Before the Dawn

by Little_Ghost14

Summary

Having barely survived childbirth by the skin of her teeth, it seems like Lyanna Stark has had a lucky escape. But after Robert Baratheon emerges triumphant from the rebellion, with lions circling ever closer, the world couldn't be a more dangerous place for her vulnerable infant son. Her own future couldn't be more frightening.

This is a re-write of my now deleted original

Notes

So, hello again! Although I deleted the original version of this story several months ago, I did promise my readers that I was working hard on a re-write. And here it is. The basic premise is the same: Lyanna lives, but due to Robert's victory over Rhaegar, she still must go to extraordinary lengths to keep her son a secret.

I've kept a handful of scenes from the original that I did enjoy, but essentially it is now a completely different story. (F)Aegon will eventually play a key role, but I'm guessing everyone (even show only folks) know who he is/isn't.
I continue to be incapable to writing short stories, so this is another long one. So, enjoy the ride and I hope to see some of you still around by the end. Thanks for reading. This story is almost entirely re-written, so my other stories will not be affected by its progress.
Lyanna was halfway down the tower steps when the dampness began to seep through her smallclothes. She froze, not daring to breathe, not daring to move another muscle. The midwife and Ser Arthur Dayne hadn't noticed and ran on ahead without her, throwing their luggage onto the back of a pack mule while she stood there mute, scared out of her wits. A small, near silent drip on the hard stone step snapped her out of it and she crossed her legs, like a child trying not to piss itself even though it was all too late. Despite her efforts, the dripping continued.

_Ignore it_, she told herself. She took the next step sidelong, like an arthritic crab, but her swollen belly pressed uncomfortably into the handrail bolted to the turnpike stairwell. As she made her way downwards she left a trail of glistening fluid that her brain refused to disregard. It was there and it terrified the life out of her as she thought of Tywin's men closing in on them. She had to get away, to the safety of Starfall. But where then? But that hardly mattered when they had the Mountain falling on them from the east.

"Your Grace, please, we must make haste."

The voice of Gerold Hightower startled her, as if she had forgotten the kingsguard were still there. He looked at her, briefly meeting her gaze before lowering his eyes in dismay at the wet trail of fluid that tracked her progress.

"I'm alright," she tried to say. "I can still go."

But she was as far from 'alright' as she was from home. The words had barely left her lips when the first contraction tore through the muscle of her belly. So, sudden, so swift, that she couldn't even cry out. She couldn't even breathe, never mind cry out. Ser Gerold acted fast and rushed up the steps to meet her, letting her lean on him as he half-carried and half-dragged her down the rest of the steps.

Out in the open, under the blazing Dornish sun, her skin prickled unpleasantly. The heat and the pain combined, caused her head to spin and her stomach to roil. Realising what was happening, the others abandoned the baggage train and ran to her assistance. Ser Arthur and Ser Gerold held her up between them, but the look on the midwife's face almost caused her heart to stop.

"The baby's coming," she said. "We cannot move her now."

_No_, her head screamed. _No, no, no!_ In actuality, she just screamed. Wordless and senseless, as another contraction tore her apart. It was left to Ser Arthur to try and reason with the woman.

"It's not safe here. The enemy will be here any minute; we cannot risk staying another night," he stated.

"If she travels she will die and the babe too," the midwife argued back.

"If she stays we will all be killed and you too," Oswell Whent chipped in.

"This babe is more important than any of us," Arthur re-joined the argument. "Aerys is dead. Rhaegar is dead. The crown passes from father to son which means the babe coming now is already our king. He must live and if that means he is born here, then so be it!"

But Lyanna had already extricated herself from them and was beginning to hobble toward her horse. She could ride. She could ride through the seven hells if need be. That was what she was good at. She and her horses were one and the others just didn't understand that.
"I can do it!" she panted, breathlessly. "Just help me into the saddle, please."

It didn't matter how far she made it, just so long as she was no longer here in this place. Two miles down the road, even one, would give her some peace of mind for the ordeal ahead. But even as that thought crossed her mind, another contraction came and the clear fluids turned blood red.

"Get her back inside now!" the midwife called over Lyanna's piercing shriek.

She had blacked out. The only reason she knew she blacked out was because when she opened her eyes again she was back inside the Tower, in world of pain and fear. She heard footsteps racing toward the closed door and in her head, it was Gregor Clegane. In reality it was only Ser Gerold, who stopped on the threshold and watched what was happening in growing consternation.

"Is there any way to speed things up?" he demanded of the room at large. "As soon as it's done we must go."

But Lyanna wasn't going anywhere now. Another contraction seized her, followed by another and another. Any faster and they'd all merge into one. The harried looking midwife pushed past the guard with a bowl of hot water in her hands.

"It takes as long as it takes," she answered, unhelpfully.

"There must be something you can do!" Hightower snapped. "Once the head is out can't you just pull it the rest of the way?"

Lyanna had had enough. "I'll fucking pull you out by the ankles, if you don't leave me be. And close the door on your way out!"

If the Kingsguard fell, that door was all that stood between her and the Mountain, if Tywin really had set his dogs off on the hunt for her. Every time someone came through it, she feared it would be Clegane or Amory Lorch. The sack of King's Landing had been a game of one-upmanship in depravity between the two and it made her physically sick to think how they'd up the ante with her. Would they rape and murder her before putting her baby to the sword? Or would they put the baby to the sword and save her for Robert?

She was snapped out her thoughts as the midwife threw open the shutters on the windows, trying in vain to tempt in a night breeze. But even at night the air in Dorne was balmy and stagnant. All the midwife could do was change her nightrail and mop her brow with a cool damp cloth as she fought against the endless pain. Every so often the midwife stopped, then peered between Lyanna's knees while offering words of gentle encouragement.

"Crowning now," she said. "The babe's crowning."

Lyanna couldn't help but laugh at the unfortunate phrasing. Laughter soon turning to another piercing shriek as the final contraction made her feel as if her lower body was tearing itself away from the rest of her. And it was over as quick as it began as something large and wet slithered from between her thighs.

Drained and limp with exhaustion she fell back against a bank of plump pillows. Her breaths were ragged and shallow. The sight of a tiny creature hastily wrapped in swaddling cloth caused her to rally, but only enough to clutch the baby to her breast. Just for a moment, all her fears and all her doubts were washed away as her new born son squirmed in her arms. Alive, healthy and staring up at her through grey and guileless eyes.

"He's a bonny little thing, your grace," said the midwife, taking the baby back from her.
Relied washed over her as she took in the babe’s Stark features.

Although the ordeal was finally over, her limbs felt like lead and she thought might even be bleeding still. Groggy and drowsy, she turned her face to the windows and the night sky beyond. *Look for the bleeding star,* Rhaegar had told her, days before he left. But there was nothing there that she could see. No smoke, no salt, no bleeding stars. The stars that were there faded into darkness, winking out one by one until there were none.

When she awoke again the sun was shining through the closed shutters in slanting beams. The child slept in a plain wooden cradle at her bedside, but they were alone. Her bedclothes had been changed, but she had bled again during the night and her skin felt cold and clammy. The sheets and her clean nighttrail seemed to stick to her skin. On her bedside sat a vase containing the last flowers the prince had sent her. Their blue petals wilted and blackened in the heat, filling the air with the sweet and sickening smell of decay.

"Sweetling," she said, trying to reach for her son.

Since Rhaegar died she had prayed for a girl. A girl would be less of a threat to the new King. *Like Rhaenys was less of a threat,* the voice at the back of her mind said. The recollection of what happened caused her heart to sink in dismay. And then she remembered that they were about to flee, but when she tried to stand her legs gave from under her. She hit the floor with a thump that sent shockwaves of pain coursing through her. Thinking she had heard a commotion outside, she stifled her own cry of pain and strained to listen.

The sound came again, the clash of swords, a muffled cry of pain and a shout of anger. Tears welled in her eyes as she tried to call out, but her voice was gone. A woman did scream but in the confusion and panic she couldn't tell who it was: herself or the midwife. Fear overrode her other emotions, giving her the strength to reach her son and hold him tight as she sought cover. There was nowhere to hide except in the gap between her bed and the wall.

Meanwhile, the fighting got louder and she could smell smoke drifting in through the open windows. To protect the child, she folded her loose gown around him, masking his face from the smoke and his ears from the sound of men dying just beyond their door. She kissed him through the fabric, her tears splashing against his scalp, just as feet pounded up the steps beyond her door. Whoever that was now, it wasn't the midwife.

She flinched as the handle turned, hugging the baby tighter to her. But the latch was on and the door didn't give way. Rhaegar had left a hunting knife behind, but she hadn't the presence of mind to fetch it and it was no match for Gregor Clegane’s sword anyway. It was little more than a desperate woman's desperate hope. A second later, her heartbeat ceased as a crash shook the tower to its foundations and the wooden door exploded inwards, sending down a shower of dust and splinters.

Frozen with fear, she couldn't even scream as a figure emerged from the dust covered in blood and dirt.

"She's unconscious, but she's breathing well." Howland was only trying to be reassuring, but Eddard couldn't help but worry. After he passed the infant to Lord Reed, he himself picked up Lyanna from where she had passed out between the bed and wall, finding her light as a feather despite her recent pregnancy. He was about to deposit her on the bed, before he noticed the blood-soaked sheets. She was still bleeding.

"Get help," he instructed Howland. "Now."
He left with the baby as Eddard sat on the edge of the bed with his sister cradled in his arms. Her skin burned to touch and her lips were dry and cracked. Water, he thought. She needs water. The only clean water he could find he had used to wash the blood and dust from his face after kicking in the door. He was about to curse himself for a fool when she stirred in his arms, coming around slowly.

"Ned, is it you?" she murmured in a voice barely above a whisper. "Is it really you?"

As weak as she sounded, relief washed over him at the sound of her voice. "Of course it's me. You didn't think I would leave you here, did you?"

She was still afraid. It was there in her eyes; something he had never seen in her before. She was trying to move, to get up, but she hadn't the strength and it only served to fuel his fears all the more. Weakening fast, her eyes rolled to the back of her head, showing only the whites as she slipped away from him. After laying her back down he took her hand in his own, squeezing it in hope that the pressure would bring her around.

"The baby," she said, rallying once more. "Ned, the baby."

"Howland has the baby," he sought to reassure her. "No one will hurt you, not now I am here."

"Robert will," she replied, almost pleadingly. "Robert will kill him, Ned, you know he will. We know what he did to the others and he'll do it him, too."

Eddard renewed his grip on her hand; his own worry solidifying into a defiant resolve. He tried not to think of the bloodied pulp that had once been Prince Aegon, but the image had been seared indelibly on his mind. Nor could he decide what was worse: the pulp of the baby or the perfectly human form of the little Princess who bore only the gaping wound of a sword through her heart. Rhaenys looked like she was only sleeping. Tywin Lannister's men had done it and Robert wholeheartedly approved.

"Robert will have to go through me first," he swore. He wanted to believe that Robert would never raise a sword to him. He wanted to believe that they were still brothers in all but blood. But the fight they’d had over the corpses of the Targaryens had put paid to any such notions. Kingship had made a butcher of his once beloved friend. With his emotions simmering so close to the surface, Ned had to draw a breath to compose himself before continuing: "I've come to take you home – to take you both home – and Robert won't be able to touch you there."

Lyanna didn't look in the least bit reassured. She was so pale and fragile that Ned was almost afraid to touch her again, but when it seemed she would fade away completely she rallied.

"Promise me, Ned," she pleaded. "Promise me you'll look after him."

He hesitated. Not through any uncertainty about granting the promise, but because he was trying to think how. How could it be done? The child was Lyanna's and there was only one realistic contender for the father. Nevertheless, he would find a way.

"I will," he answered, firmly. "I promise."

They remained together for what seemed an age before Howland Reed returned with the midwife. Between them they had bedsheets, fresh water and the baby. His nephew he had not yet met properly. But Lyanna was out cold. Her breathing was ragged and shallow, sweat beaded her brow and he felt like he was watching her fade before his very eyes. Taking the infant in his arms, Ned sought to distract himself.
The little creature was quiet, barely making a sound even when he was hungry and all they could do was drip goat's milk into his mouth to keep him alive. At one point, a small hand reached from the swaddling, grabbed Ned's fingertip and refused to let go. Still the babe was silent, as if he knew he wasn't really meant to be there. As if he already knew he would have to slip through life completely unnoticed.

"My lord, we need the wetnurse."

It was already evenfall when Howland approached him again. Ned was sitting on the battlements with the infant in his arms, both of them looking up at the stars popping into the darkening skies. Had Lyanna been stronger he'd have gone already. But there was no change in her. Meanwhile, the baby grew hungrier as Lyanna's life hung by a thread. It pained him to leave her, but the hungry baby left him no choice.

"I've already sent a raven to Starfall. Lady Ashara said …" he realised then that it didn't matter what she said. Things had changed; everything had changed since they last met. "I'll bring the sword back to Starfall myself and tell her everything. Arthur died defending a child he regarded as his king. He died nobly. And I cannot imagine Ashara refusing to appoint our wetnurse over this."

Howland looked abashed. "They'll understand."

"You'll stay with my sister until I return?"

He already knew the answer.

"Of course."

In the depths of a fevered sleep, Lyanna dreamed of snow. It swirled all around her, whipped by the remorseless winds. She clutched the stolen baby close to her breast, swaddling him in furs as she stumbled toward the icy tower in the distance. Although she didn't know how, she knew she was north of the wall. Blue-eyed men armoured in sheets of ice circled the tower and she had to reach it before they did. They wanted the baby. Her special, abducted baby. While she staggered through the gusting winds, the ice men moved as swift and soundless as a summer breeze. They closed in on her, touching her, frozen fingernails raking through her hair. But she wouldn't yield the baby. She wouldn't and she screamed, before waking with a startled gasp.

The snow and wind was gone, replaced by the all too familiar Dornish heat. She sat up slowly and that simple act alone made her head spin. All the same, she disentangled herself from the twisted bedsheets and tried to stand up. When she fell, she brought a vase down with her and the noise of it hitting the floorboards brought people running to her chamber.

"Lord Reed!" She managed to get up and kiss her old friend's cheek. "I remember Ned being here but I did not know you were too. Where is he? Where is my baby?"

A blush crept up behind his beard. "The midwife agreed to stay behind, my lady. She has your son."

While she got back to her feet, he brought her a bowl of clean and cool water which she drank almost in one go. Howland urged her not to rush it, but the whole fluid lot seemed to go no further than sinking into her sponge of a tongue.

"Do you need more?"

"I need my baby," she answered.
Once she had him in her arms again, she felt better. The midwife had procured a screen for her, to put up while she breastfed. On the other side of it, she continued to bombard Howland with questions.

"Is Robert with you? Are you sure no one followed you here? How many people know about the baby?"

'No, no, no one,' came the answers.

Despite the assurances, her nerves were scattered. Even when Howland told her how long she had been unconscious, she still felt unsettled. If anyone had followed them they would have made their presence felt by now.

"I want to be ready to go as soon as Ned gets back," she stated. "We can decide what to do next on the way."

The one small mercy they had going in their favour was that the baby looked nothing like his father.

Dawn shone in Eddard's lap as he drew back the scabbard. Pale as milkglass, it caught the sun and made the light its own. Not even Ice compared in beauty, or so he thought in that moment. As for who could be worthy to wield the blade next, he could think of none to match the skill of its last owner. Ser Arthur could easily have finished him off, had it not been for Howland Reed. A memory he knew he would take to his own grave. But then, the last year had been one long bitter memory that would never let him rest again.

Replacing the scabbard, he turned to look out over the horizon from the prow of the small boat that bobbed him down the Torrentine River. Starfall was in the near distance, darkened against the setting sun. The Palestone Sword towered above the rest, keeping its watch over the river traffic pouring in from the Summer Sea in the west and the Red Mountains behind him to the east. From the top of the tallest tower, his gaze lowered to the slight, hooded figure awaiting him on the wharf and he knew it was her. Behind her a sheathed sword still attached to a large leather sword belt was propped against the wall.

He thanked the oarsman for taking him the last few miles of his journey, sparing his exhausted horse the toil and paid the man gold. Only when he climbed ashore did she lower her hood, meeting his gaze with those haunting lilac eyes. She must have got the raven, or she wouldn't have known to come for him. For that, he sent up a silent prayer of thanks and hoped his gods could hear it. But when it came to what to say to her, words utterly failed him.

For a long time, she said nothing either. But she was smiling. A sad, pale smile as she watched the boatman who brought him here sailing back down the Torrentine. Ned kept his distance, wondering whether she was thinking the same thing as him.

"I remember the last time I watched a boatman bring you ashore, Lord Stark," she said, finally. "Things were very different then."

"I think now it might have been a different life," he concurred. "A different you; a different me."

The sound of her voice broke the spell and he hazarded a closer step. When she did not flee from him, he moved closer still. Close enough to catch the scent of her rosewater. All the while, he held Dawn in its scabbard like it was an offering. As beautiful as it was, it was still a sorry substitute for a brother of Ser Arthur's calibre. When Lady Ashara's gaze fell on it, he heard the breath catch in her throat.
"I heard that the fisherman died," she said, her hands covered his where he held the sword. "If it is true, I am sorry to hear it."

"It's true," he confirmed, letting go of Dawn. "He was sailing me back to the North when a storm blew up and hauled him overboard. His daughter took up the oars herself, sailing us through safely."

Her mouth twitched, her lips drawing back in an attempted smile. "I'll always remember watching for him from the top of the Windwyrm Tower; waiting for that little boat to come bobbing into view, knowing you would be on board."

"I always looked for you there," he answered. "I think I always will."

In truth, he didn't know how to feel. They danced at Harrenhal, they stayed in touch after she returned to Dragonstone with Elia and he returned to the Eyrie. Occasionally, they visited each other. It wasn't long before they found themselves on opposite sides of a war. No promises had ever been made between them, but their hearts had been exchanged.

"I am sorry for your loss, my lady," he said, at length. "Your brother was among the finest- "

"Spare me the eulogies, Ned," she cut in, but not harshly. A smile took any lingering sting from her words. "Forgive me. But I knew him well and I don't need other people to tell me of Arthur's greatness. However, in just a few short minutes you're going to walk out of my life and we will never see each other again. So don't waste your breath on things we already know."

Then you don't want me to tell you how I still love you, he thought to himself. But he could not bring himself to say it. His gaze dropped to where she cradled Dawn in her arms. Her long, tapering fingers traced over the star in the hilt.

"How is your sister?" she asked.

"I think she is like to die," he answered, honestly. "Lord Reed gave her medicine he brought down from the Neck and it seemed her fever broke the last night I was there. Even so, she was barely breathing when I left."

Ashara looked him dead in the eye. "And the baby?"

Ned hesitated. "A healthy boy. He looks just like his mother."

"He'll be easier to hide from Robert then," she noted, before double taking. "You're not going to tell him, are you?"

"Of course not!" Ned retorted. "And Robert be thrice damned for what he did to Elia and the children."

He recalled the fight they'd had with chilling clarity. 'I don't see babes; I see only dragonspawn.' Those were the words left ringing in Ned's ears as he stormed out of the Red Keep. He had gone on to lift the siege at Storm's End, then sailed straight for Dorne with the images of slaughtered children still fresh in his mind. Before he could grow angry at Robert again, he drew a deep breath to compose himself.

"Forgive me, I haven't yet had the presence of mind to thank you for letting me know where Rhaegar took Lyanna," he said, more evenly. "And about the baby."

"You saved my life back there, Ned!" she replied, waving a hand dismissively. "As for the babe, Rhaegar's last surviving heir, I thought I should return the sword you gave me. Whatever you tell that
child in the future, it's only right he wields his father's sword."

Ned had almost forgotten the sword. Robert took it from Rhaegar's body hoping to have it melted down and added to the iron throne. After entrusting him with it Robert promptly forgot all about it and Ned wasn't about to remind him. He arrived in King's Landing just as the sack was getting under way and he gave Ashara the sword for her own protection.

"My thanks," he said, taking it from her. It was no match for Dawn, but still a splendid blade. "My nephew will give his thanks, in good time."

"What will you name him?" she asked. "You can't very well keep calling him Aegon now."


A blush crept into her pale face and she laughed, shaking her head. "Did I say Aegon? I meant Aemon, after that old uncle of Rhaegar's up at Castle Black. I think they settled on that, anyway."

She then quickly changed the subject. "Speaking of which, won't Robert guess at the identity of the baby's father? Lyanna was all but a prisoner at the Tower, it is not as though there are many other men who could have fathered the boy. In fact, there are none but Rhaegar."

Ned sighed heavily again, his heart hardening toward the man he once looked up to as a brother. "If Robert wants to get to my nephew, he will do so only over my dead body. And my sister's dead body. The dead bodies of the Stark army."

"Let me tell you something about Court life, Ned," she said, sounding almost weary. "Now that Robert is King, the small council won't just let him raise armies to go storming about the country waving around that hammer of his. All the killing he needs doing now will be done by stealth. By assassins planted in your household staff, by hired catspaws slipping through your castle walls. I know you, Ned, and I don't think such a practise would cross your noble mind. But those men are not like you. They will want the job done and they'll want it done discreetly and efficiently. Take my advice and hide that boy well. It matters not how you do it, but you must if you want him to live … and making peace with Robert would be a good start."

Ned's stomach churned and he looked away from her, toward the Torrentine wending into the Summer Sea beyond. The sun was setting now and the shadow of the Palestone Sword fell heavy across them both. So soon after the event, he could not think what to do. If Lyanna lived, they would discuss it together. If not …

"I never thought Robert could ever sanction the murder of children," he said, bitterly. "The crown has changed him, Ash, and not for the better."

Ashara laughed. "Since when do crowns change folk for the better? What I do know is that there's a new reality in place, and we must all shape ourselves to it."

Ned suppressed the groan that was on his lips. It was all very well other people telling him to make peace with Robert, but they hadn't seen the corpses. The bloodied pulp and the sleeping-but-dead princess. Elia raped and a sword through her heart. It was a scene of evil made flesh.

"I know you don't want to hear it, but I am sorry for the death of your brother," he said again, meeting her gaze. "I'm sorry for … a lot of things."

"You and I, both," she replied. "But the things we said were said before the war. No one could have foretold what would happen."
If Lyanna hadn't gone with Rhaegar; if Brandon hadn't been such a damn fool. It was the wolfblood in both of them. But there was no use in tormenting each other with what could have been and their new reality shaped itself around them, forcing them down different paths and in opposing directions. And the sad truth was that Ned didn't know what might have happened, even if Brandon had lived and Lyanna married Robert. No promises had been made, he reminded himself. No promises had had to be made. It was always left unspoken.

"What will you do now?" he asked.

Ashara did not answer. She put down Dawn, propping it against the wall of the Palestone Sword before turning back to him. The setting sun was reflected in her lilac eyes, making them as dark as indigo.

"I don't know, but I'll think of something," she answered, honestly. "What about you? I hear you have a son now."

"Yes," he answered. "I suppose I ought to return and get to know him and his mother."

He meant it lightly. That he had a son by a woman he had only met once. A woman meant for another man who knew him as well he knew her. But in truth, it scared him. All he saw ahead was uncertainty and the light follies of youth had hardened into the heavy burden of expectation.

A splash of oars on water caught his attention and he knew the boatman was returning. It was almost time to leave, and Ashara saw it too. "This is it, then. I hope she makes you happy, Ned. I really do."

