

“This is the proposed canal, and these are the three new roads I’m proposing.” Harry pointed at the brown lines drawn on the map of the North while showcasing the proposal to his father, Lord Ryswell and Lord Manderly.

“These are extensive road lanes you are proposing, Lord Harrion. I also couldn’t help but note the canal cuts through the Kingsroad.” Lord Ryswell made his observations known after a minute of quiet contemplation.

“The roads are for faster troop movements in case of an attack on either mouth of the canal. We’ll also have to build a bridge to connect the Kingsroad across the Sunset Canal.” Harry hastily added, pressing his finger at the spot on the map where the canal cut through the Kingsroad.

“That’s going to be difficult, is it not?” Lord Wyman asked, rubbing the beard on his face with a frown.

“I suspect it won’t be as difficult as raising a full-fledged castle.” Lord Ryswell mused aloud, staring pointedly at Harry.

“No, it’s not.” Harry agreed.

Privately, he thought it would be a long, winding process. Mostly because he’d need the workforce to complete the roads adjoining the bridge and those connecting the mouths of the canal with the Kingsroad. There were also the ports he was hoping to build to deter enemy ships and pirates from transiting the channel. But he didn’t say it aloud.

Besides, it’d be a wasted opportunity for the North to disregard its labour. Constructing the roads to the two mouths of the canal would provide work for the smallfolk, and it also gave him a convenient opportunity to turn the lands between these roads and Moat Cailin into ripe farmlands. He hoped that one day, Jon would take the lordship of Moat Cailin. With the rich farmlands under the Moat’s control, it could sustain itself in the future. It was a way of financially stabilising the castle so it’d never again fall into disrepair.

“How long would the construction take?” Eddard asked.

“As soon as the land survey is completed, I can deploy the runestones to sculpt the channel. I believe it’d take a year at most before all works are completed, including the roads.” said Harry.

“I suppose that leaves us with the survey of the land and the finer details.” said Lord Manderly.

What followed was the most challenging set of negotiations. Lord Ryswell spoke on behalf of Lady Dustin, wringing any concessions he could try to wriggle out of them. But Harry was not willing to concede to anything he was not already willing to give.

“Instead of buying the land from House Dustin, how about leasing the land in exchange for a share of the tolls imposed on the ships in transit?” Lord Ryswell suggested.

Harry didn’t wait a moment to shout down that idea on the spot before anyone else could pitch in.

“That would be impossible. The canal is built by myself, and the labour that goes into it is paid out of my pocket and Lord Manderly, with our fleets guarding the canal in perpetuity. What does House Dustin contribute to this venture besides land?”

Just as Lord Ryswell opened his mouth to comment, Harry immediately intervened.

“Besides, House Dustin ended with Lord William’s untimely demise in Dorne. While Lady Dustin is his widow, she’s not his heir. She’s a temporary custodian of those lands until my father settles the succession of the Barrowlands.” Harry reminded the old lord of the Rills.

“We have Dustin blood in our veins Lord Harrion.” Lord Ryswell said in a quick rebuttal.

“As does other dozen Northmen. Their claims are just as valid and will be considered before settling the succession of House Dustin.” Harry retorted calmly.

That was when something Harry didn’t foresee happened. He could see he walked right into a trap by the look on Lord Ryswell’s face. The moment the brown eyes of Lord Ryswell connected with Harry, he read the surface thoughts of Rodrik Ryswell, which forced him to act. He acted quickly by placing the Confundus charm on Lord Ryswell to force the man to shut up. Otherwise, Lord Ryswell would’ve demanded Barrowlands be confirmed to Lady Barbrey in return for the land adjustments Harry proposed for the canal and the roads.

Due to his timely action, the plan of Rodrik Ryswell never panned out. Instead, it was decided to absorb the land for the canal into the land holdings of Moat Cailin. Harry was even happy to pay a reasonable price in gold agreed upon by the Lord of Winterfell and Lady Dustin after proper surveys were conducted for the canal and the road. House Manderly agreed to construct the road connecting the east mouth of the channel with the Kingsroad, making it less of a financial burden on House Stark.

