. MAESTER LUWN IS WITHOUT AND BEGGS URGENT AUDIENCE.

YOU TOLD HIM I LEFT ORDERS NOT TO BE DISTURBED?

YES. MY LORD. HE INSISTS.
Very well, send him in.

My lord, pardon for disturbing your rest. I have been left a message.

Been left by whom?

A carved wooden box was left on a table in my observatory while I napped.

Inside was a fine new lens, but I found the true message concealed within a false bottom when I dismantled the box. It is not for my eyes.

Let me have it then.

Pardon, my lord, but the message is not for you either.

It is marked for lady Catelyn, and her alone.
THIS IS FROM LYSA.
SHE TOOK NO CHANCE. IT IS WRITTEN IN A PRIVATE LANGUAGE WE HAD AS GIRLS.

PERHAPS I SHOULD WITHDRAW...
NO, WE WILL NEED YOUR COUNSEL.

CATELYN, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

LIGHTING A FIRE, MAESTER LOWIN HAS DELIVERED ALL MY CHILDREN. THIS IS NO TIME FOR FALSE MODESTY.
My lady, tell me. What was this message?

You sister is sick with grief. She cannot know what she is saying.

This message is carefully planned, cleverly hidden.

You must be Robert's hand. You must go south with him and learn the truth.

Lyra says Jon Arryn was murdered by the Lannisters. By Queen Cersei.

The hand of the King has great power, my Lord. The power to find the truth of Jon Arryn's death. To protect Lady Arryn and her son, if the worst be true.

You say you love Robert like a brother. Would you leave your brother surrounded by Lannisters?
CATELYN, YOU SHALL STAY HERE IN WINTERFELL.

NO!

YOU MUST GOVERN IN MY STAND. ROBB WILL BE A MAN GROWN SOON. HE MUST LEARN TO RULE, AND I WILL NOT BE HERE FOR HIM.

WHAT... WHAT OF THE OTHER CHILDREN?

MAESTER LUWIN. GIVE MY WIFE YOUR VOICE IN ALL THINGS. TEACH MY SON THE THINGS HE NEEDS TO KNOW.
RICKON is very young. The others I would take with me.

No. I could not bear it.

Sansa must, wed Joffrey, and it's past time Arya learned the ways of a Southron court.

Yes, but please need for the love you bear me, let Bran remain.

There is bad feeling between Robb and Joffrey. Let Bran grow up with the young princes and become their friend as Robert became mine. Our house will be safer for it.

Keep him off walls, then. You know how he loves to climb.

Thank you, my lady. This is hard. I know.

What of Jon Snow, my lord?
HE IS YOUR SON, NOT MINE. I WILL NOT HAVE HIM. THEY SAY YOUR FRIEND ROBERT HAS FATHERED A DOZEN BASTARDS.

AND THE QUEEN HAS SEEN TO IT THAT NONE ARE EVER SEEN AT COURT. JON WOULD BE SHUNNED, HOW CAN YOU BE SO?

ANOTHER SOLUTION PRESENTS ITSELF. YOUR BROTHER BENJEN CAME TO ME ABOUT JON. THE BOY ASPIRES TO TAKE THE BLACK.

THERE IS GREAT HONOR IN SERVICE ON THE WALL, MY LORD. AND EVEN A BASTARD MAY RISE HIGH IN THE NIGHT’S WATCH. A HARD SACRIFICE, YET HIS ROAD IS NO CRIEER THAN YOURS OR YOUR LADY’S.

VERY WELL I WILL SPEAK TO BEN. WHEN SHALL WE TELL JON?
"It will be a fortnight before we are ready to depart. I would sooner let Jon enjoy these last few days."

"Summer will end soon, and childhood as well."

"When the time comes, I will tell him myself."

To be continued.