It made him feel small, as if he had been caught doing something wrong. Worse, he could think of nothing to say in reply. Nothing but a hollow: "and you as well."

Ned knew he should be walking away by now, but his own two feet remained stubbornly still. It didn't seem possible that this was the last time; that this was their final goodbye.

"I'll see to it that my family know of what you did for me back in King's Landing," she promised him. "The wetnurse I promised you, Wylla, has already been sent ahead. So, go now. Live your life and be happy."

But not before one final kiss. It was happening before he knew it and Ashara offered no resistance. Their lips met and he tasted the salt from tears he didn't notice she had wept. Rhaegar's old sword fell at Ned's feet while he closed his eyes as she brought her hand to his face, fingertips trailing the dark stubble of his jawline. The kiss lingered as sweet as the summer sunset, until Catelyn burst into his head and he pulled away far more sharply than he intended.

"I'm sorry," she said, falteringly. "For old time's sake."

No, he thought to himself, because I still love you.

But she already knew that and didn't need to hear him say it again. She looked as if she was going to say more, but the boatman's vessel bumped against the small harbour's wharf. There was no more delaying the inevitable now. He touched her dark hair one final time, trying to avoid looking in her eyes. Silent with grief for the past and fear of the future, he turned and walked away.

By the time he was back on board, the beacons had been lit at the top of the Palestone Sword. Their bright flames small against the darkening skies, growing smaller as he sailed back into the night. He thought he could see her still, watching from the wharf with her hood pulled up. Silent, small and alone. The tears he tasted on his lips were now his own.
Lyanna was still weakened from her childbed fever when the wetnurse arrived. When said wetnurse arrived without Eddard, she couldn't help but assume the worst. That he'd fallen down a mountain pass or been set upon by brigands in the night. Or worse, fallen into the hands of the Martells who would be out for rebel blood given what befell Elia. But Wylla was quick to reassure her as she carefully extricated the baby from her arms. Ashara Dayne had sent her before Eddard had even arrived at Starfall.

Wylla was a tall and robust looking woman, of perhaps twenty. Her hair was deep brown and her eyes almost black, but warm and friendly with it. Still, Lyanna felt the wrench as she took the baby from her arms and cradled him as if she'd cradled a hundred others before him. The babe made no fuss for Wylla as he'd made no fuss for anyone. Just the faintest grizzle as his nap was disturbed while being transferred from pair of arms to another.

"Well there, little sausage, what's your name?" she asked, rocking him in the crook of her arm. Although she addressed the babe, she looked to Lyanna for the verbal answer.

"He had a name," she answered, falteringly. "His father and I were set on it, right from when he was first conceived. But we can't call him that. Not now."

Not in all the weeks since Rhaegar's death had she thought of an alternative. She couldn't bring herself to do it. The only thing she had decided on was that it would be a simple name, unassuming and one that didn't draw attention to itself. Everything about the boy would have to be discreet from now on. He couldn't even be named after his famous forebears on either side of the family. Either way, she would settle the matter with Ned as soon as he returned.

In the meantime, she got her strength back by using her legs more often. She packed her things back in a strongbox, the same one she was meant to take with her to Starfall before the labour began. Now, the only place she wanted to go was home. To Winterfell, out of the hot winds blowing sand dunes and away from the relentless heat. And she wanted to be ready to go as soon as Eddard returned.

Outside, she found Howland Reed watching over the burial mounds of the slain Kingsguard. For almost a year all anyone had known was grief and this was only more of the same. Only this time the deaths felt needless. Almost gratuitous. They most certainly didn't need to happen.

"Why did they fight you?" she asked, going to sit beside Lord Reed. "Why did they try to stop Ned, of all people, coming to me? It makes no sense."

Howland looked to her and shrugged. "Ned and I, we were rebels my lady. We rebelled against our King. From where they stood, I suppose that meant we'd also rebelled against your son."

It sounded so foolish she almost laughed, the baby was literally a baby. Then the words of Ser Arthur Dayne returned to her in a flash. At the time, she had been so preoccupied that she hadn't been able to give what he'd said her full attention. He'd reminded them all that Aerys and Rhaegar were dead and the baby was their new King.

"They didn't want Ned getting to my son because they wanted to take him away from both of us," she speculated aloud. "That's the only reason I can think of as to why they thought my own brother, the boy's uncle, should not reach us. They wanted to rule my son themselves, I suppose."
She wouldn't have thought it possible of Ser Arthur. But the other two, Whent and Hightower, were a different matter. As far as they were concerned, her role was to deliver the heir and, after that, her role was done. Whatever the truth, it was gone now. It was buried all around her.

"The little one's slipped a noose, Lyanna," said Howland, nodding toward the tower where the babe slept on. "Had Rhaegar's men lived, he would have been spirited far away, to be raised far from home as a King in exile. The burden would have been on him right from his first breath until his last. For sure, an exiled king would have won the support of Robert's enemies, but only for as long as they remained Robert's enemies. They would drop him again for the price of a castle in the Reach. The boy would forever be a piece on other men's Cyvasse boards."

*Never a truer word spoken,* she thought to herself. "He isn't a King, anyway. He's just a baby."

"Quite right," Howland agreed. "With a little creativity, that boy can lead a normal life. All you have to do is talk to your brother and work it out." He paused, blushing a little as he added: "And I would like to help, too."

Lyanna thanked him, raising a proper smile. "I can't drag you into this too, Howland. But thank you all the same."

Whatever the kingsguard were playing at, they were right about one thing: the babe was more important than any of them. Whatever was needed to keep him safe, it had to be done whether she liked it or not.

When Ned returned from Starfall the first thing he saw was Lyanna sat in a window embrasure with the baby nestled into her chest, fast asleep. Her head was bent against a broad morning light, making her chestnut hair a deep, rich red. She didn't seem to notice his arrival at first, but after a second she looked up and smiled brightly. He motioned for her to stay where she was before wrapping his arms around them both.

"I had braced myself for your death, sister," he admitted. "Thank the gods you're recovered."

"Us Starks are hard to kill."

She was still pale, made paler by the white gown she wore. Thin as well, for someone so recently with child. But her grey eyes once more shone and her lips were no longer cracked and bleeding. She made room for him in the window embrasure and handed him a flagon of cool water, he accepted both gratefully.

Meanwhile, Ashara's warnings echoed once more in his head, as they had ever since he had left Starfall. There would be no war, only secret assassins. As such, he had a plan. The seed of a plan that he wanted to discuss with Lyanna first, but he dreaded her reaction to it. But first, the good news.

"I have decided to make peace with Robert," he said.

"It would be for the best," she agreed. "Enmity between our houses now would serve none of our interests. Least of all his." She nodded toward the sleeping child in her arms.

However, Ned wasn't finished. "He's going to know you're alive and well. We can't keep it from him, Lya. And he's going to want to see you."

She averted her gaze from him, turning to look out of the window over the red mountains stretching over the horizon.
"I know," she murmured. "When you go to make your peace with him, I shall come with you. I'll bend the knee and swear fealty to him, gladly. It won't matter, because he will not want me now. Even if he does believe Rhaegar raped me, I'll still be used goods. I think I will be safe from his amorous affections and he'll free me to go and live out my days in Winterfell. Wouldn't you agree?"

Ned inwardly flinched, not least because it simply wasn't true. The crown may have brought out in the worst in Robert, but if there was one thing about him even the iron throne could not corrupt, it was his love for Lyanna. Only she could not see it.

"He still loves you," he admitted. "He would tear this realm apart all over again to get you back."

Lyanna's smile died. "And what about him?" she asked, once more gesturing to the baby. "Will Robert tear the realm apart to be a father to Rhaegar's son? He may look nothing like his father, but it won't take any great sharp minds to guess the truth once it becomes known that I am his mother."

"No one can know you are his mother," Ned pointed out. It was the uncompromising truth that had been staring them all in the face for weeks. It was only now, while backed into a corner, that he was able to admit it. "No matter where you go, or where you end up, no one must ever know you are this child's mother."

She did not reply. The pain of the situation was written in her expression as she again averted her gaze to the mountains. Faced with the reality of the situation she looked as though she were tempted to stay in this tower with the child and live out the rest of her days unbeknownst to anyone.

"I can't give him away, Ned," she said, meeting his gaze again. "I don't think I could even give him up to people we trust- "

"I would never ask you to," he cut in. He hesitated before giving voice to the idea that repeatedly intruded on his inner machinations, but in the absence of anything else it had to be done. "What if everyone thought he was my bastard?" His suggestion was met with silence in which he continued: "And I mean everyone. Even him. Even Catelyn. It was war, it could be explained. One small indiscretion and here's the consequences."

Silence again. Her lip trembled and he realised she was trying to stop herself from crying. Ned looked again at the sleeping baby. He would have no memory of having been born a king, but the stigma of bastardy could last a lifetime. He cursed her for being in this situation; he cursed himself for knowing no better way of handling it.

"Lyanna, if there was any other way I would not hesitate," he added. "Believe me, I would. But I just cannot think of any other way for this to work."

"I can flee into exile," she said, urgently. "That's what I thought would happen anyway. I can take a ship to Braavos as soon as we reach a port. You could tell Robert that I'm dead and the baby need never be mentioned- "

"I cannot!" Ned interjected again. "Lyanna, you've got to put the baby first. As my bastard, he can live and grow up in Winterfell. He already has a brother and more will follow, if the gods grace Catelyn and I. He will have friends to play with, a master-at-arms to teach him sword craft and a maester to tend his cuts and ills and teach him his letters and numbers. He will have safety and security." He paused, before adding: "He will have his Aunt Lyanna to watch over him."

Eddard hadn't even met his own son yet. But he already knew if someone had walked up to him now and told him he was not allowed to be a father to that boy, only an uncle, he would break their jaw for them. As such, he did not blame his sister for her reticence, or the tears of loss that now leaked
down her face. He rose and embraced her again, kissing the top of her head before giving her time
and space to think his proposal through.

To avoid the heat of the Dornish sun, they began their homeward journey at evenfall. First, however,
Ned wanted to destroy the evidence. They had filled the ground floor of the tower with bone dry
kindling and struck a flint. Helped by the dry heat, the flames soon took hold and tore through Prince
Rhaegar's Tower of Joy. Together he, Howland, Lyanna, Wylla and the baby all watched the
tongues of flame licking at the darkening sky above. Smoke billowed in great black plumes, forming
a smog over the arid desert.

At his side, Lyanna bounced the baby on her hip.

"Jon," she said.

"Who?" he asked, turning to face her.

She smiled sadly. "I think we should name him Jon."

The flames reflected in Jon's large grey eyes and the smoke made him cough, his large grey eyes
watering. That cough was the first sound Ned had ever heard him make.

"Jon," Ned repeated. "It is perfect for him."

He remembered again what Ashara had said: 'you can't keep calling him Aegon.' Whatever she
meant by that hardly mattered anymore. Not now that he was simply Jon Snow.

The long journey through the Red Mountains passed in a haze for Lyanna. Unless she could find a
way to prove that Jon was the result of an immaculate conception, she could never openly be his
mother. No one could know, no one must find out. What if they do? She kept asking herself the same
question over and over, the answer remained elusive. Flee to the Free Cities and they may just spend
their lives dodging the Faceless Men. End up anywhere else and they'll be dodging the Faceless Men
and the slavers running rampant across much of the known world. A fine predicament for the last
Targaryen to end up in.

When they reached the nearest port they soon secured voyage onboard a Braavosi merchant ship
bound for King's Landing. She and Wylla were the only females on board, attracting hungry looks
from the mixed bag of oarsmen as they passed below deck. But once they were settled in their cabin,
they found it basic but comfortable. Two narrow pallet beds were bolted to the floor and they'd
brought Jon's cradle with them from the Tower of Joy, but there was room enough for it between the
two beds. Overhead, an oil lamp hung from the ceiling on a rusty chain that creaked every time the
ship swayed. A cabin boy offered to help her with the strong box, but she politely declined him.
Instead, she managed to shove it under the bed where it would be out of everyone's way.

Once Jon and Wylla were settled, she joined her brother on deck. Together, they watched the
Dornish coastline pass and fade into the distance. Despite where they were going to, a burden lifted
as they cleared land and the cliffs were replaced only by a wide-open sea.

"If I stay at Winterfell people will soon guess the truth," she said, turning to her brother.

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried about it," he replied. "But there's a chance of people learning
the truth anyway."

"A chance significantly reduced by my not being there," she stated. The sea breeze picked up,
blowing her hair across her face. She pushed it back and had to hold it place. "If I turn up with a new
born baby in my arms after almost two years of … of being with Rhaegar, people will talk no matter how many times you tell them Jon is yours. You could tattoo it on your face, and people might still whisper behind our backs. But if I am not there, it will be as if I never was."

Eddard didn't say anything. He didn't have to; she could tell he was already thinking it. It was the one flaw in their plan. Jon's cover had to be deep and it had to be impenetrable.

"After I lifted the siege of Storm's End, Robert sent Stannis to capture the last of Aerys' family on Dragonstone," he explained. "Rhaella is pregnant."

"Rhaegar told me the last time we saw each other," she replied. "She must be nearing her time by now."

Eddard shrugged. "I cannot say. Stannis is a hard man. Brittle. Duty comes first, but still I cannot see him killing a child and a pregnant woman."

He meant Viserys, the other Targaryen prince lodged on Dragonstone. She drew a deep breath, taking in the salty sea air. "Would Robert listen to me if I pleaded with him to call off the dogs?"

"A year ago, I would have said 'yes'," replied Eddard. "But then, a year ago I also believed we would never have need to do so."

"But as things stand now?" she persisted. "You told me he tore apart this country for me, but what does that mean if he won't stop tearing this country apart for me?"

He was honest enough to shrug his uncertainty. "He did it out of anger, because he didn't get you. Perhaps that's not quite the same thing as doing it 'for' you."

"I thought as much," she said, quietly. "Whatever happens, Ned, I can't let him continue. I must speak with him, plead with him to let Rhaella and the children leave in peace. And let them live out their days in peace. Seeing as Stannis is now Lord of Storm's End, perhaps we can even talk Robert into letting Rhaella have Dragonstone?"

Ned laughed drily. "I neglected to tell you, sister, Renly is Lord of Storm's End now. If Stannis himself gets Dragonstone he ought to count himself lucky for it."

"Renly?" she repeated, aghast. "Ned, he's eight years old. Stannis is a man grown. By all the laws of inheritance and succession, Storm's End should be his."

"Storm's End is Robert's to give to whoever he wants," Ned corrected her, gently. "And he's given it to Renly."

Lyanna said nothing while Eddard drew a deep breath, adding: "You know Robert. He's not one to overly concern himself with tradition or right. He follows the path of his own choosing."

When Lyanna returned to her cabin, she found both the baby and Wylla fast asleep. She lay down herself and closed her eyes, but she did not have the same luck and found herself tossing and turning along with the ship. At best, she dozed fitfully. All the time Robert played on her mind, teasing her back out of whatever sleep she found.

Giving up all hope of sleep, she rose in the middle of the night and checked her strongbox. It was the one she wouldn't let the cabin boy put below deck. The documents were all in there. Her marriage to Rhaegar, the notice of their son's birth with the wrong name written on it, but it still bore Rhaegar's seal. There was another they had written on the off-chance that her baby was a girl, but that was only fit for burning. Princess Visenya was doomed to only ever be a distant dream of her now dead father.
Her Targaryen wedding cloak was in there, acting as little more than a dust cover for a silver harp that had been Rhaegar's. It was more a lyre than a harp, but it was beautiful all the same. Jon may want it, one day. Cramped into one corner of the strongbox was a pressed and dried blue winter rose, one that she had plucked from the crown Rhaegar had given her after winning the jousts at Harrenhal. The memory of it made her eyes moisten, her vision blurring with unshed tears. Now the small collection of mementos was completed by Rhaegar's sword, given back to them by Ashara Dayne.

Almost all of what was left of Prince Rhaegar was locked in that box. But the most important part of him was currently fast asleep in his wetnurse's arms, sweetly oblivious to the uncertain future ahead. It was that future that Lyanna had to occupy herself with now. The past was done and their gamble failed. All that mattered was the future…

After a moment sorting through the items and arranging them neatly, Lyanna closed the box and fixed the padlock in place. She locked it once and then twice to make sure she had done it properly, then brought the keys above deck. Pressing them to her lips for luck, she dropped them overboard into the inky-dark waves.

Eddard breathed a sigh of relief once they were back on dry land, even if that dry land was King's Landing. The city still bore the scars of the sacking, the air still smelled of smoke and blood and rotting corpses. The survivors were still subdued, wary and cowering behind closed doors. They took their leave of Howland who would sail on to Gulltown before making his way home on land, but the rest of them stuck together as they paid for lodgings in first decent tavern they found and was still open for business. All the others were boarded up, or just not admitting strangers at all.

He and Lyanna dined together alone at a table in the common hall. There were no other patrons, despite the crowds of men-at-arms still milling about the city. Most of them, he noted sourly, wore the livery of House Lannister.

"The lions are circling the stag already," Lyanna said, echoing his thoughts. "Well, Tywin never was the type to let the grass grow under his feet."

"We'll see how close they're circling on the morrow, sister," he stated. "But if you have doubts about this, you need not come with me at all. You can stay here with Wylla and the baby."

But Lyanna was adamant. "No, I'll come. We must all do whatever it takes to make amends and restore peace and stability to the realm."

She sounded distracted, he thought, not herself. Nor did she meet his gaze as she spoke, instead picking at the boar they'd been served and not actually eating any of it. After another minute, she gave up the pretence and pushed her plate away.

"There's only one way I can guarantee Jon's safety, isn't there," she said, at length.

Ned felt as though he knew where she was going and was keen to slow her down. "Lya, you don't have to decide anything yet. Speak to him first, see what's happening."

"You've seen the Lannister men out there," she whispered urgently. "They're profiting from the murder of-" She cut off abruptly before she said anything worth overhearing. But Eddard definitely knew where she was going.

"I don't like it any more than you," he replied. "But it won't affect us in the North. Robert will pursue you, though. I have no doubt of that. He won't give up easily, not after all this."
Lyanna smiled sadly. "He won't give up at all." She buried her face in her hands, kneading at the bridge of her nose. "If I give him what he wants he will leave you in peace. He won't even know Jon exists."

"But he wants you," said Eddard, pointedly. "As I said, make no decisions now, sister. Rest and perhaps things will turn out differently."

He gained her agreement on that, at least. But she had a point. Robert would be wherever she was; he would never grant them his royal blessing for her to remarry, unless it was to him, and she would be living in Winterfell forever afraid that someone would work out the truth. Either way, it looked bleak and fraught with uncertainty.

First thing the next morning, they made their way to the Red Keep together. Lyanna had donned a pretty silk dress of silver-grey and white, lined with fine rabbit furs. Her hair had been brushed to a shine and arranged into a neat bun by Wylla. But, greeted by strong head winds gusting straight from the sea, loose strands blew loose about her face.

The guards on the gates stood aside for them, but when they reached the outer-gallery of the throne room the remaining kingsguard greeted them with stony faces. Eddard caught the eye of Jaime Lannister and inwardly flinched. He had already told Lyanna of how he'd found the man sitting on the iron throne, his sword still slick with the blood of King Aerys. For her part, his sister seemed to act as if he was not there at all. It was Ser Barristan Selmy that he was truly surprised to see, especially after the injuries he sustained on the Trident.

"Good morrow, Lord Stark," the older guard said, glancing sidelong at Lyanna. "It seems you have … glad tidings … for the king, after all."

Eddard couldn't help but consider how much Selmy knew and he could almost sense his sister wondering the same thing. If it came to it, they would concoct a bare faced lie to throw him off the scent. They would say she miscarried or the babe was stillborn. But he hoped beyond hope that Selmy would have enough affection for his old master to keep a secret or two.

"My thanks, ser Barristan," he replied, stiffly. Turning to Lyanna, he kissed her brow and added: "I would speak with the King myself first. Do you mind waiting?"

"No, you go," she urged him, managing a smile. She had turned pale and shaky now, betraying rare signs of nerves. "I'll wait."

To his consternation, Jaime Lannister followed him into the throne room. Inside, more Lannisters crowded around the King who was sat at the head of a long trestle table. Lord Tywin was at Robert's right, Lady Cersei to his left. Ser Kevan, Tywin's younger brother, remained to one side. There was only one non-Lannister and, to Ned's eternal relief, it was Jon Arryn. While Lord Arryn greeted him warmly, the King continued to pretend that no one had entered the room.

Spurred into action by Arryn's embrace, Cersei rose elegantly to her feet with a look of annoyance on her face. Her comportment was that of a Queen in waiting.

"Lord Stark, we all thought you had said all that needed saying after your last meeting with His Grace," she said, icily cool. "It seems we were wrong, so what can we help you with?"

"We," already. Anger flickered hotly inside him once more, but he refused to let it show in front of the Lannisters. Nor did he wish to dignify her presumption with an answer. However, when he looked to Robert he found he was still being ignored. It was disappointing, he had thought Robert above such childish games.
"Robert!" Eddard snapped, refusing to show deference. "I must speak with you."

While clearly enjoying the show, Cersei tried to look outraged on Robert's behalf. "He is your King-
"

"You've said all you had to say, now go!" Robert thundered over her. "Run back to that snow hole you live in."

Finally, he got up and almost shoved the Lannister woman aside in the process. It wiped the smirk off Cersei's face, but that wasn't enough to mollify Eddard. Robert looked as if he wanted greet him the same way he had Rhaegar Targaryen back on the Trident.

"Why is he not under arrest?" Cersei demanded, looking to her brother.

Ned stood his ground, all thoughts of making peace with the king gone. "Answer Lady Cersei's question, Your Grace. Why not have me clapped in irons-"

"Don't tempt me, Lord Stark," the King cut over him as the gap between them closed. "State your business and then leave. I have no stomach for your self-righteous fool talk."

"Oh, so that's it, is it?" Ned shot back at him. "I told you a few hard truths, you dishonoured yourself and that crown-"

"Careful, Ned," the King warned. His face flushed and his eyes flashed angrily. "Be fucking careful now."

"Or what?" Ned challenged. "Gods, I was a fool to come back here thinking I could ever be-"

Robert's fist cut off the rest of Ned's sentence, connecting with his jaw and sending him reeling.

"Run back to your frozen bolt hole in the North and don't you ever darken my halls again," Robert growled down at him. "Go now, before leave me no choice but to call my guards."

Jon Arryn had tried to intervene, positioning himself between them like a weary parent, his hands pressed against their chests. "Stop this madness now, both of you! Would that I could knock your thick heads together!"

Both their angers were on them, their blood was up and the aging Lord Arryn stood no chance. Eddard prided himself on his honour and his patience, but he had a temper like any Northman and the damage was done. He sidestepped Jon and rounded on Robert again, half-tempted to return the punch in like kind. Until another set of hands grabbed him, trying to pull him back. Smaller, weaker, the newcomer was easy to escape.

"Ned no, please, don't," Lyanna pleaded, stumbling back as Ned shook her off.

Startled, no one had seen her come running into the throne room. Not even Robert. They all spun round to face her, finding her wide-eyed with fear and breathless. She had her hands help up in a gesture of surrender and she was looking at Ned as if to say: 'think of the baby'.

"Lyanna!" Robert gasped, his brain finally registering what his eyes were seeing. "Lyanna, you've come back to me."