There was also the ambitious but entirely necessary road project that directly connects Winterfell with White Harbour under consideration. The usual route of taking the Kingsroad to move goods to White Harbour was fast becoming an issue because of the delays. While the Kingsroad was patched up a few years back after King Robert’s visit, the demand for Avalonian glass was such that it was becoming increasingly difficult to have the glass transported to White Harbour in time. He had thought of using his airships to hasten the process, but he thought better of it after thinking about the loss of jobs and revenue the smallfolk and other merchants would suffer. The convoys from Avalon would stop at many inns along the road, which kept the smallfolk and the merchants in business.

Therefore, the solution that didn’t rob the smallfolk of their meagre earnings was to build a new road. It also helped that a new direct road connecting Winterfell and White Harbour would also ensure the seamless movement of troops. Faster troop movements would be a boon when the time came to subdue the Three Sisters. Purging the pirates from the islands and turning them into a shield for the North would ensure their capability to repel other Westerosi fleets from attempting an invasion. The islands would also serve as a good trading hub and stop-gap to reach the free city of Braavos and other eastern ports of the southern kingdoms.

But first, Harry needed the waters around White Harbour and the Three Sisters under observation. For that to happen, the map had to come alive.

‘It’s time.’ Harry thought.

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The last days of the harvest feast were filled with dances and songs to entertain even the hardest men. All kinds of delicacies were on the table, with the finest wines in the Seven Kingdoms to fill their bellies for the whole night.

“What’s with that long look?” Harry asked, joining Jon on the balcony, staring at the full moon shining brightly in the night sky.

Jon merely spared him a glance before resuming his moody state.

“You know what. I think I know the place that you should visit tonight,” said Harry, taking Jon’s hand. “It’s definitely not here.”

Harry started dragging Jon away from the balcony towards the place he thought Jon should visit tonight.

“What’re you doing? Let me stew in peace.” Jon muttered.

“I’m taking you to a better place to stew in peace. Trust me.” said Harry.

A short walk later, Harry and Jon stood before the stone sculpture of Lyanna Stark. Together, they lit a few candles before her tomb, lighting up the dark corners of the crypt.

“What do you think happened?” Jon suddenly asked, making Harry stare curiously at his cousin.

“Hmm?”

“Her.” Jon nodded at the statue of Lyanna Stark. “What do you think happened? Did she go willingly with Prince Rhaegar?”

Harry used the *Muffliato* spell to muzzle their conversation from any surprise visitors in the crypts.

“What did Uncle Benjen say?” Harry asked, eyeing Jon out of the corner of his eyes. “He knew Aunt Lyanna better than most.”

“He said she was fierce, skilled than most in the tilts and half a horse. Other than that, I now know more childhood stories of her, but that doesn’t really answer any of my questions now, does it?” Jon muttered darkly.

“Does it matter whether she went willingly with Rhaegar?” Harry asked after a moment of silence.

“Of course, it matters.” said Jon.

“Does it, though? Rhaegar kept her a prisoner in Dorne, surrounded by the finest knights in the realm and a bloody desert, while the Mad King murdered her father and brother. Do you think a man who loves a woman would allow such depravities to go unanswered against her family?”

“No.” Jon whispered.

“Knowing all that you know about Lyanna Stark, do you think she was a woman who’d run off with a married man she met at a stupid tourney?” Harry asked with a raised eyebrow.

“No.” said Jon, shaking his head.

“I don’t think so either,” said Harry, clapping Jon on his shoulder. “Your mother battled a fever and whatnot to deliver you safely into the world while those supposed honourable knights were keeping her prisoner on the orders of Rhaegar in a tower in the middle of the desert. If she went willingly with Rhaegar Targaryen, it was only because of fear, not out of love.”