"Lord Eddard brought me back," she said. "And he didn't mean those things he said, everyone's upset. That's all. Everyone's very upset and we all need to just breathe."
The words came rushing from her ten to the dozen while everyone else still recoiled from shock. Eddard recovered himself and placed a protective arm around her shoulders. Robert, meanwhile, turned to everyone else in the room.

"Out!" he commanded. "All of you, out! OUT!"

Before leaving the throne room, Cersei lingered by the double doors even after the others had left. She looked at Lyanna with cold disdain for a long, drawn out moment before joining her father, uncle and brother. Ned watched her leaving, almost certain Lyanna had dealt a fatal blow to the woman's ambitions of ever becoming queen. She had been spurned by Rhaegar Targaryen as well, he remembered.

When he looked back at Lyanna and Robert, the king had her hands wrapped in his own.

"This is for you," Robert was telling her. "All of this was for you and we will reign together; Houses Baratheon and Stark side by side. You will be my Queen and Ned can be our Hand-"

"Robert, slow down."

She looked like a trapped animal and Ned was quick to intervene.

"Robert, she's weak from fever," he said, gently. "She needs to be home, with her family."

He still riled from the bitter row, his jaw still ached from where Robert had hit him. He was in no mood to let the king ride off into the sunset with his sister like she was some sort of prize won in a tourney. But the way Robert looked at him now with only love, relief and joy in his eyes, made him remember who the real Robert was. He was still in there, regardless of what happened. If Lyanna had a plan he could only hope it was a good one.

"I'm sorry, Ned," said Robert. He looked defeated, like he didn't know where to turn. Even Lyanna looked taken aback by the sudden apology. "I mean it, Ned. I'm sorry. Can you ever forgive me?"

Robert extended the cup of peace and Ned willingly took it. "There's nothing to forgive, Your Grace."

In the blink of an eye the world turned black as Robert grabbed him in a gruff bear hug. The tension melted, whipped away by the day's strengthening winds.

That night, Lyanna had one more thing to be grateful for. That she and Ned had opted to not sail on to Gulltown that very day. By evenfall the morning's wind had gathered into a robust storm strong enough to pull tiles from roofs. By nightfall, lightning struck the city and the very ground vibrated to the monstrous claps of thunder. All the while, the winds howled, levelling the cheaper dwellings built against the city walls. She looked from the window of her chambers at court and saw more than one home going up in flames. All around the Red Keep, the seas vented their fury, smashing into the rock faced cliffs, some the size of houses. And she had never seen rain like it.

Eddard had confessed to Robert that he had fathered a bastard and, mercifully, Robert had both Jon and Wylla brought to court and lodged alongside them. Had they still been in that tavern they could well have been blown away by now.

A knock at the door distracted her from watching the storm. Moments later, Robert stepped into her chamber bearing a bouquet of wild flowers. He offered them up to her, suddenly as bashful as a child.
"They're only from the Maidenvault," he confessed. "But I thought you might like them all the same."

She stuck her nose among the blossoms and breathed in the rich scent. "They're beautiful. Thank you, Your Grace."

He looked almost sad, then. "Don't call me that. Not you, of all people."

"Robert," she corrected herself, raising a smile.

She let herself be guided to a window seat. There was a set of glass doors the likes of which she had not seen before, but they were shut against the raging storm. In better weather, they could go through and sit on a pretty balcony.

"I've never known a storm like this, Lya, not in all my years at Storm's End," he said, frowning out of the window. "Gods have mercy, there's still boats out there."

"There's no cure for madness," she jested, turning to see for herself. They were big boats, too. Certainly not fishing vessels.

Both of Robert's parents were taken in a shipping disaster, she remembered. She found herself wondering if he was thinking of them now. A fork of lightning lit him up in silvery light, the thunder that followed made her insides tremble.

"Rhaegar did not harm me, Robert," she told him. "He just ... took me away to this place in Dorne. But he did me no harm and he made no threats. That was Aerys; it was all Aerys."

Robert grimaced, turning his face away from the window. "Well, they're all dead now and it's no less than they deserve." He paused to draw a deep breath before quietly adding: "Why did he do it? What did he want from you?"

Lyanna shrugged. "It was a prophecy. Some stupid prophecy he believed in with all his heart. But it matters not, Robert. It's over. Let Rhaella and the children go in peace. They did me no harm, nor did they harm anyone else."

He remained silent, scowling at the window again as if he was wrestling with some great moral dilemma.

"Please Robert," she tried again. "Let this be the end of it."

Silence again, until he said: "It's over. It is done."

Relieved, she lay back against the window seat took the weight from her tired feet. Outside, the storm only grew more vicious. If that wasn't the wrath of the old gods and new, she didn't know what was.

"I was rather hoping to find your brother here," said Robert. "But I suppose he's tending to his son."

Lyanna inwardly flinched. "Yes, I suppose. But he'll be here soon, he's joining us for supper."

He didn't elaborate on what he wanted Eddard for. Instead, he sat beside her in the window seat and put a well-muscled arm around her shoulders. She couldn't help but stiffen in fright.

"I'll wait for you, Lya," he said. "For as long as it takes; for as long as you need. Even if it takes forever."
"I want to go home," she said, truthfully.

"You're going home, if this storm ever ends," he replied.

"What about Cersei?" she asked.

"Who? Oh, Tywin's daughter. You should have seen her stirring up that fight between me and Ned. I'm sure she'll make her future husband a very happy man," he answered.

Lyanna looked away. So, long as she was close to the crown, Jon was safe. She could make sure Robert never got too close. She could be the decoy Queen.

"Lady Stark, I mean Catelyn, will be in for a terrible shock," she said. "So, I promised Ned I would stay at Winterfell for at least a year, maybe even two, to help with his bastard. You know, for Cat's sake. Keeping him out of her way until he wins her over. Do you agree?"

"I meant what I said," he replied. "As long as you need, my love. And not just for Ned or his son's sake. But for yours. As long as you need."

_Gods forgive me_, she thought to herself. It had to be done. "Thank you, Robert."

When Ned arrived and the dishes brought from the kitchens they dined together. Venison and parsnips roasted in butter, one of her favourite dishes. But, before they started, Robert took a scroll of parchment out of his breast pocket and handed it to Eddard.

"This came from Starfall before you arrived," he said. "It's Ashara Dayne, Ned. She jumped from the Palestone Sword into the Torrentine River, not long after you left her. Her body hasn't been found."

Lyanna almost choked and abruptly turned to her brother, watching helplessly as the colour drained from his face.

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Author's Note: Guys, I am really sorry about not updating this story here (as well as on my FF account). Somehow, I managed to totally forget. Anyway, for those who aren't following me on fanfiction.net, I'll be posting the next ten chapters of this story here over the next week or so. Again, I'm really sorry.
"Look, Maester, do you see the Ice Dragon?" Stood on a crenel between two merlons, stretched to full height, Jon pointed into the night sky above Luwin's turret. He aimed for the burning sapphire star of the constellation's eye. Old Nan once told him the breath of the ice dragon was colder than death. The smallfolk believed the real thing lay beneath Winterfell, the very castle he called home. Others said that the ice dragon was now the wall that marked the boundary between the realms of men and the frozen wastes that lay beyond. Whatever the truth, the only ice dragon Jon had ever known was the one in the sky. Every time he saw it, it felt like seeing an old friend.

Close by, Luwin's chain of many metals clanked softly as he approached. "Oh, yes. Yes, very majestic. Jon, please come down from that crenel before you fall. Your father will be most displeased if scraping you off the cobbles disrupts tomorrow's royal visit."

Had it been daylight and he looked down, he knew his head would spin at the sheer drop. But in the darkness, when the stars were out, all he wanted to do was look up and up again. Still, he obliged and took a deft backwards hop from between the two merlons back onto the battlements proper. He was plenty tall enough to see over the wall these days, anyway. Tall, lean and fast on his feet, as his father would describe him.

"Come and use the Myrish Eye if you want a better look."

"I would like that," Jon concurred, following the older man to the observatory.

Winterfell was the largest castle in the whole realm, larger even than the Red Keep, so the observatory had to face north where there were no turrets or towers obstructing the view. Like himself not moments before, the Myrish Eye was set up in a crenel, pointing straight above. Once there, he brought the viewfinder to his own eye and winked the other closed as he looked into the heavens. The Ice Dragon looked so close he felt he could reach up and touch it.

"I ought not to be encouraging you tonight, Jon," Luwin sighed. "You have an early start and a busy day ahead on the morrow."

Jon kept his head in the stars as he answered: "Lady Stark won't let me get within ten feet of the King and Queen, so what will it matter?"

"It matters a great deal, Jon," Luwin replied. "Look at me for a moment, if you will."

He did as the old maester bid and withdrew from the viewfinder. Finding the old man leaning against the lower part of the battlements, the many metalled chain links glimmering dully in the moonlight. Not far behind him, the sleek black cat Luwin kept as a pet hopped from merlon to merlon, nimble, lithe and utterly fearless. It came to a halt, green eyes flashing silver as it met Jon's gaze almost knowingly. Turning his attention back to the maester, he noted how careworn Luwin suddenly looked.

"No matter what Lady Stark thinks is proper, you are still the Queen's nephew," he continued. "From what little I remember of her, she was always fond of you."

Jon wasn't even three when she left, but sometimes he wondered if she was the girl in a memory he had. Truth was, he didn't even know if it was a real memory. It was hazy, insubstantial; more a sensation than anything else. The more he tried to grasp at it, the faster it eluded him. All he could say about the girl was that her hair was very long and dark brown – hardly unique features in the
North. She spun him around and tossed him in the air, catching him before he hit the ground. And laughter. The girl was laughing. Her heard her laugh better than he saw her face. There on the battlements he tried to conjure her again, but she was nought but a wisp of smoke dissipating in the cold night air. In reality, the memory was probably no more than a dream of the mother he never knew and the girl whose face he gave her could have been anyone.

"You don't suppose the Queen knows, do you?" he asked, inflecting the word 'knows'.

Luwin knew what he meant and the dismay in his expression was visible even in the poor light. "If she does, she never said anything to me."

"Didn't Lady Stark ask her?" he persisted.

Luwin sighed. "Of course, as you might expect. I'm afraid your father grew angry with Catelyn when he found out she'd been pressing your aunt on the matter. I would advise you to learn from her mistake."

Jon tried to hide his own dismay. "I would think little of the Queen if she went running to my father just because I asked her a question."

"Now, Jon, she is the Queen. It's not for you to form low opinions or otherwise," Luwin replied, sternly. Softening somewhat, he added: "There have been candidates over the years. Wylla, for one. The fisherman's daughter, who sailed Lord Stark through a terrible storm after her father was taken overboard – that was when your father was being hunted by the Mad King and he needed to get home to call his banners. Ashara Dayne… Perhaps, if you made discreet enquiries about those ladies, rather than interrogating her grace as soon as she steps through the gates, you may get a little further?"

Despite the secrecy of his father, the servants still talked and he'd heard those names before. Ashara Dayne was the name everyone feared to speak, but he'd heard it in whispers muttered in the darkest corners of the servants' quarters.

"Perhaps," he agreed. "Well, my thanks all the same. And for letting me use the Myrish Eye."

"You're always welcome, Jon," the maester assured him. "Now, to bed with you else you'll be too busy yawning to ask the Queen anything."

The silent black cat accompanied him down the stairwell and out into the darkened yard. Stealthy and swift, he knew she was still there when she suddenly coiled around his leg, near tripping him up. Suppressing a curse, he successfully fought the urge to feed her to Ghost. Ghost, who awaited him on the castle steps and came bounding over as soon as he appeared. He knelt to scratch the wolf's ears, only to be interrupted by the narrow beam of an oil lamp being swung in his direction.

"I'm going now, maester," Jon called over his shoulder, suspecting Luwin would chivvy him along again.

"Father," Lord Stark corrected him, but not unkindly. He closed the gap between them, ruffling Jon's hair by way of greeting. "Luwin's right, though. It's late, you ought to be abed."

"Aye," he agreed, curiously. "But where are you going?"

His father hesitated a moment. "Just checking everything's ready for tomorrow."

"I can help, if you like?" he offered, eagerly. "What needs doing?"
"That's good of you, but no," came the answer. "You go on now. Go straight to bed."

Protesting no further, Jon headed for the door. All the while, his father held the lantern aloft and watched him. It gave the impression that Lord Stark was waiting for him to go, rather than merely seeing him safely indoors. But he soon forgot about it as he remembered the stars. Above him, the Ice Dragon would soon fade against the approaching dawn. He paused in the doorway to look up one last time before that happened. However, unlike his mother and the girl in his dreams, he knew the Ice Dragon would return come evenfall. Just like an old friend.

Lyanna had begun to regret travelling the last few miles to Winterfell in the royal wheelhouse. With nothing else to occupy her mind, all she could do was sit there worrying and growing ever more nervous. Prolonging her agony, the wheelhouse moved with the speed and dexterity of a drugged slug. Despite that, she twitched the curtain aside every few minutes, watching the castle grow larger as they drew nearer. It's thick curtain walls sprawled over the hills, wending their way through the vast countryside. Towers and turrets jutted above those walls, almost touching the blue skies overhead. In the midst of it all, the central keep stood sturdy and unchanged by the endlessly passing time. It was exactly how she remembered it and that in itself offered a slender sort of reassurance.

As for the people inside, she knew in her head that that would be a different story. The babies she had kissed goodbye would be flowering into young adults; the adults would be greying, balding, softening around the middle. The elderly would be there no more, she supposed. But in her heart, whenever she thought of them – which she did every day – they all stubbornly stayed the same. In the midst of all that was him. Even imagining him as a baby, he somehow managed to stand head and shoulders above anyone else in that castle.

When she saw him last, he had cut his baby teeth and formed a few words. "Lyanna" was far too much of a tongue twister, but he managed to say "La-La" and that sufficed. Until, Ned pointed out, it sounded like he was trying to say "mama". That was precisely the sort of thing that set her nerves on edge. A clue that someone might put together and realise the dangerous truth. Not long after that, she knew the time had come. Staying any longer would put them both at risk; put the entire Stark family at risk, no less. Sansa had just been born at the time, too. Lyanna found her place within Winterfell was slowly shrinking, as a new generation of Starks edged her slowly toward the exits.

So, she had left. She rode through the gates knowing a large part of her had been torn away and left behind. She looked back, watching Winterfell grow smaller on the horizon. Now her memory seemed to reverse as she watched it grow larger.

"We're almost there," she said, turning to Robert.

Even as she said it they were trundling beneath the portcullis, entering the outer-courtyard. Robert raised a smile, half-hidden behind his thick beard, blue eyes twinkling happily.

"About bloody time," he sighed.

His reply was partially cut off as a fanfare blared all around them, heralding their arrival. She just had time to smooth down her skirts before the wheelhouse ground to a halt and the door was pulled open. Despite the long and winding journey, the end still managed to take her by surprise as she found herself looking out of the open door at a sea of bowed heads. She hadn't expected such formality from her own people.

Foregoing the proffered arm of a squire, Robert defied his bulk and jumped deftly to the ground and extended a hand to help her out. She emerged as gracefully as she could, her skirts gathered in her free hand in hopes of avoiding falling flat on her face. As she avoided such an ignominious start,
Lord Stark rose as she appeared and greeted her with a rare, warm smile.

"Your Grace, Winterfell is yours."

He kissed the ring on her finger before pulling her into a firm embrace.

"Sister," she whispered in his ear. "Not 'Your Grace', just sister."

They drew apart and, for the first time, she could get a look at what the years had done to him. In that moment, however, all that mattered was that he was still himself and right there with her. Her musings halted as he linked his arm through her own and began presenting each of the family in turn. Where appropriate, kisses and hugs were exchanged and brief salutations uttered before moving on to the next in line.

All the while, from the tail of her eye, she watched the odd one out who seemed to have been tacked on to the end of the queue as if he were just an after-thought. He was with them, but not truly among them. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, clutching his cloak closed at his throat as if he willed it swallow him. She could tell he felt out of place too.

"You remember Robb, of course," Ned was saying, the words almost washing over her. "But Sansa was only a baby when you left. This is Arya, this is Bran and our youngest, Rickon…"

Sansa was far and away the beauty of the family, but when she blushed she bore an unfortunate resemblance to a radish. And she was blushing in that moment as she dipped an elegant curtsey. Arya, meanwhile, looked her right in the eye and she liked that. The girl was a Stark in a world of auburn haired Tullys.

"And, of course, I'm sure you remember Jon…"

Her heartbeat hammered as the boy drew himself to full height in time for his royal inspection. Unable to hold back altogether, Lyanna drew a sharp breath and delicately placed one gloved hand under the boy's chin, tilting his face up. Dark grey eyes, almost black, looked into her own. He was tall and lean, like his father, but his face hadn't yet lost the softness of boyhood. Constrained by convention, all she could do was utter a hasty "pleased to meet you" before Lord Stark was ushering her away again.

"We should talk," he whispered in her ear. "The crypt."

Lyanna nodded, then gently intruded on the conversation Robert was having with Cat. "My love, Ned and I are going to the crypts to pay our respects. I'll see you soon."

"Give your brother a nod from me," he said, kissing her cheek.

By the time she reached the crypts her eyes had begun to well with the tears she'd fought to hold back. To her dismay, Ned had noticed and her hands began to shake. She tried to pull herself together, but her emotions were simmering too high. Coming home for the first time in a decade; seeing all the old faces and being forced to greet her son like he was a stranger in the crowd. She thought she'd have been able to keep a lid on it. But seeing Jon for the first time in so long had been quick to prove her wrong.

"Lya," he said, putting his arms around her. "No tears, please."

"Don't mind me, I'm just being silly."

"Whatever you are, I don't want to see you like this," he replied. Releasing her from his embrace, he
looked her in the eye and spoke earnestly. "I may not know how hard it was for you. But I do know you did the right thing. Those Targaryen children live hand to mouth. Would you have wanted that for Jon? Homeless, hungry and scared all the time. It's no life for a child."

For some reason, it didn't make her feel any better. While Ned was momentarily distracted by procuring one of the oil lanterns from a sconce on the wall, she dried her eyes properly and drew a deep breath to compose herself. All around them, the stony-eyed Kings of Winter looked on, their rusting swords across their laps and granite Direwolves at their feet. Unflinching, uncompromising, she felt like they were judging and finding her wanting.

Unable to look at her ancient forebears for much longer, she turned instead to her flesh and blood brother. He had aged somewhat, but undoubtedly so had she. She was thirty-one years old now and had proven to be as barren as a brick. Still slender, but strands of silver were becoming an uncomfortably regular sight among her chestnut tresses.

"You've given Jon a splendid start in life, here in Winterfell," she remarked as they strolled the centre aisle of the crypts. "You're right. All I could have given him was a life on the run in the Free Cities … I keep having this nightmare, that Jon goes to bed one night looking like me, and wakes up in the morning with silver hair and purple eyes and, suddenly, everyone realises who he is. I cannot thank you enough for what have done, brother."

"It's just a dream," Ned replied, stifling a gentle laugh. "If it was going to happen, it would have happened at birth. As for the rest, you sound like you're justifying yourself to yourself. You know you did the right thing."

It was all true, but she couldn't bear to have him thinking her ungrateful. All she had been able to do was send enough gold to cover Jon's upkeep. Ned had protested vehemently, at first. His nephew was no expense. But seeing as her involvement in her own son's life extended no further than money, name day gifts and the odd letter, she had insisted. Whatever decisions she had made as a terrified and bewildered sixteen-year-old were done now and they all had to live with it. And between then and now, life itself had kept on happening to them.

"Jon Arryn was more a father to you than our own," she recalled, espying Rickard's statue in the distance. "How have you been since his death?"

The light in his eyes dulled. "Sad. Just very sad. Although I hear Lysa took it worse."


"Hmmm," Lyanna replied.

Ned paused, holding the lantern up to her face. "What does 'hmmm' mean?"

She realised too late that she'd put herself on the spot. "Little and less, brother. But Lysa fled the capital almost as soon as it happened. Robert was talking about sending the boy to Casterly Rock, to foster with Tywin Lannister. Personally, I would have preferred you of course. You're almost kin and I know you would see him right. I talked to Robert about it and he made a good point, Ned. The whole point was to take him away from the nest and put some steel in his backbone. He needs to be independent if he's to take the Vale for guard the east for us."

"And Lysa grew angry with you?" he asked, frowning. "For backing Tywin, I mean."

"That's the thing," she clarified. "Lysa was furious enough when I suggested you and Cat, never mind Tywin. I said to her: 'look, Cat's his aunt already and she'll be like a second mother to him at Winterfell.'"
"True enough," Ned conceded. "Then what happened?"

She gestured to her left eye, only recently healed. "Almost scratched the damn thing out. If she hadn’t been a grieving widow in fear of her boy's future I'd have knocked her out myself, Ned."

"A more diplomatic approach might be to send Cat down there and have a word with her," Ned suggested, walking on again. He didn't stop until they reached the tombs of their brother and father. There was a space beside them, meant for Eddard himself in time, but now taken up by a strongbox. "I came down here in the early hours to dig this up. Jon saw me crossing the yard, but I made sure he was safely out of the way before coming down here."

"Good, thank you Ned," she replied.

She dropped the key to the padlock over the gunwale of the ship from Dorne, but Eddard appeared to have smashed it off with a claw hammer. It opened easily and she found the documents still wrapped in vellum, which was protected by folds of linen and tied with a silk ribbon. Nervously, as though they could be caught at any minute, she opened it up to reveal a large sheet of parchment affixed with the seals of Rhaegar Targaryen and her own of House Stark. There was another document with the seal of Elia Martell added to it, but she left that one undisturbed. Under it all lay Rhaegar's old sword and sword belt, with a large ruby stuffed down the scabbard.

"All present and correct," she said, satisfied the documents were dry and legible even after all these years. "And here's Jon's birth announcement … with the wrong name on it."

"It's all safe," he assured her. "It can be left here for as long as you like."

After taking the sword that had once been Rhaegar's and a ruby that once adorned his breastplate, she paused briefly before closing the lid of the box for the final time.

"Fair warning, Ned," she said, looking up at him. "Robert's going to ask you to be his new Hand."

As she suspected he would, he sighed and looked a little older.

Lord Stark was rarely at ease during feasts and dances. But that night was different. He had entered the great hall of Winterfell with his arm linked through his sister's, with Cat and Robert just ahead of him and taken his place at the high table. From up there he could look out over a packed hall. Three of the white cloaked kingsguard patrolled the side lines, but everyone was having too much of a good time to cause trouble. It was a rare chance for his household staff to let down their guard and just enjoy themselves. Most of the free-riders that royal progresses picked up had been catered to in the outlying grounds. Inside, even the children had been given a cup or two of celebratory wine. Arbour gold straight from the fertile Reach.

He spotted Jon seated at one of the lower tables, talking with some of the squires. Ghost, the direwolf pup, was carefully concealed beneath the trestle. Not carefully enough, but Ned didn't mind. He could only marvel at how well his children had trained those pups. Shaggydog was sometimes trouble, but Sansa's Lady was a model of obedience and Ghost was as quiet as a mouse. They were not unlike their owners.

"Direwolves south of the wall." He heard Lyanna say. "What do you make of that, Ned?"

He turned to face her, still smiling at the spectacle. "Not a great deal. This one must have just found a way through the wall, nothing more sinister than that."