"I don't know what is worse: to be an unwanted son forced on her by Rhaegar or a son born out of an unlikely love that drowned the seven kingdoms in blood." Jon whispered.

"Your mother's last wish was for you to grow up in Winterfell. You were her last thoughts, Jon. No matter the circumstances of your birth, she loved you more than anything else in the world."

Tears rolled down Jon's cheeks, making Harry give his cousin a one-armed hug.

"Lady Lyanna gave her life so that you could live freely. It'd be a disservice to cry in her presence." said Harry.

Jon wiped his eyes clean and slowly regained his composure.

"You're right." said Jon, wiping away the tears.

"The blood of the dragon might run in your veins, but the wolf blood in you is stronger. After all, you don't look like a prissy silver-haired idiot and instead look like a proper Stark like the rest of us." said Harry, making Jon chuckle.

"Thank you." Jon whispered.

"For what?" Harry asked.

"For giving me the Stark name. For all...this." said Jon before hugging Harry tightly.

"That's what brothers do. They look after each other." said Harry, patting Jon on his back. "Tell you what. How about we go on a trip to Essos?"

"A trip to Essos?" Jon asked with a frown.

"Yes. We can visit some of the Free Cities and even see the ruins of Valyria." Harry said excitedly.

"The ruins of Valyria!" Jon gasped, pulling away from the hug to stare at Harry with wide eyes. "Are you mad?"

"Don't tell me you're not curious to see what's left out there." said Harry with a knowing look.

"Of course, I'm curious. But no one has ever returned alive from Valyria. You know the stories better than most, Harry."

"I know the stories said by those not blessed with magic. Nothing is going to happen. After all, you have me." Harry grinned.

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It was not exactly an easy task to convince the Lord and Lady of Winterfell to give their permission for what was likely a long trip in Essos. But with magic, anything was possible, and he never hesitated in getting his way using the mind arts. It was fast becoming second nature to him relying on the mind arts to get around an inconvenient situation involving other people.

In this case, a healthy dose of compulsion charms and memory alteration were necessary, considering the necessity of the Essosi trip. Unlike what he implied to Jon, the trip was not for sightseeing. There was another agenda in his journey to Essos, one connected to the Sunset Canal. It

was imperative to have an understanding between the North and the Free Cities like Braavos and Pentos before opening the canal for their merchant ships. Their commercial interests had to be aligned with the strategic maritime safety of the North. There were also some agreements to be struck with Braavos and Pentos before their ships were allowed transit through the canal. By using the Sunset Canal, Braavos and Pentos could end up neatly shaving off nearly a month of sea travel in accessing the ports of the western shores of the Reach, North, Riverlands and Westerlands.

But most importantly, Harry wanted to strike an ice trade agreement with the Free Cities. He had allowed such talks to lapse so far because he was giving the cities enough time to show that his hold on the Iron Islands was rock solid. Not only did he demonstrate his capability of holding the newly conquered territory, but he was also showing them he was quickly building a fleet to exert total dominance over the Ironborn and possibly the Sunset Sea. If he could dominate the Sunset Sea with his fleet, he could attract merchants from Lorath, Ibben and, if lucky, as far from the Jade Sea. The lands west of Westeros were nearly all explored, and the next frontier lay in the Sunset Sea. Unfortunately, the Ironborn hindered exploration and trade relations with new civilisations across the Sunset Sea.

With the opening of the canal and the complete subduing of the Ironborn, Harry was offering them access to new markets for their wares, and they would know it the moment some sensible people put two and two together. Harry counted on the Sealord's court to recognise the canal's value. Once they did that, Harry was sure the massive fleet of Braavos would strategically align with the interests of the North once House Targaryen launched their doomed war to reclaim that useless piece of metal they charmingly call the Iron Throne.

"The Iron Throne." Harry scoffed, looking at the position of the Crownlands on the map sprawled out on the table.