In truth, it did trouble him. Even Theon Greyjoy had commented on how unusual it was. More
disconcertingly, they'd been found so soon after talk of White Walkers. Despite the music from the packed rafters above and the early dancers swinging into motion on the floor, a twist of foreboding darkened the atmosphere for him. He glanced up at the musicians just as the Dornishman's Wife began to play. Before that they'd played "the Song of the Winter Rose". Not one they often liked to hear inside the walls of Winterfell.

"That being said, sister, I would like to hear what Benjen thinks of it," he added.

She didn't reply immediately. She was still looking at Ghost, now gnawing on a whole chicken Jon had slipped beneath the table. "And they haven't tried to attack the children?"

"Not at all."

That was a wonder, too. In his heart of hearts, he had hoped the beasts would have starved or died a natural death. The children's broken hearts he could mend, their mauled bodies would have been trickier. However, the wolves thrived and protected the children fiercely.

Just as he was about to say something else, he noticed the doors at the back of the hall opening and a newcomer all in black entering. A tall and lean man, looking like he'd been cut from granite. Benjen… Ned breathed a sigh of relief as he watched his brother pause at Jon's table and ruffling his hair before taking the vacant seat at his side. With the music so loud and the dancers getting thicker on the dance floor, he could barely keep them in his line of sight and never mind guess at what was being said.

Besides himself and Lyanna, Benjen was the only living soul who knew the truth about Jon.

"Lya," he said, getting to his feet. "He's here."

She had been yelling over the music into Robert's ear about something or other, so had missed Benjen's arrival. Realising who he meant, she kissed her husband's cheek and excused herself. Together, they weaved carefully through the dancers, got their feet trodden on a few times and, worst of all, Lyanna was virtually bowled over as Jon bolted past her. Noticing that it was the Queen he'd knocked over, Jon swung around hastily. He'd turned red in the face, panic stricken, and Ned noticed he had tears in his eyes. But before he could stop the boy, he had fled the hall in shame.

"Jon!" Lyanna called after him. "Sweetling, come and join us."

But it was too late and the boy had vanished into the yard beyond.

Benjen placed a hand on Lyanna's arm to prevent her from going after him. "Leave him, sister. He needs to cool down."

She seemed reluctant, at first. Torn between worry for Jon and love for a brother she desperately missed and had not seen in thirteen years. But, she saw sense and they soon had their arms around each other, holding each other close. They had always been close, Ned remembered. The closest of all the Stark siblings during the years of their childhood. Close enough to share even the most dangerous of secrets.

"What happened with Jon?" she asked, as they made their way back to the table. "What did you say to him?"

Ned had been curious about that, too. Jon had greeted his uncle with a warm hug, happy as can be. Moments later, he was fleeing the hall in tears. A rare sight in a boy of fourteen, close to manhood. Rarer still in Jon.
Now it was Benjen who looked stricken. "I didn't say anything, I swear!"

Ned was mystified. "Then what ails him?"

Arriving back at the high table, they found an extra seat for Benjen and grouped together. As soon as he had some food and wine in his belly, and a lull in the music came, Benjen elaborated. "I think Jon had been sneaking drinks from the wine pitchers. He was certainly drunk. Then he tells me he's ready to join the Night's Watch and asks me to take him when I return. I told him to talk to you. I might also have mentioned that he was too young. I might even have mentioned that he should get a son or two of his own first, before taking a vow that involves celibacy."

Ned sighed and Lyanna flushed red in the face.

"Bastards," she said. "He thought you meant bastards. Well, bastards or no, he cannot join the Night's Watch and we all know why."

Benjen looked deeply apologetic. "I couldn't very well tell him that. Anyway, he had a bit of an outburst just as everyone else at the table fell silent. Perfect timing, they all heard it. Including the Greyjoy lad."

"Oh dear," Ned said, with understated elegance. "Well, give him time. He'll only get more upset if we crowd around him."

Robert and Catelyn were dancing now, the king clumsy through drink. But Lady Stark bore the trampled toes with grace and dignity. For a long moment Ned was more than content to watch them. Robert had been wild in his youth, but marriage to Lyanna had settled him. Robert, in his turn, slowly brought Lyanna back to life in a way he had never foreseen. He was about to ask her to dance before the musicians struck up a song about Bael the Bard stealing into the night with the Lord of Winterfell's daughter, leaving only a single blue rose in her place. It wasn't one they heard in Winterfell often, with reason. Then, another obstacle dropped in his path.

"Arya!"

Sansa's voice cut across his musings, drawing his attention to the spot where his two girls were a hair's turn away from all-out squabbling. A large orange stain was spreading across the bodice of the elder girl's dress, her face livid with anger. Wearily, Ned got to his feet.

"Gods, here we go," he murmured, dejectedly. "Excuse me, both of you. Duty calls."

Feeling sick and dizzy from too much strong wine, Jon slouched against a low wall and tried to compose himself. Even outside the noise from the musicians could be heard, distant and muffled by the thick stone walls. If he strayed from the courtyard he would end up stumbling into the camps of free riders and that was the last thing he wanted. So he chose to endure the music only to find that it helped prevent him from replaying the moment of humiliation all over again.

However, it wasn't a long time after getting out of the hall that he began to feel better. He sucked in a lungful of clean night air, letting it wash away the heat and the smell of the Great Hall that had begun to cloy at his skin. His head stopped spinning enough for him to pick up a sword from outside the forge. It was only blunted steel, so he knew no one would mind. He turned it over in his palms, getting a feel for the weight and balance of the blade. As soon as he was done, he swung around and slashed at a quintaine, sending it spinning on its wooden axis. He hit it again, satisfied by the sight of loose bits of straw flying upwards, caught on the gentle breeze. He wanted to land a third stroke, but footsteps rang on the stone steps leading from the castle.
Initially, he ignored them. But there was no denying they were approaching him. Lowering his sword, he glanced over his shoulder and felt his heart sink at the sight of the Queen. If she was angry about his slamming into her, she didn't look it.

"Do you mind if I join you?" she asked.

He had no desire for company, but she was the Queen and he couldn't very well tell her to bugger off. In the end, he said nothing and she sat on the stone step. She had a silver goblet of wine in her hands and sipped from it casually and made no attempt at conversation. On the spot, he cast around for something to say himself.

"I'm sorry I knocked you over."

She was silent for a second, looking up at him and smiling gently. "And I'm sorry I obstructed your spectacular flight to freedom."

Despite himself, he managed a wan smile. "I made a fool of myself."

"No, you didn't," she assured him. "But I fear you did misunderstand what your uncle was trying to say. All he meant was that you should live your life before taking the black. Travel a little. Find out what's in the world before you give up your remaining years to protect it. Once you know what's out there, what it's like, you'll say those words and mean them to the last letter."

She gestured for him to sit, which he did. "But I mean them now. Uncle Benjen was younger than me when he took the black. So, why can't I? I am a man grown … almost."

She quickly looked away, swirling the contents of her goblet with a curiously sad look on her face. "Benjen had his own reasons for joining the Watch."

Jon wasn't interested in Benjen's reasons, so he pressed his own suit. She was the Queen. If she wanted she could probably command his father into letting him join.

"Ser Rodrik says I am one of the best swordsmen of my age he's ever known," he explained, words tumbling out of him in rapid succession. "You can ask him yourself, I am not lying. I practise every day and I've knocked Robb into the dirt more times than I can count. Everyone says the Watch isn't what it used to be and if I joined I know I'd be the best one there. Won't you talk to father?"

She blinked at him, taking a moment to think through what he'd said.

"I'd bet my last dragon that you're every bit as skilled as you say you are," she replied, earnestly. "And I could even talk to Lord Stark. But I can't force him, Jon. I hope you understand that."

Suspecting that that was the best he could hope for, Jon quietened himself before he came across as a braggart. Inwardly blaming the lingering effects of the wine, he turned from the Queen and tried to think of something nice to say about her dress. Women liked that, he knew. Her took a moment to see her properly, sat on the concrete steps in a gown of grey and white silk and samite; her hair was loose and raven dark by night. She sipped her wine and looked up at the stars, a faint smile teasing the corners of her mouth. Starlight made her dark grey eyes twinkle. She lifted her cup to the sky as if raising a toast to the constellations.

"Look, Jon," she said, "it's the Ice Dragon."
Leviathan

If there was just one place in Winterfell that remained unmolested by the passing of time, Lyanna knew it would be the godswood. It was a dark and primal place, where the old gods watched through the carved face of the ancient heart tree, standing tall and proud among the others species. Beside it, the cold spring pool formed a black mirror of the canopy overhead, its depths treacherous to those beguiled by its placid surface. Glittering crystals and dancing light may look pretty in a sept, but the light of the seven never once penetrated this most sacred of Northern spaces.

It was dawn already, with the sky beyond turning a hazy pink and Lyanna was still half-drugged with sleep as she met Eddard in the common hall. They made their way to the godswood together, careful not to make too much noise in a castle packed with sleepers – people probably much more sensible than themselves. True to her memories of a distant childhood, the woods remained unchanged. The surface of the spring still calm and black.

Once, when she was a little girl, her father tried to circumvent the possibility of her drowning by telling her there was a huge Leviathan dwelling just below the surface of the spring. Lord Rickard's reasoning was that she would be too afraid to get too close to the edge. On the contrary, she came here every day hoping to catch sight of the monster in the lake. She brought food, she brought fishnets on one particularly memorable occasion, she knelt by the water's edge until her knees sank in the mud. Neither scale nor beady eye of any water monster was ever seen, to her eternal dismay. However, she quickly got used to being too close to the edge. Sometimes, she felt like she'd been too close to the edge her whole life.

"I spoke privately with Jon, last night," she said, once they were deep in the godswood. "It wasn't just too much wine, he really was upset by what Benjen said. Although, more because it was said in front of his friends."

Eddard drew a deep breath. "I thought as much. But it may be worse than that. It was said in front of Theon. They're not exactly friends, sister."

She had agreed with Robert when he sent the Greyjoy boy to Winterfell, despite some misgivings. Now she felt a little guilty about it, too. "Ah, I see. Now Theon will tease him. All the same, Jon seems terribly keen on joining the Night's Watch. What are your true thoughts on that?"

"He would be an asset to the Watch, I've no doubts on that front," he answered. "But if he's to join the Watch then it must be for the right reasons. Getting away from Catelyn and the likes of Theon Greyjoy are not the right reasons."

They reached the edge of the spring, just before the heart tree. Still in the full bloom of summer, it's ruby boughs stooped and tickled the surface of the water. Eddard spread out an old cloak on the ground, somewhere dry for them to sit a while.

"How bad are things between Jon and Catelyn?" she asked. "I read between the lines of your letters, of course, and realised it wasn't exactly peace and harmony. But tell me true, what has been happening."

Even Jon's occasional letters were guarded and absurdly polite. He always asked more about her than he told of himself. He certainly didn't write about Catelyn Tully. Meanwhile, Ned was struggling to form a reply.

"She … she just doesn't very much like him," he replied, at length. "I've asked her a hundred times,
why she must be so damnably cruel to him. It's not his fault. None of it is his fault. I would that she
took it out on me, but she never does. And I know she's not a cruel woman, Lya. You've seen her
with the children, you know her. The way she is with Jon, that's not the real Catelyn."

A curious conflict of frustration, anger and guilt fought amongst themselves in Lyanna's heart.
Catelyn was put in a terrible predicament; Catelyn was a terrible predicament for them. Neither of
them knew Cat when Ned married her, so she couldn't be trusted with the truth – it was too risky. By
the time they did get to know her, she had come to hate Jon so much that she still couldn't be trusted
with the truth. So, they were locked in perpetual enmity.

"I wish we had known her better when you married," she said. "I wish we had made more of an
effort with her when she was betrothed to our Bran. If we had known what kind of a woman she
was, we would have known to trust her."

Anger flicked at Eddard's expression. "But could we have trusted her, Lya? I love Catelyn, I really
do. But the way she is with Jon, right from when he was a helpless babe, I'm not sure she would
have understood the situation. Right now, she thinks he's going to steal Robb's inheritance and that's
bad enough. How would she react if she finds out the truth and realises we've been harbouring a
hunted Targaryen all these years?"

What was done was done. But Lyanna was gaining a much clearer picture of why Jon was
chomping at the bit to escape Winterfell. Now, if Eddard agreed to become Hand of the King, the
poor boy would be as good as alone with her. It was already decided that Sansa, Arya and Bran
would be coming south with them, should Eddard take the position, leaving Jon even more cut adrift.

"Have you made a decision about Robert's offer?" she asked. "And if you agree, where will that
leave Jon?"

He didn't reply immediately, but after a long pause he nodded. "If I agree, and I want to agree Lya,
Jon simply cannot stay here. Catelyn will not have him."

"Have you discussed it with her?" she asked.

"We certainly argued about it," he replied. "Last night, after the feast. She won't have him here
without me. If I force her to accept him, I won't be there to defend him. Robb will. Robb would look
after him, they're as close as brothers. They are brothers."

"But Jon doesn't want to be reliant on Robb for protection," she said, guessing rightly. "So, this is the
situation: if you stay, Jon can remain here at Winterfell. If you go, Jon will be forced out. The way I
see it, Ned, it's now imperative that we have that talk with him. He's welcome to come south with us,
but I feel it ought to be his decision made with full knowledge of the truth."

Eddard met her gaze, the look on his face grave. They both knew, without needing to say anything,
that this was part of the reason she came home. She needed to be with her son. The time had come.
The truth. That was the real Leviathan lurking beneath the surface of Winterfell.

"I quite agree," he replied. "But, is bringing him south a good idea? He would be under Robert's
nose."

"Robert seems to think he's Wylla's son," she said. "Wylla or Ashara Dayne. He's never once
questioned his father. But then, Robert's never really mentioned Jon at all and neither has anyone
else. Anyway, Jon might decide to join the Watch after all. I mean what I say, I intend to give him all
the facts and let him make the decision himself."
"But the Watch, Lya? There's nothing so honourable, but it is for life. The rest of his life," Ned repeated. "I suggest that if he insists, we agree on condition that he waits a year. He will be fifteen by then, a man grown although still half a boy by my reckoning. That year can be spent either with us in the south, or I will find a suitable guardian from among my sworn lords."

That was a compromise she could live with and she agreed with a nod. "When will be a good time to tell him?"

"Robert and his court are riding out to hunt this afternoon, most of my household will no doubt join him," explained Eddard. "Catelyn won't go, but the rest will be gone for at least a day or two. I'm certain you won't mind missing out on a hunt if it's for this."

"Absolutely not, this evening it is," she retorted. "And, Ned, thank you again for all you've done."

A sad smile played at his lips, his eyes downcast as he turned away from her. "For all that I tried to remind myself that this day would come, that he was only my nephew, I still love him as a son, Lya. I shouldn't have let it happen, but it did anyway."

"You wouldn't be human if you didn't," she assured him. "And Ned, he loves you as a father and that's not something either he or I will forget in a hurry. Even with the truth, he will still need you."

But it wouldn't ever be the same. She could see it in his eyes. The truth would sever a bond between a father and son and neither of them could second guess how Jon would react. He could end up hating them both. Her own nerves chewed at her insides, but she couldn't let it show for Jon's sake.

"You took Rhaegar's sword, yesterday. Are you going to give it to him?" asked Eddard. A pointed change of subject.

"Mikken is cleaning it up for me," she said. "As for what will happen to it … Jon strikes me as the type of boy who doesn't like to be given things for no reason. Besides, if all he says about his own swordsmanship is anything to go by, he'll earn it in no time."

Eddard laughed. "He's not just bragging, sister. He's a gifted swordsman. Before you leave, you should come and watch him in the sparring yard."

"I look forward to it," she replied. "But first, we must break our fast. Come, brother. The others will be missing us by now."

A hangover was there to greet Jon when he woke up that morning. A throbbing pain just behind his eyes and a cold clammy feeling that things can only get worse. A feeling made real when, moments later, he stood up and his head began to spin as if he'd suddenly found himself at the top of very tall tower without a harness. Worse, his excesses of the night before hadn't been in the least bit enjoyable. All that readily accessible wine had seemed like a perk of being a bastard at first. But it hadn't been long before he was picking a fight with his own uncle, embarrassing himself in front of Theon Greyjoy and knocking the Queen off her feet as he tried to beat a dignified retreat. The fact that the Queen had been so understanding of it all made it worse, somehow. She was making allowances for the stupid drunk boy.

He unshuttered his window, fumbled with the latch, and then winced against the bright light of day. Despite the visual assault on his senses, he threw the window wide open and let the cold air smack him in the face. It felt so good after the cloying heat of the wall pipes and furs that had stifled him during the night. After a minute cooling down, he turned his attention to dressing. Something he usually did without thinking but now seemed to require a moment's careful consideration before
It was just as he was finishing lacing his boots up that a knock sounded on his door. His father's voice quickly followed: "May I come in?"

Fully expecting a stern lecture after last night's carry on, Jon groaned inwardly as he reached for the door and unlatched it. But when Lord Stark stepped through to the inner chamber, Jon noted there was more than a glimmer of amusement undercutting his normally solemn countenance.

"First time's always the worst," he said. He sat on the bed and gestured for Jon to join him. "Well, not that it gets better. But at least next time you'll know what to expect come the morning."

"There won't be a next time," replied Jon, firmly. When he spoke, he could still taste the residue of the wine at the back of his throat. "I'm never drinking that much again."

Lord Stark wore a look on his face that suggested if he'd had a gold dragon for every time he'd heard that the North would be richer than all the other kingdoms combined, as well as just larger. If he was thinking it, he didn't rub it in by saying it.

"The King has asked me to be his new Hand," he said. "My decision isn't final, but I'm erring towards accepting."

Unsure of what to do with that information, Jon hesitated as he tried to think of the right reply. He had no doubt his father would be perfect for the role, but he also knew leaving Winterfell and his children behind would be a wrench.

"But that's good," he finally stated. "There's no one better."

Lord Stark's smile was a pained affair and brief. "That's very kind of you, Jon."

Jon swallowed, finding his throat constricted at the thought of his father leaving. Surely now he would have no choice but to consent to his joining the Night's Watch. He couldn't stay in Winterfell with Lady Stark in charge. But now was not the time to press that suite.

"I'll miss you," Jon added. "We all will."

"That's just it. If I go, your sisters and Bran will be coming too," his father answered. "Rickon is too young, but he might join us in a few years."

Jon nodded, trying to summon a little enthusiasm. "Winterfell will be very empty. Well, I ought to get ready for the hunt. Robb's betting that I don't snare so much as a rabbit-"

"You're not going on the hunt, Jon," Lord Stark cut in. "You're to stay here."

"Right, I see," he replied, colour rising in his face. He should have known there would be no place for bastards among the royal retinue, but he had no wish to embarrass his father by saying anything. "Well, good luck."

His father easily second guessed what was on his mind. "Jon, it's not what you think. There's something the Queen and I need to talk to you about, that's all. And don't be worrying, you're not in any trouble."

Even with that assurance, Lord Stark's innate solemnity made it sound ominous. Then Jon remembered asking the Queen to speak with Lord Stark about his joining the Night's Watch. It seemed she had been as good as her word, which he appreciated.
"Come to my solar after supper this evening, Lyanna and I will be waiting for you," his father added. He still looked grave, almost pained as he drew out the pause. "And, Jon, it would be best if you kept this to yourself."

The ominous feeling was back. "Father, what's this about?"

That pained look was back in his father's face, as if he didn't want to say anymore but felt compelled to. "Your mother. We need to talk about your mother. And when I say tell no one, no one includes Robb and Arya."

Never mind after supper, Jon wanted to know now. He didn't care about the stupid hunt any more, either. But he calmed himself, gave himself a minute or two for the shock to wear off. After years of wondering and hankering after her name, this sudden decision to come out with the truth had left him reeling.

"I'll not breathe a word, I promise," he assured. "And I'll be there."

Before he left again, Eddard Stark hesitated and mussed up Jon's hair like he did when he was a child. A small act of stilted intimacy that seemed odd to him.

"Don't spend today worrying about this. Go outside, enjoy the day. And all this talk of the Night's Watch… I know how badly you wish to join. But don't make your mind up before we've talked. All right?"

Jon nodded. "Very well."

His promise proved hard to keep. After hastily breaking his fast, he saw Robb out in the yard helping Hodor saddle up for the hunters. Arya was mounted on a new palfrey the Queen had gifted her and even Bran would be going along for the ride. Theon Greyjoy had been appointed as Robert's temporary squire and even he would be going, to Jon's relief. Relief that proved short lived as the eternally smirking face of the Ironborn shone upon his own.

"Staying behind with the girls, bastard? Hardly a surprise after last night's carry on," he said. "You will be missed."

"Which is more than can be said for you, Greyjoy." Lyanna had come breezing past just at that moment, her reply cutting off the rather more vulgar riposte that had been on Jon's lips. "Although, you might end up missing something if you keep the King waiting any longer."

She winked at Jon as she passed, but didn't stop to talk. King Robert was mounting up and it was to him she was greeting with a kiss. He watched as they chatted quietly to each other and found himself wondering why she wanted to sit on tonight's discussion about his mother.

"Are you even listening, Snow?"

Jon whirled around to face a disgruntled looking Robb. "Yes, of course."

"Then what did I just say?"

He had the decency to blush. "I wasn't listening, brother. I didn't even know you were there."

Robb grinned, laughing so loud people turned to look. Once he composed himself, he threw an arm around Jon's shoulders and guided him away from the hunting party. "Look, I don't know what happened at the feast, last night. Arya was acting up and I had to take her up to bed. By the time I got back, you weren't there anymore. But if you're being held back from the hunt because of that, or
because of my mother, just say so. I'll talk to father and he'll listen to me."

"No, it's nothing like that," he answered. "Don't worry, it's a good thing. I'm really happy about it, actually."

He was bursting to say something, but his father's dire warnings about secrecy kept repeating on him. All the while, Robb was looking at him expectantly, waiting for him to continue. When he didn't, he was rewarded with a good-natured dig in the ribs.

"And?" Robb nodded for him to go on.

"And I promised father I wouldn't breathe a word to anyone," he said. "I'm sorry, Robb. But it's nothing bad, I promise."

"In that case, you better not say anything to anyone," Robb replied. "Luckily for you, I'm not anyone. I'm your brother."

"Father did specify that 'anyone' includes you and Arya," he stated. He cast a furtive glance over his shoulder, checking the coast was clear before whispering in Robb's ear. "He wants to tell me who my mother is."

The smile was back on Robb's face. "Then I really am happy for you and I hope she's still around somewhere. Gods, we'll not be back for a day or two. But you can't bring me this far and leave me hanging. You must tell me who she is as soon as I get back."

Jon nodded. "Yes, but Robb, not a word to anyone. Not a soul."

The hunting horns blared, rushing their chat to a hasty end. But Robb swore by the old gods and the new not to tell a soul, before he dashed off to get mounted up.

To watch the vast hunting party ride out through the gates, he decided to run up to the battlements for a good view. It was always stirring to see the silk banners and coloured streamers fluttering in the wind as they went. But, once they were gone, the castle seemed empty and void of life. At a loss for what to do, he wandered across the empty grounds, avoided Lady Stark who rounded a corner he was about to pass down and ended up in the common hall.

Ghost was in there already, stretched out by the fire with his brothers and sisters. They had all been left behind so as not to frighten the horses. The only human inhabitants of the common hall were Sansa, her silly friend Jeyne, Septa Mordane and the Queen. Grouped around a trestle table in the middle, they were passing around samples of needlework for Lyanna's royal inspection.