Harry placed a carved wooden red dragon coin on the Crownlands adjacent to the crowned stag figurine. He put another red coin inside the borders of the Stormlands. He was certain Aegon Targaryen, supported by Dorne, would wage a war on the Stormlands that'd spill into the Crownlands. If Viserys Targaryen also amassed enough support from Essos to help his nephew, then all the better. But they desperately needed an alliance with the Reach if they wanted to make rapid gains against House Baratheon.

"The Riverlords could reinforce the Baratheon troops fast enough." Maester Marwyn suggested, placing the trout inside the borders of the Crownlands.

"Hmm. Lord Hoster is a cautious man. I feel he won't move to reinforce the capital without support from the Vale knights or the North. If I were him, I'd be wary of taking my eyes from the River road." said Harry, tapping the long road that connected the Riverlands to the interior of the Westerlands.

"The Westerlands is a spent force." said Maester Marwyn.

"Since when has common sense prevailed amongst the lords of Westeros?" Harry asked with a scoff. "A bloodletting of this scale is too much of a temptation for even the least bloodthirsty of lords and knights. There is glory to be had on the battlefield, and I suspect many idiots would jump at the chance to reap some to their name."

"The Vale would take time to muster their army if the Targaryen forces catch the Baratheons in a surprise attack. It might become an even fight if the Reach supports the Targaryens." Maester Marwyn said, rubbing his beard thoughtfully while staring at the map.

“But...” Harry looked expectantly at the old maester.

There was a reason why he was having this conversation with Maester Marwyn. As a Reachman, Marwyn knew more about the internal politics of the Reach than anyone else. He needed to consider all possible scenarios that could play out in future wars if he navigated an optimal path that’d benefit the North’s cause.

“But the Reach will never unify under House Tyrell. House Florent is now in a better position.” Said Maester Marwyn.

Harry nodded at the point raised by Maester Marwyn. The Florents now had the upper hand as one of their own was now the queen of the Seven Kingdoms.

“I believe House Tyrell is about to face a decline as House Florent gains more power in the Reach. The Hightowers have kin on both sides, and therefore I believe Oldtown might sit out any potential conflicts. I suspect the Reach might end up fracturing.”

“Hmm.” Harry hummed thoughtfully.

It was a reasonable assumption to make, as the Reach had always remained disunited after the fall of House Gardner. Even during the Targaryen Civil War, the Blacks had more support in the Reach, which was thought to be the Greens’ stronghold.

“Winterfell received a betrothal offer from House Martell. Prince Doran is offering his daughter’s hand in marriage to me. What do you make of that maester?” Harry asked while he began placing wolf figurines on the islands of the Sunset Sea, capturing the interest of Marwyn.

“I think Prince Doran understands his nephew’s chances to overthrow Stannis Baratheon are slim, and he wants to ensure the North’s alliance or, at the very least, our neutrality. He’ll be most happy if he could push it and make the Riverlands neutral.” Marwyn said after giving some thought on the matter.

“I concur.” Harry said, placing wolf figurines on Fair Isle, Greenshield, Southshield and the Arbour.

“My lord. Are you...?” Maester Marwyn trailed off, seeing the spread of Stark positions capturing the Sunset Sea.

“Yes. It’s the first time since the arrival of the Andals on this continent the North is expanding its territory. It’s now the time for the First Men to reclaim the lands that were lost in the invasion.” said Harry, placing the last of his pieces near Sunspear on the map of Westeros.

“Send a raven to Prince Doran. I’ll visit Sunspear at his earliest convenience to discuss some important matters.” Harry ordered.

“But what about your visit to Braavos?” Maester Marwyn asked.

“Did you forget that I possess the fastest ships in the world, maester?” Harry asked with a chuckle.

Standing up from his seat, Harry moved towards the window to gaze at the bustling harbour of Avalon. He could count almost thirty ships in the harbour. A few had sailed towards Bear Island for training exercises, including landing on beachheads and weathering storms. The ships also had to be tested to see whether they met their standards, as they had only arrived from the Arbour’s construction yards. More ships were slated to arrive by the end of the next month, and more were

under construction in Avalon and Harlaw. The Ironborn were good shipbuilders, and their workforce was speeding up the construction work.

Harry was sure his fleet would reach parity with the Redwyne Fleet in numbers within two years. The island hopping he was planning when the North declared independence would require nothing less than a highly skilled naval force under his direct command. Fortunately, the men under his command were edging the knowledge and experience gap with the aid of his Ironborn subjects and sailors from White Harbour.

It would be some eventful years ahead, especially the trip he was planning into Essos. The only thing left was to select the companions he would take on his trip to Essos.

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Stannis Baratheon carefully sat on the Iron Throne in full regalia as he faced the court. The jagged edges of the Iron Throne were a hassle to navigate while sitting on the Iron Throne, but he had never felt so powerful or content. Despite the demanding nature of his kingship, Stannis liked the fact that he was the most powerful man in Westeros. After capturing the treasury of Casterly Rock, his coffers were now overflowing with gold. Having control of Lannisport also added to his revenue, as he had been using his tax collectors extensively in extracting all that was useful from the city's populace. He was supposed to give the city to a trusted house, but he had so far refused to do so on the advice of Petyr Baelish.

While he disliked the Master of Coin, the man was shrewd when it came to expanding the crown's finances. That was the only reason the Valeman retained his post in the Small Council.

Today, the court was not gathered for any petitions or resolution of any disputes. Instead, the court was gathered inside the throne room to witness the return of Godsgrief. The large oak door of the throne room swung open, and Stannis could see Renly leading Edric Storm into the throne room with Godsgrief slung on the boy's shoulder. He watched the distinct curiosity with which the court stared at his elder brother's bastard son and the hammer in the boy's hands.

Stannis had tried to avoid this from happening. He had requested Harrion Stark to somehow lift the magic on the hammer so that the weapon could be used by him and, in time, his heirs. But the answer he received from Harrion Stark was unsatisfactory. According to the Stark boy, the magic on the hammer could not be lifted for some reason. This left the hammer entirely useless, and he was forced to leave the hammer in the same place his brother fell.

According to Varys, a village had sprung up around the land where Robert's hammer fell. The villagers had even started calling the place Hammerfall. The village had sprung up in the aftermath of the war, attracting people from all over Westeros to see the fallen but unmovable weapon of his late brother. But now, the hammer of his brother was no longer in Hammerfall.

"Your grace."

Both Renly and Edric Storm bowed before the foot of the Iron Throne. Renly was dressed in bright blue, yellow and red colours that waded a few tongues in the court.

"Brother. Nephew." Stannis acknowledged the duo with a nod.

He expertly hid a grimace at seeing the flamboyant colours on his younger brother's clothes.

"Go, nephew." Renly cajoled Edric forward.

Stannis watched neutrally as his nephew climbed the steps towards the throne. Reaching the last step near the foot of the throne, Edric Storm placed Godsgrief on the floor. The warhammer remained pristine, with shiny ripples adorning its surface.

"Thank you, nephew." Stannis nodded at the boy.

While he couldn't use the hammer, Stannis was adamant not to leave his brother's hammer in the Westerlands. Even if the future kings from his bloodline could not lift the hammer, he desired to have the weapon close to the Iron Throne. After all, his brother had spent a fortune on the hammer, and he was not above using the hammer in a similar fashion the Targaryens used the dragon skulls.

"You'll serve as a squire for Ser Barristan from now on. In time, you might earn knighthood if you're diligent enough." said Stannis.

He noticed the eerie silence of the court. While his nephew was a bastard, he wanted the boy to have a life of his own under his watch. Serving under Ser Barristan as a squire ensured the boy's presence in the Red Keep.

'If I'm lucky, the boy would end up in the Kingsguard.' Stannis mused.