"Oh, that's lovely," Lyanna was saying, approvingly. Taking another, she said the exact same thing. "Oh, that's lovely."

"And this is Arya's work," Sansa said, passing the sample over gingerly between thumb and forefinger.

"Oh, that's lovely," replied Lyanna.

Oblivious to the funny looks the others were now giving her, Lyanna turned in her seat and greeted Jon with a bright smile. "And look who's come to join us. I'm sure Jon doesn't want to listen to us girls going on about our needlework."

She seemed grateful for the change of subject and Jon suspected she was like Arya in more than just looks. Sliding into the seat beside her, he couldn't resist picking up Sansa's expert work. "Actually
no, I'd love to hear all about how you got these stitches in such neat little rows."

However, his attempts at teasing the Queen went horribly wrong as Lord Stark showed up and called Lyanna away, leaving him alone with the girls and their needles. But their chatter washed over his head as his mind raced ahead to this evenfall.

"We're all going to live at court now, have you heard?" asked Sansa, jolting him out of his musings. "I don't suppose you have."

"Aren't you coming with us, Jon?" Jeyne immediately cut in.

"Of course he isn't," Sansa retorted, sharply.

Septa Mordane gave her a warning look. "Now, Sansa. There has been no final decision. However, if your father agrees, I am sure your half-brother will be more than welcome to join us."

From needlework to being talked about as if he wasn't in the room, Jon had already had enough. "Somehow, I don't think I will coming to court any time soon. Now, if I may be excused?"

He was polite enough to ask, but not enough to wait for an answer.

Killing time was turning into a nightmare and time passed with agonising slowness. But there was one thing he was set on doing. Now that he knew how painfully boring needlework was, he decided Arya needed a helping hand out of her hellish tedium. He made his way to Mikken's forge ready to order up that little sword he had in mind for her. If she was going to live in King's Landing, he wanted to gift her something she would remember him by.

It was cold outside, with a light summer snow falling to form a frosting on the cobbles. But in the forge, the warmth enveloped him like a warm blanket. As always, the armourer himself was busy at his tongs and bellows, hammering away at red-hot blades that glowed ember red in the dimness. They flashed through the air before hissing loudly as they were plunged into deep vats of cool water.

While he waited for Mikken to finish what he was doing, Jon took a look around. Ice had been left there, which struck him as odd. His father always carried it on his back, or tended to the blade himself. All the same, there it was. Next to it was another sword that, although it had seen better days, was a beautiful blade. Although dull, the steel rippled beautifully beneath a fine layer of dirt and dust. Patterns and swirls where it had been hammered and folded numerous times. It wasn't Valyrian, but it was still among the finest he had seen.

He picked it up, soft and worn leather belt included, and held it to the light. The pommel was decorated with a tarnished ruby that had once been pretty, the rest of it chipped. The sigil of the three-headed dragon was embossed on the leather sword belt, an even smaller sigil in the pommel, fashioned in the shape of a dragon. He almost dropped it in shock. The Targaryens were long gone, beaten into the dirt by King Robert after Rhaegar had abducted Lyanna.

His father never talked about it, but that was what everyone else had told him. As such, he hadn't known what to expect of Lyanna. He thought she would be fragile and delicate. But she didn't seem that way.

"It's a beauty, isn't it?"

Jon hadn't even realised that Mikken had stopped his hammering.

"The Queen found it in the armoury of the Red Keep and decided to see if I could clean it up," he added. "She said she'd only trust my good self with such a task."
"She should have it melted down and added to the iron throne," Jon retorted, putting the sword back down.

"I think she wants it done up so she can use it on your father," Mikken laughed. "Have you seen them in the sparring yard? They're knocking seven bells out of each other and having the time of their lives."

So much for delicate. "Er, no. I think I'll leave them to it." All the same, he grinned at the thought of it. "Anyway, I have an order to place too. A sword for a female beginner, live steel. What would you recommend?"

Mikken was thoughtfully rubbing his chin, leaving a greasy smear in the singed stubble of his beard as he did so. "I know just the very thing. And if this is for Arya Underfoot and your father finds out, I had no knowledge of it."

Jon grinned again. "Of course not."

After that, he had a bath and dressed himself in clean clothes for his meeting with the Queen and his father. Once that was done, it was almost time. Not in the least bit hungry, he forced a little venison into himself before heading up to his father's solar. True to his word, Lord Stark and the Queen were already there. They may have been having fun in the sparring yard that day, but they were both as sombre as a funeral procession now. The Queen had even swapped her blues and silvers for a sober black and grey gown.

Meanwhile, his father gestured for him to sit at a table in the middle of the solar. There was more food on offer, but he declined politely. His nerves were at him. While killing time in the afternoon, he had settled eventually and calmed himself. But now the time had come, he had butterflies. Whole swarms of them and they felt like they had steel tipped wings. Nervously, he glanced from his father to the Queen and back again, as if waiting to see who would break first.

"Your Grace, would you like to say anything?" asked Eddard.

The Queen drew her seat closer to Jon's. "There's really no gentle way to say it, so I'll just say it. It's me, Jon. I am your mother."
First, Jon thought he had misheard. Second, he thought it was a joke. Then, he decided he liked the first better and stared at his aunt, gaping like a mute. Meanwhile, they waited for him to react, to say something. But he had nothing. The more he tried to organise his thoughts, the more they seemed to fragment. One thing that did stick out was that if his aunt was his mother and his father was his father, then that didn't add up. But it made sense. The shame his father always felt was more than just the shame of a man who had cheated on his wife. There had always been something more and now he knew what.

Jon looked to his father. Eddard was reddening, gazing into the hearth fire and unable to meet his gaze. *Deny it, Jon wanted to say, just deny it!* But the words wouldn't form, as if they'd lodged in his throat. He realised he no longer wanted to know. But the look on his father's face told him all he needed to know, whether he wanted it or not. Once, when Arya was upset after being teased for having a face like a horse, Eddard had comforted her by telling her she looked like Lyanna. He remembered the words his father used: *lovely, beyond all compare.* At the time, it sounded like a brother's fondness for his sister. Now, it sounded like something that made him want to throw up.

"Is this true?" he demanded. "Is this why you couldn't tell anyone?"

"It's true," his father confirmed. "But Jon, listen--"

"No," Jon cut in. He thought of all the little red-haired Tully's running around Winterfell. Out of the five of them, only Arya had the Stark looks. Did his father guess that was going to happen? Jon would never have believed it, but now he realised he didn't know that man at all. Eddard Stark was a stranger to him. Suddenly, he felt sorry for Catelyn. "If you wanted to keep the Stark bloodline pure, then you could have married a Karstark--"

"Eddard!" Lyanna interrupted, looking to her brother. Jon looked at him again, but the pain in his father's expression stilled his tongue.

"I'm only your Uncle," he admitted, his voice low. "Just your uncle, nothing more."

Of course, that made more sense. But he still felt stuck in the middle of a web of lies.

There was only one thing worse than being bastard born, and that was being bastard born of incest. Relieved about that at least, he sat back down in his seat and looked between the two of them again. So, it wasn't poor Eddard who'd had the roll in the hay, it was Lyanna. Robert had had a couple of bastards, everyone knew that. But Jon supposed it was different for a woman to do it, women always got lumped with the greater burden of shame. Nor did he suppose King Robert would be too thrilled if he found out the woman he'd torn the realm apart for had been carrying on with some stable lad-

"Oh," he said, mid-train of thought. The realisation came like a punch to the stomach, physically winding him so that the 'oh' came on the rush of a sigh. Whatever else he was, Rhaegar Targaryen wasn't *some stable lad*. From thinking himself a plain old bastard, to a bastard born of incest and now a bastard born of rape – all in the space of a few short minutes. He found himself backing away from Lyanna, as if he might burn her. "If this is a joke, tell me now because I'm not laughing."

"No one else is laughing, either," she replied. "And no one would joke about this. Listen, your father was a good man. He might have been … misguided. He might have read too much into things. But he was a good man. He was my husband."
"Right," he replied. "Right, well that's settled then, isn't it? I'll be on my way."

"What?" the other two chorused.

But Jon wasn't listening anymore. He'd heard enough and could hear no more. Although his legs felt weak, he got up and walked around the table with a steady pace.

"Jon, sit back down, we need to talk…"

The door closed on Lord Stark's imploration, shutting them both out. But the click of the latch was soon followed by muffled footsteps approaching the door. So, Jon ran. Down the narrow stone passageway, all the way to the foot of a set of stairs leading up the north turret. He hesitated for a moment. Lady Stark had rooms up there, like the wicked witch in a children's hearth story, it was simply where she dwelled. He looked up into the darkness, hearing only the silence.

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"Eddard, leave him. A little time will help the shock." As reluctant as she was, Lyanna was only second guessing how she'd feel if she had just been told her whole life was a bit of a lie. Even a well-intended lie was still a lie, after all. She turned in her seat, to watch Eddard standing there with his hand still on the doorlatch.

He looked torn and indecisive. "And what if, in his shock, he goes telling people?"

"He's not a lackwit," she replied. "He'll know not to tell anyone."

Even so, she didn't intend on leaving it long. A few minutes time to cool down and collect himself, then she would look for Jon herself. In the meantime, she poured them both a drink to steady their nerves.

"You didn't even say his father's name," said Eddard, falling into a chair opposite her own. "What if he hasn't figured it out? He could be out there, running around the castle, completely unaware of how much danger he's in. Forgive me, sister, I think you're being altogether too complacent."

"He knows," she insisted. "Just a few minutes, Ned…"

But she was second guessing again and her tone was underpinned with worry. What if Ned was right? She found herself caught between giving her son the time and space he needed to work things out and protecting him from himself. She looked to Ned again, seeking guidance and finding only the worries and concerns they shared. Without another word, they got to their feet and ran for the door.

"Where do you think he would have gone?" she asked.

Outside the solar door was a narrow passageway leading up to the north-facing turret. When she was at Winterfell, her mother had occupied those rooms. By instinct alone, she found herself heading in that direction.

"Not down there, those are Catelyn's chambers," he replied, steering her down a turnpike stair instead. "Try the sparring yard and, if not there, the godswood. Ben's still here, we'll set him to looking as well."

Hitching her skirts above her ankles, she looked back over her shoulder for a brief second. There was only shadow and stone.
Jon stepped out of the shadows, watching as the Queen and Lord Stark vanished down the stairs, their voices echoing after them. Only when the sound of their footsteps faded did he breathe a sigh of relief. At least he was right when he guessed no one would look for him here. Instead of walking away, he made the most of his unlikely sanctuary and sat on the bottom step. It was as good as anywhere to gather his tumultuous thoughts.

Everything had been a lie, he realised. Whatever the reason, whatever the cost of the truth, it had been a lie. He remembered again what Lyanna had said about his father. A good man. A misguided man. A man who read too much into everything. He didn't even know what he was supposed to think about that and it made him angry. The lies made him angry. As the shock receded, it only made way for anger.

And it was all about to get worse.

"What're you doing here?"

Catelyn's waspish tone made Jon flinch. As if the step had suddenly bit him on the arse, he shot to his feet and almost fell. Even after all these years, she still had what it took to turn his blood to ice. Anger dissipated fast, swamped by trepidation as she approached him, taking the stone steps carefully as she drew closer to him. It was stupid, in light of what he had just been told. He realised that just as he was about to bolt and it was enough to make him stand his ground.

"That was your father and the Queen I heard, what are you hiding from them for? What have you done?"

"What have I done?" he repeated, aghast.

Her blue eyes flickered over his shoulder, down the stairs Eddard and the Queen had taken only moments before. "I don't see anyone else here. Of course, I mean you."

"I haven't done anything," he answered, backing himself against the wall. "I've done less to you."

"What are you skulking on these steps for if you've done nothing?" she retorted. "I should take you straight to your father, right now and we'll find out exactly what this 'nothing' is."

He could tell her, he realised. He could tell her everything. They'd both been lied to, after all. They both deserved the truth and now he found himself pitying her more than he ever feared her.

"He told me who my mother is," he said, drawing himself to full height. If he really was Lyanna's son, fathered by a prince, he had even less to fear from this one. "Don't you want to know who she is?"

The flicker in her expression gave her away. Whatever snappy rebuke was on her tongue, that was where it remained as she struggled to form some other reply. She didn't want to believe him, he realised.

"I really do not care about your whore of a mother, bastard," she replied, coldly. "Be on your way, now."

All the same, her eyes narrowed in suspicion as she looked him up and down. She was so transparent he almost laughed. If Lord Stark was worried about dealing with him after years of lies, Jon couldn't help but wonder how he'd handle his wife. His only regret about what he was about to say was that he wouldn't be around for the chaos that would inevitably follow.

"That's no way to speak of your Queen," he replied, smiling crookedly.
Quick as a viper, she struck him across the face. The slap resounded down the stairwell, stinging him sharply. "Enough of your lies, bastard-"

"Lady Stark!"

They both backed down at the sound of Benjen's voice. Jon turned from Catelyn, to see his uncle taking the steps two at a time.

"Lady Stark, my thanks for finding the boy, but I think I'll take over from here," said Benjen.

"The Queen will hear of this slander-"

"I heard what was said," Benjen cut over her. "Lady Stark, if you kick a dog often enough he will eventually bite back. Perhaps bear that in mind before repeating to anyone what was said here. Jon, come with me."

Just for a moment, he had had the upper-hand against Lady Stark. All the same, Jon was glad to leave her stewing in her own sour juices. He followed Benjen back into the solar, just a few short feet away and found it much as he had left it. Two glasses of wine sat abandoned on the table, but Benjen didn't seem to mind that as he lifted one for himself. While Ben took the wine over to the fireplace to warm himself up, Jon remained hovering by the door, watching his uncle's back.

"Your mother and Lord Stark risked their lives to keep you safe," said Benjen. "You could at least repay their efforts by not blurting out the truth by way of a petty act of revenge."

"It's not like Lady Stark can tell anyone without it all falling back on herself," he replied, sharply. "And you knew about all this, didn't you?"

"I was there, Jon," he pointed out, turning from the hearth. "Sit."

He sounded like he was commanding a dog, but Jon sat all the same. Sliding into Lyanna's recently vacated chair, he took the liberty of pouring himself some wine. There was a moment of loaded silence between them, during which Benjen studied him intently. As always, his expression was unreadable. Where Ben was concerned, it was like the cold had permanently frozen his face. He even looked like he'd been cut from a rocky crag – tall and muscular, but lean as a whip.

"If Lady Stark says anything about what you told her, I'll say you were teasing her," he said. "She'll believe me and Ned over you."

Jon bridled. "Because she's a-"

"Jon!" Ben cut in again, but quite gently. "Did you pay attention to your Maester's history lessons? Do you know what happened to the rest of your blood father's family? What do you think your six-year old half-sister looked like after she'd been put to the sword and your baby half-brother had had his brains dashed against a wall?"

As calm and quiet as Benjen spoke, but what he said was like a noose slowly closing over his throat. His throat slowly constricting, shutting off the airways. Jon had left the room without giving Lyanna the chance to speak his real father's name – he'd just guessed. He'd been in too much shock to think about the bigger picture. Words escaped him. He couldn't even muster a one-word answer. A simple 'yes' or a 'no' beyond him.

"I'm not chastising you, you've every right and more to be angry," Benjen continued. "But think about it all. What do you think would happen to Eddard's family should the truth come out? He would lose his head, that's for sure. But if Catelyn and the children can plead ignorance, they might
just survive. They would lose everything, of course. Ignorance was their only veneer of protection and that might just be enough to spare them their lives."

"But the King loves my father as a brother," said Jon, desperately. "He loves Lyanna more. If everything was explained to him, he wouldn't do anything to hurt our family."

"After what happened to the others would you be prepared to take that risk?" Benjen retorted. He drew a deep breath, letting it go in a long sigh. "You need to talk to them. Lya and Eddard. Give them a chance to explain everything without running off as you did."

Jon answered with a slow nod. No matter how angry he became, he would never have willingly risked the lives of his brothers and sisters. And they were his brothers and sisters. They were flesh and blood. They were people he knew. Not names written in a history book.

"I only wanted to get back at her," he said, harking back to Catelyn. It had felt good, too. But he left that unsaid. "Catelyn, I mean. All these years she's lashed out at me and now I'm told all this. What was I supposed to do? Knowing what I know now, why should I have to put up with her? She has no right speaking to me as she does."

"Don't fret on it," said Benjen. He leaned over and mussed up Jon's hair. "I'll smooth things over with her, she'll listen to me. But promise me you'll wait here for the Queen to get back."

Jon nodded again. "I'll wait."

If nothing else, it sounded like it was going to be an interesting story.

Lyanna paused outside the solar door, listening for sounds within. Benjen had already told her what happened and Eddard was smoothing things over with Catelyn. So now, it was just her and Jon. If the boy was still in there, he was being awfully quiet. In order to find out for herself, she inched open the door and stepped inside.

Jon was sat by the hearth, gazing vacantly into the fire. He looked up as she entered, but didn't say anything.

"Lord Stark's in with his wife," she said. "He'll be back later. But there's no reason we can't talk in the meantime. Eddard won't mind."

Jon still didn't look at her. Lyanna pulled up a chair opposite him and she settled down, studying his profile as he continued to watch the flames in the hearth. Even with a storm breaking out around him, he possessed the same stillness that his father had. That one display of anger toward Catelyn Stark aside, of course. She wondered at how calm he seemed about his father. Whether that too was just another manifestation of the outward calm, or whether it just hadn’t sunk in yet. She couldn't guess and he wasn't talking.

"Do you want to know about your blood father?"

The answer was a blunt: "No."

As her attempt at conversation was shot down, Lyanna suddenly found herself at a loose end. "Do you want to know about me, then?"

"No."

Shot down again, she glanced about the room still reeling from running into two brick walls.
"Well, in that case, let's talk about the game hunting up here. I know the late-summer snows are still falling, but I think there's hope of pheasant and peahen, don't you think? What say you?"

He looked at her. Briefly, and as if she was running mad but it was better than no reaction. And she was damned if she was going to let them sit there in silence with all this weight hanging over them.

"We could talk about that, we could talk about the falling snow and the cold nights, or we could actually talk about what matters. Something like, why I abandoned you here and went dancing off to King's Landing, leaving you to be raised as another man's child."

Jon shuddered. He suppressed it quickly, but she still saw it. She knew she had hit a raw nerve.

"We could, but perhaps I don't want to hear your excuses," he replied, sharply. He looked like he wanted to say more but faltered at the last minute. "I'll listen, but only because I promised Uncle Benjen."

"All right, well where do you want to begin-"

"I'm not unduly affected, you understand," he cut in, as if she hadn't spoken. "I mean, I was curious about who my mother was. But you needn't think I was lying awake at nights … You needn't think I cared too much. And you needn't think this changes a thing."

For some reason, this shallow show of bravado hit her square in the heart. She couldn't think why. Was it the obvious hollowness of the lie? Was it because it was so beneath him but he felt the need to do it anyway? It was a desperate attempt to hide how much he was hurting, like the roar of a toothless tiger.

"Naturally," she answered, quietly. She wouldn't add salt to his wounds by showing how much she saw through his protests. "You have your own life here and the last thing you needed was me swanning back into it and turning it upside down. I get that. But you still needed to know from where you came."

He was looking her in the eye now, just a split-second's pause before the dam broke and the questions rushed out of him. "Before, you said you were married? I heard different. Did you love each other? What about his other wife? Why did he want you? Where did you meet? How? How come everyone says you were abducted and raped? Did you want me? What was he like?"

Lyanna closed her eyes for a moment, pinching the bridge of her nose as she tried to gather her memories. She knew he would be feeling a storm of emotions and she did her best to keep up, but he was leaving her behind already. When she opened her eyes, she found him perched on the edge of his seat.

"Well, let's just start at the beginning and go from there, shall we?" she suggested. "Shall we go out onto the terrace? You look like you need the air."

Sitting in that solar, as spacious as it was, Jon still felt like the walls were closing in on him. He nodded eagerly and followed the Queen outside. Up on the terrace, they could see over the curtain walls. In the depths of his shock, he'd almost forgotten that the world outside still existed and he was mildly surprised to see it was still there, unchanged and reassuringly the same as he remembered. A small outpost of familiarity he could cling to in his ever-changing fall. The Ice Dragon was overhead, leading the way to the wall.

Breathing the open air helped clear his head, the brisk wind blowing that gathering fog away. It soothed him, helping him see more clearly. Benjen was right, he needed to at least hear her out and
he had given his word. He joined Lyanna at the balustrade of the terrace, looking out over the castle walls.

"I did something foolish at the Tourney of Harrenhal," the Queen began. "If truth be told, I did a number of foolish things at Harrenhal."

Jon turned to look at her. She must have been freezing in that thin gown with just a silk shawl wrapped around her narrow shoulders. But, if she was she didn't show it. It was odd to think that she was his mother.

"Isn't that what generally happens at tourneys?" he asked, trying to make it sound light. "Not that I'd know. I've never been to one."

She raised a smile. "Not the kind of 'drunken high-jinx' foolish, I'm sad to say. It was the 'sentenced to death for high treason' kind of foolish."

Jon almost choked. "What did you do?"

Was that the lie? It was really her who'd kidnapped Rhaegar and forced him to bed her? He didn't think anything would surprise him anymore.

"I suppose it begins with Lord Howland Reed-"

"The Crannogman?" Jon cut in. He didn't mean to, but this still had ways of throwing him off-guard. The Crannogmen were never seen outside the Neck. Not ever.

Lyanna bore his interruption well. "We met him on the road to Harrenhal and he was being beaten to a pulp by three squires. They were from House Blount, House Haigh and House Frey. So, I beat them off him with a tourney sword. Lord Reed is our bannerman, after all. It's our duty to protect them."

"And you got into trouble for that?" he asked, aghast.

"Well, it didn't quite end there. We took him to the tourney with us, but they tried to throw him out of the opening feast," she continued. "But I insisted he was noble born and sworn to House Stark and had just as much right to be there as anyone else. They relented and Howland was let into the feast. Prince Rhaegar played the harp, I cried and Benjen teased me so I tipped wine over his head."

"Is that how you met him?" Jon asked.

"I doubt he was aware of my existence at that point," she answered. "I was one woman among several. But later, I salved my wounded pride by doing the first of the big foolish things. I got dressed up as a Mystery Knight and defeated the three squires in the list. Instead of demanded a ransom of coin, I asked only that the lords chastise their unruly squires. King Aerys saw the whole thing and declared me an enemy of the crown and passed sentence of death —"

"You weren't foolish!" Jon cut in, hotly. "You did right. Aerys was the foolish one-"

"Aerys was King," Lyanna interjected. "For better or worse, Aerys was King. He had half the men at that tourney out searching for me. Robert was among them. Robert and his friend, Richard Lonmouth. They found my shield hooked on the end of a weirwood branch. It was Prince Rhaegar who found me, though. I thought he'd drag me straight to his father and have me burned alive there and then."

Jon had never heard any of this, before. He found himself inching closer, as if it was Old Nan
recounting one of her old stories. He hadn't been this gripped since the story of the Long Night.

"And that was when he ran off with you?" he asked. "He rescued you from his insane father and you fell in love."

Lyanna was smiling wistfully, the look in her eyes distant. Jon wondered if she was reaching back in time, reliving the first flush of her first love.

"I punched him in the face," she replied, flatly. "If I was about to be burned alive I wasn't going without a fight."

"Fair enough," said Jon. "I'd do the same."

"And we didn't run away," she pointed out. "He protected me, that was all. Later, he told me what the tourney was really all about. You heard about the prizes? The Whents were offering fat purses of gold to all the winners. But they were penniless. Well, maybe not penniless, but they didn't have that kind of money, and on top of paying for the tourney itself. It was secretly backed by Tywin Lannister, who wanted to gather all the Lords of the Realm together – including Rhaegar – to plot to overthrow Aerys and place the Prince on the throne. So, as you can tell by now, there was no way Rhaegar was going to hand me over to his father to be burned as a traitor."

Jon thought about it for a moment. "I'm guessing King Aerys was never meant to be there in the first place?"

Lyanna shook her head. "He hadn't left the Red Keep in years. But, someone found out about the true nature of the tourney and told him all about it. So, he turned up there looking for treason. Meaning, when I step into the tiltyard in disguise…"

Aerys was mad already, Jon could see how it would have looked even if Mystery Knights were a regular feature at tourneys.

"He would have just assumed you were a conspirator," he said. "So, that's how you met him?"

"Basically," she replied. "As simple as that."

"But he was married already," said Jon. "Princess Elia, of Dorne."

"He protected me, Jon. We didn't run off and get married the first night we met," she corrected him, but gently. "It all sounds like it happened in the blink of an eye, doesn't it? But these events took place over almost two years. He gave me sanctuary; his marriage had died and nature took its course."

"So why does everyone think he abducted you?" Jon was only growing more baffled.

"I wish I knew," she replied. "I'd gladly snap their necks with my bare hands. But the first I heard of these abduction allegations, Brandon had gone charging into the Red Keep threatening to kill Rhaegar. Hoster Tully tried to stop him before he left Riverrun. Barristan Selmy tried to stop him when he reached the Red Keep. It was treason, so Aerys locked our Bran up, killed his companions and sent word to Jon Arryn that Ned and Robert were to be handed over for execution and Rhaegar was sent to despatch me. He had already set Elia aside by then, so he married me instead and gave me a place to hide. We were going to marry anyway, once the dust settled. But neither of us could see into the future and I don't think either of us anticipated that."

What should have been a scandal turned into a war. It made Jon's head spin.
"Robert," he said, at length. "If Robert found out you had left him for Rhaegar then he would have made it up himself."

Lyanna frowned. "No, Jon. Robert didn't know. How could he? I'd only met him once, at that point. I was still in the Riverlands, he had no reason to suspect anything until he got that message. Somebody else sent that message and I don't know who." She paused to draw breath. "And it no longer matters. What's done is done."

Something told him she had suspected Robert before and suspected others still, nor did he expect her to tell him everything tonight. On the other hand, he didn't know why he was latching on to it. He was supposed to be finding out about his parents, not solving the sticky mysteries of Robert's Rebellion. From what he could fathom at this early stage, just about everyone involved could have handled it a lot better.

"Did you love Rhaegar?" he asked, quietly. "You didn't marry him out of fear, did you?"

She shook her head. "I knew him quite well by then. And I loved him. I think he might have loved me, too."

Jon cocked an eyebrow. "Might?"

Lyanna hesitated before answering. "Let me just say, Rhaegar had his own reasons for wanting me. It had nothing to do with my rapier wit and stunning good looks. And it's definitely for another day. Whether he loved or not doesn't matter. What does matter is that he loved you. He never met you, he was dead before you were born. But from the moment he knew of you, growing inside me, he knew he would gladly have died for you."

"He's not much good to me dead," said Jon, but he couldn't be angry still. Only sad. Sad that two stupid people in love had made such catastrophic mistakes, made worse by their furious families. Aerys burning anyone who looked twice at him; Brandon all but declaring war without even bothering to try and get the full story. It all just made Jon wish people talked more. It was only then that something strange occurred to him. "Was I born a prince, then?"

"No," she replied, her voice quiet. "You were born a king."

"Gods," he cursed. "Of course. Rhaegar dead, Aerys dead and the others too." He paused and smirked at her. "Did you bend the knee to me?"

"Don't push it," she replied with a laugh, quickly growing serious again. "Ser Arthur Dayne did, though. The Sword of the Morning, no less. So did Gerold Hightower and Oswell Whent. That's not to be sniffed at."

"That was a fine kingsguard I had," Jon stated. "Shame I can't remember it."

He laughed. He couldn't help himself. From where he looked, the events surrounding his birth were the perfect blend of tragedy, comedy and farce. It left him with the choice between laughter and tears. Once he did compose himself, Lyanna was watching him carefully again.

"Jon, I can't give you anything," she explained. "I can't give you back what was taken from you. I can't restore your father's family. I have no grand plan. I have nothing up my sleeve. All I could do was keep you safe and let you live an ordinary life, like an ordinary child, in really quite a privileged home. And you couldn't have that with me around."

Those words sobered him up, but he didn't know how to reply. He didn't agree with her. He could see her reasoning, but he didn't agree with it.
"We could have gone into exile," he said, firmly. "Just you and I. We could have done it. We could have stayed together in the Free Cities."

He could tell by the dismay in her eyes that she had thought about it. For some reason, it gave him some small consolation that abandoning him hadn't been her only plan.

"Just imagine I had done that," she replied, twisting a ring on her finger. "We'd be starving, homeless and fleeing from place to place to escape catspaws. We'd be living hand to mouth. We may have been lucky and escaped the hired assassins. We could have been lucky several times over, but Robert would only have to be lucky once. And if you had been killed, I would have watched you die knowing I could have harboured you safely at Winterfell, surrounded by a family who loved you. And … I know you dislike Catelyn and Catelyn dislikes you. But on the whole, her aside, you have been happy here, haven't you?"

The coldness was back on him, settling in the pit of his stomach. "I suppose."

"Exile sounds so romantic," she continued. "But it really isn't. Besides, Robert's a good man at heart. He gets worried about the last Targaryens, especially since I bore him no children. But Stannis is a more than worthy heir and Robert soon calms down. Others Queens might have encouraged him to go hunting stray Targaryens. Needless to say, I certainly didn't."

Jon supposed he ought to be grateful for that, even if no one did suspect a thing. But he couldn't bring himself to say anything. As the shock wore off, the emotional numbness receded, leaving only this raw vulnerability that came with being hunted. And he would have been hunted like a white lion on the Dothraki sea had Robert gotten wind of who he was. He couldn't believe he had lived his life utterly ignorant of the danger he was in.

He looked to the Queen one last time. "I want to go back in and wait for father. With your grace's leave."

She nodded her head, a small smile playing at her lips. "Very well."

He paused, waiting to see if she followed. She didn't. She leaned against the stone barrier, looking out over the darkened grounds of her childhood home. After watching her for a moment, wondering what was going on in her head, he backed through the double doors into the warmth of the solar.
A couple of things stuck out in Jon's mind. The shock of the revelations had receded, leaving room for his own sense of reason to make its presence felt. Even though he felt like he was no longer himself, he was able to begin processing what he knew. The part of him that still expected this to be an elaborate joke was getting smaller all the time, but it still sprung into life at will. That aside, he forced himself to confront these new truths.

While he warmed himself by the fire, the Queen remained out on the terrace. He turned to watch her, but she had her back to him. The gown she wore, a simple thing of grey and white silk, shimmered in the moonlight as the breeze raked over her. She and he looked alike, he couldn't deny that. But, before long, the questions returned. The things that snagged during her talk, but he didn't ask because he didn't want to interrupt her.

Rhaegar might have loved her. He had his own reasons, she had said. His own reasons for wanting her. He wondered what she meant by that. It seemed important, but she hadn't gone into detail. Before he could dwell on it too long, Lord Stark reappeared through the solar door. Although Catelyn had provoked him, he was still apprehensive as he met Lord Stark's gaze.

"There you are, Jon," he said, wearily. "I hoped you would be back."

Eddard closed the gap between them, coming to a rest beside the hearth. Jon watched as he held out his hands, splay fingered to get some warmth in him.

"You told Lady Stark that I lied to her," he said.

"No," he answered, firmly. "I told her she pushed you too far and you snapped. But, Jon, you can't do it again. You understand that, don't you?"

He nodded, but without conviction. Nor did he wish to waste this valuable time talking about Catelyn Tully.

"So, what are you now?" he asked, looking up at his actual uncle. "What am I supposed to call you? What am I to you? Just a nephew? Am I not to be your son any longer?"

Self-consciously, he glanced to the terrace door to see if Lyanna was listening in. But she was in her own world out there, still taking in the cold night air. Meanwhile, Eddard turned from the fire and placed his warm hands on Jon's face. He leaned in so close they were almost at kissing distance.

"You will always be a son to me," he said, quietly. "Your mother's over there. Get to know her, grow to love her. She's there for the taking and I won't take it as a slight. But I raised you as one of my own because I feel you're one of my own."

"I can call you father, even when we're alone?" asked Jon, trying to keep the tremor from his voice. He'd dreamed of being given the name 'Stark', but just being able to call the current Lord Stark 'father' had always been his greatest source of pride. He knew, for a certainty, he could never feel the same about Rhaegar Targaryen. Who was he, anyway? A name in a history book after falling in a war of his own making.

Meanwhile, Eddard smiled briefly, his grey eyes twinkling in the firelight. "Listen. I am your father – that's what I'm telling you. There's more to being a father than planting a seed in a woman's belly."

Jon returned his father's smile, warmed by the reassurance that he wasn't about to be tossed out of the
bosom of his family. He let himself be pulled into a brief bear hug, before Lord Stark held him at arm's length.

"It's late," he said. "Have you had enough for tonight? You're not obligated to stay and hear all this. You can go off to bed whenever you want, or just take some time to yourself."

Jon shook his head. A few hours ago, he would have. He would have run for it. But now the dust was settling and all he had was a headful of questions. Sleep certainly seemed unlikely. "There's more I need to know."

"Then go," his father urged him.

With that seal of approval, Jon gladly obeyed. Feeling a little more certain, like the ground had re-solidified beneath his feet, he stepped out onto the terrace where his mother still took the air. At the sound of his approach, she turned and granted him a smile. A smile that made her face light up, as one genuinely glad to see him. It was hard not to be moved by it.

Jon looked at her hard for a moment, daring himself to ask the question that had hitherto been frozen on his lips. "You said Rhaegar had ulterior motives for wanting you. What do you think they were?"

If the question was impertinent as he thought, Lyanna didn't seem to agree with him. She remained untroubled as she resumed leaning against the wall of the terrace, looking out over the stars. Behind him, Jon heard his father stepping out too, but he remained silent as he settled into a chair.

"I was born at the height of a particularly awful winter," she said. "It was long, it was dark; people were smothered by snowfalls and all the rest of it. Your blood father was born amidst a raging fire that reduced this realm's most opulent pleasure palace to ash and dust. The fire was started with blood magic and fire magic — whatever that entails, I cannot say. Before all that, a woods witch prophesised that the Prince That was Promised would be reborn, to the line of Aerys and Rhaella Targaryen — your grandparents. Rhaegar thought it was him, for a while. Until he realised there was a missing ingredient with regards to his parentage: ice. He was the fire, I was the ice and our offspring would be the perfect blend of both. The Prince That was Promised, born of ice and fire."

When she fell silent, Jon waited to see if she had more to add. Something along the lines of why this mattered. Or, if there was to be some benefit that came from being born to parents who had rather extreme elemental births themselves. He himself couldn't figure it out.

"Oh," he said, when she didn't elaborate. "But, what for?"

"Horse shit," Eddard supplied from the background. "Pay it no mind, Jon."

Lyanna laughed, glancing over her shoulder at her brother. "Rhaegar believed it. He staked his realm on it and he said it mattered not, so long as the child was born and lived."

"But why?" Jon repeated, more urgently. "Horse shit or no, I'd like to know why."

"He believed the Long Night was coming again," she answered, bluntly. "He believed the Others would come and the world would be placed in mortal peril and only the Prince That was Promised would be able to bring the dawn."

Jon knew about the Long Night, of course. Old Nan had regaled them with stories from that time by the fireside, more times than he could recall. It had been a favourite of his when he was a small boy, and he would climb into his bed eagerly, hoping Old Nan would tell it again. He would be wrapped in quilts and furs, warmed by the water pipes and the fire burning in the hearth and relishing the thrill of terror while simultaneously knowing he was in the safest part of the safest castle in the realm. He
tried to imagine what it would be like if dawn never came. But, it always did.

"So, Rhaegar believed that I, personally, would save the world," he asked, seeking clarity.

"I don't think it's as simple as that," she answered. "Books of prophesy are strange things, Jon. Hardly a solid foundation on which to build your life. I loved your father, that's why I went along with it. And expecting one person to save the world is a rather large ask. I tell you, it cannot be done."

Not for the first time that night, Jon found himself completely bewildered. "You don't expect me to save the world, do you?"

"I don't even see how the world needs saving to begin with," Lyanna replied. "It all seems to be rolling along quite nicely. Rhaegar might have believed it. But, like I said, sometimes I think he read too much into things."

Despite his earlier sentiment, Jon found himself exhausted. He turned suddenly to Lord Stark to excuse himself and pulled himself up sharply. His father was leaning forward in his seat, glaring at Lyanna with a face like thunder. Seemingly oblivious to her brother's anger, Lyanna was still transfixed by the night beyond Winterfell.

"I'm quite tired, actually. With your grace's leave, I might retire."

He addressed the Queen, but both gave their assent. By that time, at least, Eddard had arranged his face into a more passive mask. But Jon wondered at it. He wondered why his father was angry with her for telling him that stuff. He had asked, after all. And they had promised him no more lies. He went on his way, mood steadily darkening.

"Was that wise, sister?"

At the sound of Ned's voice, Lyanna turned to face him. "I thought you might have been displeased, brother. And I am sorry for it."

He sighed heavily, dragging himself reluctantly out of the chair he was sat in. Closing the gap between them, he looked out wearily over the lands he ruled. It wasn't meant to be him standing there. Something Lyanna knew he was still painfully aware of.

"I'm not angry with you," he replied. "I understand why you did it. But it's a lot to put on the shoulders of a boy. And Jon is still a boy, he has the smell of summer of him still. Worse, he might actually start to believe it."

Lyanna turned to study his profile. He had aged. Perhaps prematurely, given the burden of his station and the wars he had fought. Not just Robert's war, but Balon Greyjoy's too. They came so close together that Ned had barely had time to warm the chair at Winterfell's high table before he was dragged out of it again. Now, all these years later, the dark stubble of his beard failed to hide his hollow cheeks and his eyelids lowered at half-mast as soon as the clock struck nine. She began to think it had been unfair of her and Robert to cajole him into being the new Hand of the King.

"No one person can save the world, Ned. Perhaps in stories they can, but this is the real world," she reminded him. "Jon knows that; it certainly won't turn his head. And it's not as if you and I are going to start pressuring him. All that prophecy business – it was stuff and nonsense. But Rhaegar respected it and, now, I feel I must for his sake."

Eddard fixed her with a hard look. "Just make sure Jon understands that. Anyway, did you tell him
"What's the point?" she asked in return. It was a strange ploy, she remembered. But Princess Elia went along with it all and Lyanna had felt compelled to as well. It was done for her protection, as well as Jon's. "Whatever was done, it doesn't affect Jon at all: that child is dead. Besides, Jon barely asked about Rhaenys."

"Oh no," Eddard corrected her. "Benjen talked to him about them. He said Jon seemed distressed by it all. But, you're right, Jon's had enough to contend with for one night."

"Quite right," she agreed. "Once the dust settles, I will talk to him again and explain the more, er, intricate parts of his father's plan."

It hadn't only exhausted Jon, either. Revisiting her past had been like dredging a shipwreck from the seabed. Her memories were little more than a skeletal structure; the bare bones of something once beautiful reduced to something ghostly and pale. She could almost smell the seaweed.

"I wonder what would have happened, had Rhaegar lived," she confessed. "Would he have raised Jon, drilling it into him that he had this special purpose in life? When I think of the effects that could have had on Jon, I'm almost glad he didn't come back. I suppose that makes me a terrible person."

Ned bit back a snort of laughter. "It means you've grown up, sister. I cannot imagine Jon with a head full of nonsense like that." He paused to draw breath, before adding: "Anyway, you would have been there to make sure the boy had a semblance of normality. You would have made sure that he knew how to enjoy himself."

She stifled a laugh. "Somehow, I doubt I would have gotten a look in. Well, there's no use wasting breath talking over what might have been. What of the future? Will you come south with us?"

"Yes, I think I shall," he replied, trying to smile. "As a concession to Catelyn, I am leaving Bran behind for another year. But Sansa and Arya will be coming too … and Jon, if that is what he decides."

"I take it there is no chance whatsoever of Catelyn tolerating Jon's presence here any longer?" she asked.

Ned looked rueful in the extreme. "He either comes with us, or goes with Benjen. She's not a bad person, Lyra. She really isn't."

"She's been an unfailingly bad person to my son, though," she curtly replied. "Oh, gods, Ned, I don't blame her for being angry. But why can't she be angry with us? She knows I made you keep him, she knows you insisted he stay. She knows you and I were equally determined to give him the Stark name and make him truly one of us. He's a good few months younger than your Robb, so he's no threat. He's the younger brother. But Catelyn never protests to us, she just lashes out at him."

While she spoke, Ned had buried his face in his hands. "I know," he groaned. "It's the one part of her, the one piece of her mind, that I cannot begin to fathom, Lyra. For what it is worth, she is angry with us as well. But you are her Queen and I am her Lord Husband – she dare not risk our wrath by complaining directly."

Lyanna let the matter go. Poor Eddard had tried his best and she could ask no more. There was just one avenue left open to her, but even that she needed time to think through. Nevertheless, it was the seedling of an idea to get them all off the hook. But, for now, she needed sleep and the night wasn't getting any younger.
That night, whenever she closed her eyes, all Sansa could see was the Kings Landing of her imagination. Initially, the streets had been paved with gold. But then she decided that, even for her, that was going a little far. She closed her eyes again and replaced the gold paving stones with plain old cobbles. In her mind's eye, she conjured the silk streamers flying from every home, the colourful bunting crisscrossing every narrow, twisting alley way. The city was populated with rosy-cheeked, robust washerwomen and barefoot, well-fed, smallfolk running pell-mell through this glittering hub of humanity. Poor but happy, because they are the citizens of the promised land. Among this bustling population, musicians busked on every corner – all playing her favourite songs. Riding through them all, mounted on destriers, knights and squires wore lady's favours as they made their gallant way to the Red Keep. All her wild imaginings made her dizzy.

She had only seen the Red Keep in a woodcut before, and another time she saw it depicted in a picture book she loved when she was a little girl. Once, a long time ago, she used to gaze at that picture for hours and try to imagine what it would be like to be there, serving her aunt … the Queen. She had been training to be her aunt's Lady in Waiting since the age of three. What did that make her? She wondered. A Lady in Waiting, in waiting? Whatever the case, it was finally happening and all her dreams were beginning to come true, after ten long years. Better still, her best friend Jeyne was coming with her.

Not quite as appreciative of the world now opening up to them, Jeyne had fallen asleep already. Because it was a celebration, father and mother had allowed Jeyne to sleep over in her chambers. But, after spending all of the previous night talking and daydreaming, the other girl had become quite worn out, it seemed. Sansa let her sleep, but that same luxury eluded her.

To pass the time, she got up from bed and looked out of the window of her chambers. She could see the snow drifts lazing idly past, she could see the rolling hills shrouded in darkness. She could also see her father and the Queen up on the terrace, talking to Jon. They had been up there for hours now and she couldn't help but grow curious. What were they talking about? She had overheard her mother telling her father about the dirty lie Jon had told her about his mother. As such, she hoped he was up there being given a thorough telling off for saying such things.

Thoroughly bored with imagining what they were talking about, Sansa got up and dressed herself. Sleep wasn't coming any time soon, and she thought she might go mad if she remained cooped up in that room. Over by the hearth, Lady lifted her head from her paws, fixing Sansa with her warm amber eyes before bounding over. Together, the two of them left the room to walk the corridors of Winterfell for possibly the final time.

Although she didn't know when they would be leaving, but it would be soon. And, despite her excitement, she knew she would miss Winterfell. A longing made a little acute by the knowledge that she might never come back. Right now, she wanted to make her farewells to the castle that had been her home. At least until…

"What are you doing out of bed?"

She started and almost blushed, as though she had been caught doing something wrong. Which she wasn't. They were celebrating and she was allowed to stay up late if she wished. Something she told Jon as she turned to face him as he descended the stairs from father's turret.

"Anyway, how can I be expected to sleep when we're going to the capital soon?" she asked, letting him fall into step beside her. She didn't know where she was taking him, but they walked alongside each other anyway. "Are you not in the least bit excited?"

Jon looked at her as if he'd never even heard of King's Landing, never mind gone there. "About what? I'm not coming."
"But you are!" she cut in. "You must. What else will you do? And if you come with us, you could become a knight in service to a lord. Or you might fight in tourneys and win honour and glory."

"Sansa!" he cut in, holding up a hand for silence.

Thinking she had gone too far, she fell silent immediately. Meanwhile, Jon was casting furtive glances all around, as if checking there were no spies nearby. Seemingly dissatisfied, he grabbed her wrist and led her into the nearest room. A smelly garderobe, as it happened. Rather startled by his behaviour, however, she made no protest. In the meantime, Jon paced and looked troubled.

"Sansa, just imagine you're at a party..." he began, then trailed off. "No, bigger than a party. Let's say you're at a tourney, in the capital. You're surrounded by knights and all that stuff you were talking about, all right?"

Curious, Sansa nodded. "Yes. I'm at a tourney and surrounded by knights. Jon, what is all this about?"

"Nothing," he waved a dismissive hand. "Now, just imagine the most handsome knight there shows an interest in you. Wait, no, he's not a knight – he's a prince. The prince. Would you run away with him?"

_But, the realm had no princes_, she thought to herself, unless Stannis counted. She didn't think Stannis would take much of an interest in her, though. She tried to imagine some other prince. But with either Stannis or anyone else, the answer remained the same.

"Of course I wouldn't, that would be most improper."

All tension drained from her half-brother's stance, his shoulders relaxed and he smiled at her. He looked most relieved.

"Good," he said. His pacing stopped and he looked into her eyes. "Tell me why you wouldn't run away with this handsome knight who looks like he just stepped out of the pages of your favourite romance."

Sansa took a moment to gather her thoughts. "Because no true or worthy knight would ever approach a lady, all brazen like that. It spoils it. Admiration should be conducted from afar, because the love of a real Lady must be seen as unobtainable. They may give us tokens and we may reciprocate, but nothing more. They can even write us a sonnet or a verse, if they wish. But we must never show that we like it, or they'll get the wrong impression. We are aloof and unobtainable. Those are the rules."

She held up a hand as if to indicate, this far but no farther. Jon looked puzzled and gave his head a quick shake. But Sansa knew the chivalric code like the back of her hand.

"Well, those aren't quite the reasons I had in mind, but they'll do," he said. After a thoughtful pause, he added: "No matter where I end up, sister, if some man shows too much interest in you you're to tell me and I'll come down there and knock his head off for you. I'll say the same to Arya."

Sansa was strangely flattered by this new protectiveness in him, but she was equally puzzled by it. As for Arya...

"I cannot think of anyone less in need of such protection," she replied. "She would tear off his man bits and wear them as earrings before you could even draw breath."

Jon laughed, sagging with relief all over again. He really was behaving very oddly, but she felt it
wasn't her place to pry. In return, she felt herself grow serious in the face of this new protective Jon.

"I'm sorry if you got the wrong impression the other day," she said. "When you walked in on me and Septa. Really, I would be very happy if you came south with us."

"Thank you, Sansa," he said. "But now to bed and you too. Celebration or no, I don't think our father meant for you to be prowling the castle at all hours."

She had to admit, he probably had a point.

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Despite his own exhaustion, Eddard escorted Lyanna back to her chambers and they paused outside the door. The beacons on her floor of the turret had been extinguished, for some reason. She thought, perhaps, the night guards had just assumed she was already in bed and put them out. Whatever the case, it didn't bother her too much. It just made unlocking the door a little trickier. *If I can do it drunk, I can do it in the dark,* she reasoned to herself.

To her surprise, however, the door swung open with the smallest pressure.

"You must have forgotten to lock it," said Eddard.

Lyanna shrugged. "I could have sworn I did, but there's a chance you're right. Especially with everything else happening tonight."

"Quite," he agreed, but he still looked worried. "I'll go in first, though. Just to be safe. You stay here."

He had left Ice in the solar. In fact, both of them were unarmed. Should it come to it, all they had were their fists. As such, she ignored his advice and followed him into the empty room. The cold hit her first. It was bone-achingly freezing in there, where a window had been opened wide. These days, more accustomed to the southern warmth, it certainly wasn't her who opened it. The net curtain billowed on the soft breeze, swelling like a ghost under the moonlight.

Eddard opened a closet door, checking the inside. "Empty. Is anything else out of place?"

She slammed down the window and took another look around. "Nothing. All is at it should be…. But the bed."

The curtains around the bed had been fully drawn – not as she had left it. Boldly, Ned marched over to it and pulled them apart sharply. He revealed only the bed itself, still perfectly made up from when the servants had been in earlier that day. Only a perfect blue winter rose was out of place, where it rested against her pillow.

She picked it up and brought it to her nose, breathing in its sweetness. "Robert knows they're my favourite. But he's at the hunt."

Ned looked troubled again, and took the blossom from her. "And I don't think Jon's quite reached the point of leaving flowers for you, yet."

"No," she agreed, readily. This whole set up: the extinguished beacons, the unlocked door and the open window, it all felt sinister. It unsettled her more than she cared to say. "Somebody knows, Eddard."

"How can they?" he asked, but his expression darkened all the same. "It's just someone playing a joke on you, Lya. That's all."
She wanted to believe it, she really did. Then she remembered the welcoming feast a few days past. The musicians had played that stupid old song about Bael the Bard. Bael the Bard, the infamous wildling raider, who made off into the night with the only daughter – nay, only child – of the day’s Lord of Winterfell, leaving only a single blue rose on her pillow. She returned years later, a baby on her breast and it turned out she’d never left Winterfell at all. She’d been in the crypts all that time. Years after that, when her son was Lord of the North and Bael was King Beyond the Wall, the two met in battle at the Frozen Ford. It ended badly.

"Give it here," she said. Taking it from him, she cast the rose into the dying fire, briefly bringing the flames back to life.
Some Mother's Son

Robb was giving Jon the most peculiar look, but all would soon become clear. In the meantime, he carried on doing what was doing. Barring his chamber door, closing and shuttering the windows, lighting candles and stoking the fire. With the shock of the truth still sending shockwaves through his body, he felt like he was committing high treason just thinking about it all. Before he could feel safe actually speaking those thoughts aloud, he wanted to be sure. At least if there was a Baratheon spy hiding up his chimney, they'd soon have the arse burned out of them. Jon smiled as the flames climbed the flue.

"Jon, what is all this?" Robb sounded worried now. "It can't be that bad."

When the last candle was lit, he sat beside his brother on the bed and told him everything the Queen had told him. He was only telling Robb because he trusted him implicitly and because he had promised. It was a promise he made before the hunting party left, before even he realised how dangerous the truth was.

"It's Lyanna and Rhaegar," said Jon. "They're my real parents and I never even saw it coming."

Robb rocked back as if absorbing a blow to the body. "Gods, Jon, are you being serious? I heard you said this to my mother and father told her you were just lashing out-"

"Because father doesn't trust her with the truth," he interjected. "I'm not even supposed to be telling you. When father came to see me on the day of the hunt, he told me to tell no one. Not even you – remember?"

Robb nodded. "Now we know why. Now we know why everything was so secret." He paused, lost in thought for a moment. Then, he laughed. "All these years… All these years you've been the bastard of Winterfell. Now you're the lost prince. You have to admire the irony."

"It's no laughing matter!"

"No, no you're right and I apologise." But Robb was still smirking as he tried to pull himself together. "This makes no difference. We're brothers until we die. Understand? When I am Lord of Winterfell, I want you on my side and, preferably, by my side."

Sensing a 'but' coming, Jon remained silent to let him continue.

"But, this gives you more opportunities than you ever dared to hope for," continued Robb. "You can't go running off to the Wall now. You know that, don't you? Go south and prosper."

"And if anyone finds out-"

"Have they found out so far?" Robb cut in. "Lyanna buried you so deep you don't need to worry about that. Just keep pretending Lord Stark is your father and they'll never know any better."

He wished Robb had used some other word than 'buried', but he had a point. "I don't want to get on in life just because my mother is the Queen."

"You won't," said Robb. "She can't show you any favour. She can't give you anything. You said she told you that herself. And, anyway, where has this pride come from? You actually have choices now, which you did not before. You would be a fool to spurn her. In fact, I'm not even going to let you. I'm going to force you-"
The rest of what he was saying was lost as Jon burst out laughing. "Force me? How? In fact, don't answer. One thing I know, I cannot hide in here for the rest of her stay. Come, I need to fight someone and you're almost as good as me now."

"Almost?" Robb scoffed at the implication, but helped Jon extinguish the candles all the same. "I suppose I'm expected to let you win now that you're a fucking prince."

"Robb!" Jon retorted. "You can't even jest about this. Just, pretend I never told you."

His brother held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Calm down, already."

Jon rolled his eyes as he lifted the bar from his chamber door. He supposed he ought to be calm about it all. But he'd been as jumpy as a cat tied to a stick since Lyanna had told him everything. When the hunt returned that morning, he avoided make eye-contact with King Robert, as if the Gods gave the King the power to read minds. All these years, Lyanna had masked the truth from him and he tried to take that same logical view she clearly took.

He knew what he needed. To get back in the training yard and do what he did best.

The blunted tourney swords met with a dull clangour. A basic attack in which Robb appeared to have the upper hand but Jon met it effortlessly. The sparrers circled each other, keeping their distance and waiting for the other to make the next move. Jon feigned it, tricking Robb into attacking just so he could parry and twist, almost dragging the sword from his brother's hands. All the while, Lyanna watched from the timber balustrade overlooking the practise yard, one hand wrapped around a support beam.

Remembering her son's wine fuelled bragging from the night of the feast, she was keen to see what he was really like. As with everything he did, she had received progress reports and they were more than favourable. But from what she had seen so far, he was almost lazily defending against Robb's attacks. Whether preserving his strength or just sluggish, she could not tell. But she continued to watch with deep interest.

She would have wielded a sword herself, had Lord Rickard allowed it. All these years later, what little had she been able to learn on the sly had long since faded away. Her continued interest was purely academic, helping to search for talent that might be of use to King Robert's household. Hopeful contenders in search of wealthy patrons flocked through the galleries of the Red Keep, but precious few ever went on to make a name for themselves. Fewer still lived to see old age.

These days, her main interests lay with her first love: horses and equestrianism. Robert had had new stables constructed in the Red Keep as a wedding gift to her. He built extensions on the existing ones and added more stalls and bays as well as a breeding ground for the finest of her studs. There was everything from sturdy little garrons for long distances to destrier war horses used only in battle and tourneys. Mercifully, the demand for destriers had slumped since Robert won the war but the Lords still required them even if only for a boost to their status. Destriers were the Valyrian steel of horses.

While lost in her thoughts, Lady Stark had appeared at the foot of the steps leading up to the balustrade. Lyanna greeted her with a smile and a kiss on the cheek, but pulled up at the worried look on her face. When they were level with each other, Catelyn withdrew a small scroll of parchment that had been concealed up the dagged sleeve of her cloak. The broken seal was the vivid blue of House Arryn.

"A letter," she explained. "From Lysa."
Lyanna turned her back on the sparring match below and read it through quickly. "Jon Arryn was murdered. By the…"

*Lannisters* was left unspoken. Instinctively, she turned back to the yard below where she had seen the eye-catching golden armour and white cloak of Ser Jaime among the growing crowds of spectators ringing the practise yard. He was there still, watching Jon now fighting both Theon Greyjoy and Robb at the same time. There was nothing lazy about her son now, he was knocking both contenders into the dirt. But she no longer had time to think about that.

"That fever came out of nowhere," she recalled, looking back to Catelyn. "Robert said as much, Cat. And I saw it too. Burned through him like dragon fire. Even Pycelle said he'd never seen the likes in all his long years." Remembering the blue rose from the night before, she added: "There are have been altogether too many odd occurances, these last few months."

"So, you agree?" Cat asked. "Jon Arryn was poisoned?"

"I'm saying it could have been poison," she said, keeping an open mind. "What other evidence does she have?" She paused there and dropped her voice to barely more than a whisper. "What evidence does she have for the Lannisters being behind it? You must understand, I cannot urge Robert to act against Tywin because of one letter written after the fact. I need more."

Catelyn shrugged her shoulders. "Everything I know comes from that letter. But there's also the small matter of her fleeing the capital as soon as Lord Arryn died, taking the boy with her. She must have been in fear of her life. How was she when you saw her last? Tell me truly."

Lyanna hesitated, automatically touching the place over her left eye where Lysa's nails had raked her flesh at the mere suggestion of Tywin fostering Little Robert. If anything, she thought it more likely that Lysa had gone to raise the Lords of the Vale to march on Casterly Rock, never mind fearing for her life. However, out of sensitivity for addressing Lysa's sister, she tried to be tactful.

"She was certainly out of sorts," she said.

"Ned told me about the eye," Catelyn stated. "People attack when they're afraid."

"True," Lyanna agreed. "But Lysa had been out of sorts for some time. Even before Jon's death. She was never happy in King's Landing."

Being of a similar age and as close to kin as could be through marriage, Lyanna had tried to befriend Lysa. Before Robert was born Lysa was in her household, they dined together and spent free time in each other's company. But beyond their husbands, they had little in common and they both gave up trying.

"When did this arrive?" she asked, handing the letter back.

Catelyn thought for a second. "The same day you arrived. Luwin handed it to me the morning after the feast."

"Once we're out from beneath your feet, Lady Stark, perhaps you could visit her and find out what's really happening," Lyanna suggested. "As it stands, there's little I can do."

"I should see her anyway," Catelyn agreed. "It's been altogether too long."

They turned to watch the sparring match that was still going on in the yard below. Robb was on his knees in the dirt, hands held up and yielding to Jon. Jon didn't hang around to savour his victory. He immediately lunged at Theon Greyjoy while kicking a third opponent into the side lines, ducking
neatly beneath the other boy’s blade as he did so. All in one graceful movement.

"Gods, he's good," she murmured. He wasn't bragging the other night, he was understating. Or just venting his pent up frustration out on the poor unfortunates meeting him in the sparring yard.

"Hmm," Catelyn replied.

Lyanna turned to look at Catelyn. She was still watching the scene below, a look of distaste on her face. There really was little effort to hide her contempt for the cuckoo in her nest.

"I heard about the altercation last night," she said. "Jon shouldn't have said those things."

Catelyn even flinched at the sound of his name. Almost imperceptible, but just enough to notice.

"Bastards suffer envy, they lie to compensate for their shortcomings," she said, curtly.

Lyanna's gaze flickered to where Jon had just knocked seven bells out of her son and was now making short work of Theon Greyjoy and another lad. "I am certain he has a lot to be, er, envious of."

"They can't help it," she said, making it sound like some deep concession to nature. "So, do you have any notion of why he decided to name you in particular as his mother?"

Lyanna sighed heavily. "I'll do what I can to help Lysa, Lady Stark. But I am not prepared to stand here and listen to you insulting Jon. He didn't just knock your son, as well as three older lads, into the dirt out of envy, he did it out of skill and talent. Talent we need in the capital and that's where I intend to take him."

Catelyn's body had stiffened, but she dared not argue back. "Take him wherever you want. He's certainly not welcome here."

"Let us give him the Stark name," she said. "Agree, then you'll never have to see him again."

Catelyn met her gaze, shrewd and calculating. "And if I disagree?"

"Why would you do that?" Lyanna asked, genuinely curious. Her brow creased, looking her sister by law up and down, taking her measurements and trying to figure her out. "Let me rephrase that, Lady Stark. Do you think Jon would pose some sort of threat to Robb?"

"Of course I do!" she retorted. "Give him the Stark name and what else will he want?"

"A chance to forge a new life in the capital, far from Winterfell," she replied. "He will be working for me. Listen, allow our Lord to give him the Stark name and I will have it written in as a precondition that Jon has no claim to any of Lord Stark's titles, lands or properties. If Jon tries to take it by force, he is guilty of rebelling against his rightful lord and will be dealt with accordingly."

She knows this would never happen. Lyanna herself knows it, the dogs skulking around the edge of the curtain walls know it. Still Catelyn looked as if she were chewing on a thistle.

"Make him swear it," she stated, plainly. "Make him swear fealty to my son, to never take up arms against him, he relinquishes all claims to the North, then you do it."

"He can't relinquish all claim to the North because he hasn't got one to begin with," Lyanna pointed out. "But you're not for moving, so I'll ask speak with him. If he agrees to these terms, I'll have Robert draw up a contract."
"If the boy doesn't agree, what will become of him?" Catelyn asked.

Lyanna shrugged. "That's up to him. But if you do this for him, he might just come to respect you. It's better than sending him off into the world harbouring a grudge against you. And by the looks of things, he will grow to be a formidable foe."

The sparring was done and a crowd had gathered. Robert stepped into the ring and gave Jon a hearty slap on the back that almost knocked him over. Only Lord Stark had stopped Jon's fall. Seeming not to have noticed, Robert was now in his element as he dished out advice to the boys, showing them stances and balancing a blade in his hands. Robert always preferred his hammer, but he was more than skilled with a sword too. She watched him now, as he joked with Robb and Ned. Jon, removing himself from the scene with stealth, watched darkly from the side lines. How easily he slipped away, an unnoticed afterthought quickly forgotten. It made her sad.

Eddard and Robert took up a blade each and the crowds parted with a great cheer. Lyanna turned to Catelyn, smiling brightly. "Come on, Cat. We can't stand around here being all serious when those two are about to make great lunks of themselves."

The corners of Lady Stark's mouth twitched. But she seemed determined not to see the funny side. "Ned will be honour bound to let Robert win."

"Oh, I don't know about that." Down below, the fight began in earnest.

Having been left aching all over from the sparring match, Jon let himself soak in the hot waters of Winterfell's large stone baths. Motionless and weightless in the perfumed waters, he let himself languish there. For once, there was no one else around. Everyone else was preparing for the night's royal banquet. Just a few more days of this and the court would be leaving again. Arya and Sansa would be going, too. Bran to follow in a year. Then there was him.

Jon let his body go limp so that he'd sink beneath the surface of the water. Winterfell was the only home he had ever known. He knew he had been born in the south, and he realised then that he'd never even considered the possibility of going back there. He would never see the Red Mountains of Dorne, or King's Landing, or Braavos, or the Mountains of the Moon… so many places he would never go. Now the world had opened up to him, revealing a jewel there for the taking.

He broke the surface of the water again, blinking rapidly to clear his blurred vision. His skin was now mottled and pink, as wrinkled as Old Nan. As he got his breath back, he thought of the future and realised he was going south with his mother. His feet found the bottom of the stone bath and he stood upright with a sense of purpose far greater than the action required. He was going south and he was going to make something of himself. He didn't yet know what. But it would be something.

Once dried off and dressed in clean clothes, he set off back into the castle with a renewed sense of purpose. Passing down galleries and corridors he had roamed since infancy, he began to wonder when exactly the royal party was leaving. How long did he have left to make his goodbyes? They'd all only arrived a few days ago, but they wouldn't be stopping long. A week or two, at most. It didn't seem long to make so many farewells.

"Jon!"

Lyanna's voice stopped him in his tracks as he headed across the yard toward the common hall. He turned to watch as she strode toward him with a rolled up parchment in her hands. She brandished it at him like an assassin's dagger.
"Here," she said. "I wrangled this out of Lady Stark."

Jon took the parchment, breaking the royal seal with a sharp snap. "What is it?"

She nodded toward it, urging him to read for himself. He read it through once, oblivious to the small snowfall that had started all around him. Some of the flakes landed on the page, blurring the words where the ink on his decree of legitimisation had barely dried. It didn't seem real, it didn't even seem possible.

"Is it real?" he asked, looking up at her.

Snow was melting in her dark brown hair, her smile fading somewhat and he realised there was a clause attached. "All you have to do is swear fealty to Robb and swear never to take up arms against him."

Was that all? Jon almost laughed with relief. "Robb knows I would never do that. But if Lady Stark requires this bit of theatre, I will let her have it."

"And she has said she never wants to see you back in Winterfell again," she added. "But, Jon, it's meaningless. Whatever else she is, Catelyn Tully is not Warden of the North or Lord of Winterfell. If Robb says you may return, you may return."

Even this empty demonstration of how much Catelyn resented him came like a kick in the gut. He almost recoiled from it. She always had a way of sucking out whatever joy he could glean from a situation. Only now, it angered him where once it would have hurt him.

"Does Robb have the backbone to stand up to her?" asked Lyanna.

"I think he does," replied Jon. "And I wouldn't want to come back to Winterfell while she's still here, anyway. Thrice damn her!"

He gave himself a moment to seethe, during which Lyanna reached out and tucked a lock of still wet hair behind his ear. It was a tender gesture that took him strangely by surprise.

"Come inside before you catch your death, child," she said. "It's almost time to eat-"

"Wait," he cut in. "There's something I need to tell you. I want to come with you. I want to come south with you, to King's Landing. Does your offer still stand?"

Lyanna breathed a sigh of what he hoped was relief, running a gloved hand through her hair. "Of course it still stands. Come here."

Smiling brightly, she pulled him into a hug and squeezed him surprisingly tightly. She held him the way Catelyn held her children, letting the embrace linger. Reluctantly at first, he returned the hug, almost self-conscious of it. But she was his mother, he realised. He was somebody's son. Some mother's son. It felt good.

Lyanna was still smiling when they drew apart and she led him toward the common hall, where supper was being served. Already, the sun was going down on another day. Now that he had committed himself to this course of action, he felt a wide open space appearing ahead of him. A space he had to fill and, all of a sudden, he had no idea what to fill it with. What he'd told himself in the bath had seemed like a solid plan. Now it seemed as flimsy as gossamer thread. If the last few days had taught him anything, it was that anything could happen. And it probably would.

"Where do we go from here?" he asked, stopping her just short of the common hall.
For a brief moment, she seemed puzzled by the question. "You and I have a lot of catching up to do. No, more than that. You and I need to get to know each other. We are perfect strangers and, soon enough, we'll have a thousand miles to travel. You and I could go farther than that, though."

Jon smiled at the notion of it. The realm was huge and vast, stretching out all around him in every direction. Like the realms of possibility, it went on forever. And, that evening, Winterfell felt small.

They sat at the high table together, where Robb and Lord and Lady Stark were already seated. For the first time in his life, he ignored Catelyn with ease. It was really quite simple, because she no longer mattered. When the others had gone, and it was just him and the Starks left in the hall, he drew a sword and laid it at his brother's feet. Robb blushed and shot furious looks at his mother while Jon said some words. Words are wind, and like all winds this passed through the hall and barely made a ruffle.

Back straight, head held high, Jon rose to his feet as a legitimised Stark.
Feeling like he was poised at an impossible angle on the precipice of a new life, Jon was impatient to get going. However, his mother insisted on staying long enough to visit one or two old friends she remembered from her youth and touring outlying villages with Robert at her side. Something about letting the people know their king and queen had not forgotten them. Although Jon didn't doubt that it was all very significant and meaningful for the smallfolk to be blessed with the touch of a royal hand, he was itching to begin the long southward journey. It was all he could do not to wake up every morning and ask: "are you done yet?"

While his decision to go south had come from a place of great uncertainty, now that his mind had been made up, it remained steadfast. Several days later, he still remembered the look on the Queen's face as he told her. It made him feel like someone wanted him. He had told Arya and she had leapt up several feet in the air and wrapped her arms around his neck, her face buried in his shoulder. Although he ordered the little rapier sword for her when he thought they'd be saying goodbye to each other, he gave her the gift anyway. Then he told Sansa who, bizarrely, curtsied. "She's practising for when she's serving the Queen," Jeyne Poole coolly informed him, in case he was getting ideas above his station. She wore the look of disapproval on her face that Sansa dared not show.

"So, you're leaving us then?" said Robb as they caught up with each other in the castle forecourt. He had just returned from a hunt in the nearby woods.

"I'm not leaving anybody," he retorted. "That implies I'm never coming back."

Robb smiled easily. "I'm glad to hear that." Throwing an arm around Jon's shoulders, Robb steered him around the back of the stables, away from listening ears. "My mother has little say in what goes on here while I am acting Lord. You know you can return whenever you want, don't you?"

He didn't intend on returning any time soon. All the same, having the safety net of Winterfell there to catch any falls felt good.

"I'll miss you anyway," he said, in a moment of frank honesty. All the same, he tried to sound stoical.

Robb was still smiling, snowflakes melting in his hair. "And I, you. Take care down in the capital."

Jon gave his word before they went their separate ways. And when the final day of the royal visit came, the first of the last-minute nerves finally kicked in. He knew they would, he was prepared for them. They came as the sunset on his final day in Winterfell and Ghost snored softly by the hearth fire in his room.

He was packing all his belongings into a strongbox, folding clothes more than was necessary and tucking inconsequential items into the corners. He found a toy soldier Lyanna had sent to him for his sixth name day and decided to leave it behind for Rickon. A decision that, seemingly randomly, brought it home to him that he was leaving. A bittersweet sensation that tinged hope for the future with a sepia longing for the past.

Sitting down on the edge of his bed, he looked around the small room that had been his since he was first brought to Winterfell. He knew every mark and crack in the stones, he knew the rusty hinged shutter that creaked in the storms. All the small details he never even bothered to fully notice until he was preparing to leave for the final time. He put down the toy soldier and opened the window to look down on the darkening yard one more time and up at the Ice Dragon, it's starry snout pointing
the way to the wall. Maester Luwin would be in his turret by now, watching the night sky through
the eye of a Myrish lens. He thought to join the Maester for one final time, before a knock at the door
dashed his hopes.

Closing the window first, he opened the door to find his mother on the other side, dressed every inch
the Queen in a full-length cloak of blue velvet, ermine trimmed and jewels glittering at her throat.
Her final night in Winterfell was being marked with another banquet, but few hearts were really in it.
She carried something wrapped in heavy roughspun sacking cloth.

"You don't mind if I come in, do you?" she asked.

He stepped aside to allow her entry. "Of course not."

He hurried to move the strongbox in case she tripped over it as she made her way to his bed. On the
bed, she dropped the object she was carrying and sat down beside it, gesturing for him to sit beside
her.

"How do you feel about leaving tomorrow?" she asked.

She made no reference to her large, long package and Jon would feel rude to ask. So, he cast another
sidelong look at it and proceeded to ignore it as his mother now did. Anyway, it was probably just
something for the feast.

"Happy and sad," he replied, "in equal measure."

Lyanna smiled knowingly. "It's bound to happen and you'll miss the place to the point of distraction
once you get to King's Landing."

"The journey will be an adventure, though," he said. In fact, he thought he might be looking forward
to the long journey more than actually getting to the Red Keep. A thousand miles across country,
through the North, the Neck, the Riverlands and Crownlands. They'd even pass through the foothills
of the Mountains of the Moon, if they strayed a little from the King's Road as soon as they reached
the Riverlands. He'd already studied maps in Maester Luwin's chambers, tracking the route himself
with fluttering excitement. "I didn't think I'd get to see any of it. Although, I suppose I must have
come that way from Dorne. I was born in Dorne, wasn't I?"

Lyanna nodded. "You were indeed. The Red Mountains, to be exact. But we came back by sea. The
most exciting part of that journey was White Harbour to Winterfell, I'm afraid."

He wasn't planning on re-enacting that route, anyway. It just felt odd to him that he was born so far
away, yet the snow and ice of the North was all he had ever known.

"As for the journey to King's Landing," Lyanna continued. "It's long, tiring and, I fear, not nearly as
exciting as you're imagining. The baggage train moves at the pace of a snail and, if the weather turns
against us, we could have to hole up in some castle and by way-laid for weeks."

She spoke with the enthusiasm of someone who had travelled the realm a hundred times over and
done it all to death. Jon found himself immune to her world-weary cynicism. Even so, she was
smiling happily enough.

"Forgive me," she said, realising how she sounded. "It's your first time and I grow so old now I
forget what it was like when I was first let off the leash. But, take my advice, don't hang around
waiting for us in the main train. Get a good horse and take off with your friends to explore."

With the exception of Arya, all his friends were staying behind at Winterfell. Another fact that came
home to him at the last minute, making him sad again.

"I'd come with you myself," Lyanna added, noting the look on his face. "But I don't suppose you want your mother hanging around."

"Yes, I do," he cut in. "You're the reason I'm coming south in the first place, after all. I didn't ask because I thought you might be too busy Queening to come with Arya and me."

She looked genuinely surprised. A happy sort of surprised, to his gratification. However, she seemed to be weighing up her next words carefully.

"You've never known me," she said. "Or, at least, you've never known who I am in relation to you. But I've always known you. Ten years ago, I didn't go riding out of the gates of this castle and forget all about you. I've always been acutely aware of the fact that you've been growing up in Winterfell, missing out on just about everything going on in your life. So, with that in mind, I hope you understand that I'll never be too busy – as you put it – 'Queening' for you. I'll never be too busy doing anything, for you. Whatever you want, or need, or if you just want me there, tell me and I'll make sure I'm there. You know that, don't you?"

Jon could feel the colour rising in his face, causing him to look away for a moment. However, he managed to nod an answer of sorts. Lyanna glanced toward the door, making sure it was closed so she wasn't embarrassing him, then gathered him up and kissed his forehead. For a moment, he didn't want to let go and squeezed her back. When they separated again, he noticed the tears standing in her eyes.

"Don't cry," he said, reached for a scrap of a handkerchief he had on his night stand. He handed it to her, looking worried. "Now that everything's out in the open, everything will be different."

She was the one blushing now, but then gave a start as if she had forgotten something important. "Gods, Jon. That's not even the reason I came here." She reached for the thing wrapped in the sacking cloth and hauled it into her lap. "I have a gift for you. It's not much, it's not even all that fancy. But I thought you might like it."

A present; he was sure he'd love it whatever it was. He took it from her, surprised by its weight and his mind racing as he guessed what it was. It felt like a sword and he had a feeling it was no blunted tourney sword. It had to be unrolled from the cloth, where a fine pale weirwood scabbard was revealed, the direwolf of House Stark carved intricately into it. The pommel was a stone white direwolf, two chips of rubies to make the eyes. He drew the blade, listening to the whisper of steel against leather. It was fine, castle-forged steel, newly worked.

"It's perfect," he said. "Thank you."

"It was your father's," she said. "I mean, it was Rhaegar's."

Jon's heart jolted, he almost dropped the sword.

"The blade was reforged to remove the dragon sigil," she continued. "I mean, the blade needed to be reworked anyway because it was so old. The pommel was a bit too Targaryen as well, so that's been replaced with the wolf. It's meant to look like Ghost, but the rubies used in the eyes came from one of the stones that Rhaegar had. It was sent to me in Dorne, to prove that he was dead. And the scabbard's completely new, as well. The old one was rotted and tatty, and emblazoned with the three-headed dragon anyway. But the blade is the same. It's essentially your father's old sword."

Jon barely touched the edge of the blade with the pad of his thumb, drawing a thin line of blood. It
was fantastically sharp. He turned it over carefully, admiring the ripples in the deep grey steel. Essentially Rhaegar's, but with all traces of Rhaegar methodically removed. His blood father had been erased; he was a non-person. It saddened him in a way that took him by surprise. Of course, there was no question of him wandering around with a sword embossed with a three-headed dragon. Everyone knew what that sigil was, what it represented. All the same, the tragedy of the Targaryens sharpened in his mind, it took on a new resonance and slowly began to feel personal. He may be stepping out into the light, but that side of him would be forever shrouded in silence and shadow.

"Thank you," he said again, sheathing the blade and holding it close. "Did you keep the original scabbard and pommel?"

"Yes, but it's old and tatty-"

"I know," he cut in. "But still – unless you want it – I'd like it. It was … his."

"They'll be in Mikken's forge, so run and get them before he bins them," she replied. "And it goes without saying, keep them hidden. Bury them in your strongbox. And, when you see Mikken, the story is I found that old blade back at the Red Keep and decided to have it polished up for you."

Of course, there would be a cover story as to why Lyanna wanted to gift a sword to Jon, especially that sword in particular. Nothing could be left to chance, even with the people they trusted. Still, she inspired in him a thoughtful question.

"If you had Mikken rework the blade for me," he said. "Where were you hiding this sword for all that time?"

"Down in the crypts," she answered. "Your father dug it up again the night before Robert and I arrived."

Jon almost laughed. "I saw him that night. I had been up on the north tower because Maester Luwin lets me use his Myrish lens to look at the stars. I was coming back late and I ran into father there, I offered to help him but he sent me to bed and watched me until I was indoors."

He remembered it well because he never could shake the feeling Lord Stark had been caught in the middle of something and was just waiting for him to clear off before getting back to whatever he was up to. He had never seen the man like that before. Furtive. Almost suspicious. Well, that answered it.

"Poor Eddard," she sighed. "I know how it must look, but I know as well that lying to you and his family about you would have been the worst thing in the world to him. He was the one who saved that sword for you."

Jon frowned. "Did he know all along?"

Lyanna hesitated before answering. "Not quite. But a friend of his told him what was going on. But the sword… Robert wanted Rhaegar's sword melted down and added to the iron throne. But, after the Trident, Robert was badly injured – Rhaegar gave him a good fight and people forget that. Anyway, he was too badly injured to ride straight to King's Landing. So, he gave the sword to Eddard, where he was supposed to have it smelted. Ned arrived with the main army, in time for the Sack of King's Landing and he found an old friend of his surrounded by crazed, drunken soldiers. He fought them off – slew them in all likelihood – and saved his friend's life. He then gave your father's sword to his friend – so they could defend themselves - and smuggled them out of the city and safely to a ship. Then, when Eddard arrived at the Tower of Joy to get me and you, he saw his old friend again and they returned your father's sword to him, telling him to keep it safe for you."
Jon was amazed. Lord Stark rarely spoke of the days of the rebellion. Almost all of the stories he had heard, like this one, came to him second hand. But it still astonished him that he had never heard of this.

"Who was the friend?" he asked, itching with curiosity.

"Someone he knew," she replied, pointedly.

"I guessed that bit," he retorted. "And they know about me. You said they told father to keep the sword safe for me."

"This friend is dead now anyway, Jon," she assured him. "Please, don't say anything to Lord Stark. For him, this is all part of a painful past."

Reluctantly, Jon backed down. "Sorry, I was just curious. You kept saying 'they' and 'them' instead of 'he' or 'she'. So, was it a lady?"

"Jon," she said, a note of warning in her voice. "That's enough. Whatever secrets Eddard has, they're not mine to tell or yours to know."

Abashed, he backed down the final step of the conversation and piped down. Since the truth of his mother came out, he had thought Lord Stark had never cheated on Catelyn at all. Now he was second guessing himself again. But, Lyanna was right and, even if he had a secret lover after all, it was nothing to do with Jon and no longer his secret to know.

"I can't help but wonder what happened back there," he said. "Even more, now."

Lyanna cupped his face in her hands and kissed his nose. "I know. But, for now at least, live in the present long enough to come and sup with us in the common hall."

She had a point; he was famished. He agreed with a nod. "But I'll follow you down in a minute or two."

After showing her out, he returned to his father's sword. Unsheathing it fully, he let the tapering blade catch the small candlelight. No, it was no mere blunted tourney sword. All he could hope for was better luck than its previous owner.

The closing night banquet was a subdued affair. Lyanna took her place at the high table, beside her brother and left Robert chatting to Catelyn. Meanwhile, through the hall before her, she could see the household and children and many of the hangers on all making light work of what the kitchens of Winterfell had laid out before them. She helped herself to a little of the simpler foods. Chicken slices and a crisp white wine.

As promised, Jon appeared not long after she did. He was peering nervously around the doors of the hall before entering properly. She tried to catch his eye, but he crossed the room and immediately struck up conversation with his uncle, Benjen.

"Did you give him the sword?" asked Eddard.

"Aye, I did indeed," she answered. "Which is just as well, seeing as Robert noticed him the other day."

It was during the sparring match that she mostly missed because she was talking to Lady Stark. Jon had taken on several opponents and ended up drawing a large crowd of spectators as he knocked
them out, one by one. Robert had been among the avid watchers, growing increasingly impressed by the boy's prowess.

"I'm not surprised," said Eddard, wiping his fingers on a towel before reaching for the wine. "He's fourteen and one of the best swordsmen I've seen. It's not just bias either. He can run rings around Robb and I don't admit that to just anyone."

Lyanna understood that she was to repeat that particular sentiment to no one. "Robert and I have a trainer in mind."

"Can you say who?"

"We're waiting on a reply. But if he agrees, Jon could do no better anywhere in the realm."

Ned smiled knowingly. "I think I can hazard a guess."

He gave her time to eat before continuing their conversation. Between bites, she glanced along the hall and noting who was around. Sansa was talking to her friend, Jeyne. Robb and the Greyjoy boy were deep in conversation, while Jon and Benjen still had their heads together in the aisle. Jaime Lannister strolled idly between the tables, stopped abruptly as if he had sensed her looking at him, he met her gaze. A flash of emerald green through the haze of woodfire smoke that misted the hall. He soon became distracted by his Kingsguard brother, Meryn Trant.

While she finished her chicken, she mulled over what Catelyn had said to her on the day of the spar. That the Lannisters were involved in the death of Jon Arryn. Even if they weren't involved, someone had put it into Lysa's head that they were. Whoever it was, if they were lying, they were stirring up trouble and she liked it not.

"Are you still worried about the rose?"

The sound of Eddard's voice snapped her out of her reverie.

"I can't decide whether I should be or not," she replied. "As you said, it was probably just someone playing a joke."

Eddard looked troubled. "But why would someone do that? It's not something people jest about."

While he spoke, she watched as Jon made his way to the high table only to be intercepted by Jaime Lannister. She couldn't imagine what they had to talk about, but talking they were.

"I'm wary of overreacting," she said, elaborating on her earlier reply. "If I lose my wits over it, it'll make the incident into something bigger than it is. Ignoring it will choke the air from any rumour that might come of it."

There never had been rumours, which surprised her. No one ever said anything. It was as if the whole rebellion had simply never happened and the sequence of events that led to it had been all but erased. That, of course, didn't mean no one knew.

"Gods, Lya, you're not letting Jaime Lannister train Jon, are you?" he asked, abruptly changing the subject.

She followed the line of his sight to where Jaime and Jon were still talking by the side of the hall. Lannister was showing Jon his sword, gesturing at some point on the blade and talking animatedly. Jon was nodding in agreement at regular intervals. The poor boy just wanted his dinner.
"Don't be silly, Ned," she retorted. "Anyway, it's your last night at home. Why not just relax and enjoy yourself? Stop worrying, even if only for a night."

She set down her knife and topped up his wine glass, emphasising the point. It would be difficult for him to leave his home, she knew that. He was the unexpected Lord of Winterfell, striving every day to fill a role that was never meant for him. As was often the case in such instances, the hard work put into proving himself capable paid off. The people of the North loved him, it was evident all around her. Now the largest kingdom was being left in the hands of an untested boy of fourteen.

She found her nephew still at table with Theon Greyjoy. Jon told her they were as close as brothers, or as near as can be in the absence of blood ties. It sat badly with her, although Theon seemed pleasant enough. A little fond of looking down on people, but that was to be expected. But there was one thing she was curious about.

"Had Balon rebelled again, would you have done it?" she asked, glancing at Ned. "Executed Theon, I mean."

"I guessed your meaning, sister," he replied. Then he hesitated, weighing up his words. "And … if Balon had rebelled … I would have had no choice. It would be my King's command."

"And if Balon does rebel again, do you think Robb would do it?" she asked, glancing back to where the two boys still talked.

She thought she knew the answer already.

To her relief, so did Ned.

"I wouldn't ask him to. I would return home myself."

It was still dark outside when Jon was roused from his sleep. Offended by the intrusion, he moaned and tried to roll over. The intruder was persistent, but gentle. "Jon, wake up. It's time to go."

At least Lyanna sounded apologetic. She also left the lantern she carried on his night stand before exiting the room. After all the build-up of the last week or so, the end came swiftly. Reluctantly, he dragged himself out of bed and pulled on the same clothes he had worn the day before. Everything else had been packed away and he wanted the clean clothes for later on in the journey, when conditions inevitably became more desperate.

Ten minutes later, his father was at the door, making sure he hadn't simply rolled over and gone back to sleep. When the door opened, he heard the sound of voices in the passageways beyond. It seemed everyone was struggling with the early start.

"Are you ready?" Lord Stark asked.

Fully awake now, Jon nodded. "I'm ready."

He reached for the strongbox, his father taking up the other end, and together they hauled it out to the baggage train outside. Already the horses were harnessed and the mules laden with bags and packs. The first of the outriders already riding through the gates, clearing the roads ahead for the royal procession. All around Jon the dogs barked and the guards and men shouted to one another over the racket. Above him, it was still dark and the stars still shone, the ice dragon out to see him on his way.

Even their breakfast was to be had on the road. Cold bacon and hard bread with a bit of cheese. Jon wrapped his own in a clean cloth, saving it for later after tossing some salted beef to Ghost. He said
his final goodbyes to Robb, Bran and Rickon, and all the other people he knew would be staying behind. And, by the time they were mounting up to leave, the first traces of dawn broke over the horizon.

Once he'd seen to it that Sansa and Arya were safely inside the wheel house, Jon and Ghost hopped up on the back of a luggage cart. He'd mount up later, but for now his horse could trot alongside them. As the horns sounded, calling all to the gates of the castle, he watched as Lord and Lady Stark locked lips, kissing each other goodbye. When they broke apart, Catelyn turned to look at him, watching as his luggage cart trundled over the cobblestones. He met her gaze easily, refusing to flinch until she was gone from sight and the castle with her.
Maester Luwin once told Jon that the North was larger than the six other kingdoms put together. It was a fact embedded in his head since before he could even remember. But it wasn't until he crossed that land on a slow-moving baggage train that he began to understand how vast it was. Two full weeks after leaving Winterfell and they made it only as far as Barrowton. Which was still in the North. Two more weeks after that, a whole turn of the moon since they left Winterfell, they had made it to the Neck.

The inhospitable terrain, the patchy weather and the cramped retinue which saw hundreds of people all shoved together made tempers flare. Arya and Sansa did nothing but squabble and Jon spent most nights pretending to be asleep just so he'd be left out of it. His father and King Robert made the most of it by taking their hawks out hunting and his mother was never happier than when she was racing her horses across the open country. Occasionally, Jon joined her. But he was no match for her skilled horsemanship and she left him in the dust.

As they passed through the Neck, and the swampy marshlands seemed to close in around them, Jon decided it was time he and Arya got away from the procession. With Ghost and Nymeria at their heels, they ducked between the trees and played stepping stones across streams and rivers, trying to shove each other into the water as they went. Jon easily defended himself against Arya's lively, but feeble, attacks.

Even though they left the procession and lost sight of the carts, Jon was careful not pass out of earshot of them. The Neck was dangerous and had done for the Andals and the Iron Born alike. Crannogmen lurked in the shadows, poison darts at the ready. Once, they even saw the snout of a lizard lion poking above the surface of a still river. Arya wanted to feed it, until he informed her that the only thing the lizard lion would be interested in eating was skinny Northern girls who strayed into its waters. They decided to go play their stepping stones games elsewhere.

He was a little old for it, but seeing Arya so happy made him happy too, so he gladly indulged her. Everything was a delight to her. Every ten minutes, it seemed, she was pointing to something new that she wanted to look at. And that day, as they passed south of the Neck, was no different.

"Jon, look at these!"

She was already picking the flowers she had spotted. Bright purple blooms, growing in clumps around the banks of the marshes.

"I'm getting some for father and you get some for Aunt Lyanna, she loves you the best."

Jon, up to his knees in swamp water, pulled up sharply. "What makes you say that?"

Arya already had an armful of the purple flowers, her lip trembling as if she'd said something wrong but didn't understand why.

"I don't know. I just thought she did."

"Well she doesn't. She loves us all the same because we're her family."

"Sorry, Jon. I didn't mean it in a bad way."

Guilt was on him immediately, he hadn't meant to be prickly with her. So much so he scrambled out of the river, pulling the fishnet he had with him, dismayed to find it empty. Once on land, he
immediately began helping her to gather some of the flowers. As well as the purple ones, he found some snapdragons and dragon's breath growing near the bases of various trees.

"I didn't mean to snap, Arya," he said, helping with the harvest. "But, how about we find some flowers that Sansa might like as well?"

She pulled a face in reply.

He wished he could tell her everything, about why he couldn't be seen showing favour to the Queen. But she was so young and so wild that she wouldn't understand the importance of secrecy. To her, the whole world was an adventure ground and he wanted to keep it that way for her. He wouldn't let reality suck the joy from her life just yet.

In the meantime, Arya was scratching at herself irritably. They both wore breeches cut off just above the knees, and he could see a rash forming on her lower legs now. Not long after, his own skin began to prickle unpleasantly, everywhere it had come into contact with some of the flowers he'd pulled up. It itched like crazy, but when he scratched it, it burned horribly and soon turned a livid red colour. It was on his bare arms and his legs, even his nose, irritating beyond belief and getting worse.

"It hurts," Arya said, still clutching her flowers. "Are they poisonous? Will we die now?"

He didn't think the situation to be quite that dire, but the itching was driving him half mad. "Come on, little sister. I think the King and Queen have a maester in their retinue."

Still clutching the floral prime suspect, Jon did something he had never before done in his life. He went running to his mother, just like all the others did when they had bumps and scrapes.

"For what it's worth, Robert, I agree with Ned." Lyanna looked at her husband, sitting opposite her in the wheelhouse. Beside her, Ned fidgeted with his new Hand pin badge. "It's not like the Dothraki can train horses to run on water."

"Exactly what I said, sister," Ned chimed in.

Robert looked far from mollified. He reclined into his seat, wrapping his furs around him so looked like a great, shaggy bear. Meanwhile, the speed of the wheelhouse reduced from snail pace to completely stationary. They must have hit another obstacle in the road that the outriders somehow managed to miss.

"And this is all coming from a condemned traitor," Eddard continued, ill-disguising his irritation. "Jorah Mormont is hardly to be trusted. A slaver and a sellsword devoid of honour, reduced to selling the secrets of an exiled Targaryen. I like it not at all."

"It's not her I'm worried about, it's her fool brother. Why else would he sell his own sister to a savage if not for the promise of an army?" Robert looked at them both in turn. "And what if she births this savage a son?"

Whatever reply Eddard had was cut off by the wheelhouse door opening, revealing an apologetic looking steward in the King's livery.

"Pardon me, your grace," he said to Lyanna and Ned. "But your niece and nephew…"

No more needed to be said as Jon and Arya appeared over the man's shoulder, scratching at nasty looking rashes on their arms and legs. They were a sorry sight, wet and mud stained from running around the Neck. Even Robert had grown curious and was now leaning to the side to see past
"We think it was these ones," Jon said, holding up a purple flower she knew well enough. "Arya wanted some for father and I helped. Now this!"

Her son looked so pitiful she couldn't be mad at him if she tried. "Children, they're poison kisses. Put them down immediately … Oh, Arya, child. You're covered. And you, Jon. Gods! What are we to do with you both?"

Robert roared with laughter while Ned buried his face in his hands. He looked up after a second, giving his sister a rueful smile. He wore the weary look of a man who had been here a hundred times before. At least Robert had cheered up.

"Do you know what to do?" Ned asked, sighing mightily.

Lyanna nodded. "It won't be pretty."

"Do what you must."

Robert was still laughing.

Minutes later and Lyanna had kicked off her heeled shoes and progressed barefoot through the trees, toward the nearest river. Please don't let these be lizard lions, she prayed silently to herself. Behind her, Jon and Arya followed in deep discomfort. She drew to a halt beside the river's edge and looked back at them both, still itching at their arms. It was enough to melt the stoniest of hearts.

"I know it's bad, but you need to stop scratching," she implored them both. "It'll only get worse."

Exercising a little more self-restrain than his sister, Jon looked from Lyanna to the river and back again. He looked worried.

"What are you going to do?"

She was lucky she changed her finery for a simple woollen dress. But she wore her Queen's jewels every day and had forgotten they were even there. As such, bedecked in diamonds and rubies and glittering garnets of varying degrees of exquisiteness, she waded out into the river and sunk her hands into the waters.

"There's only one thing I know that will rid you of the Poison Kiss's sting," she said, scooping up a handful of wet river mud. "This."

She held up the wet, dripping mud for them to see and noted the look of intense dismay on her son's face. Arya, by contrast, grinned from ear to ear.

"Arya first," she said. "Come on, child, hold out your arms."

As far as mud went, it would be clean enough and not tainted with horse shit and the gods know what else. It was cool to soothe the itching and some swore it actually kept skin looking young. Lyanna had to remind herself of that as she plunged her hands back into the freezing waters, gathering up handful after handful of thick, sloppy mud to smear on the children's limbs. She was even still wearing her ring, the same one noblemen kissed by way of formal greeting. Only now, mud slipped and slid between the gems, dripping off the sharp edges. It was probably cleaner now than it had ever been.

"Leave it on for an hour or so, then wash it off," she advised as she put the finishing touches to Jon.

Lyanna.
He'd gotten skinnier since leaving Winterfell, she noted. "You'll have that rash for a day or so, but it won't itch anymore."

Although smeared in river filth, they both looked a lot happier. No more itching, just sheer relief. Her job was done, so long as they had the patience to wait an hour. Not that she could blame them. She had been exactly the same at Arya's age. All bumps and bruises and rashes from picking all the wrong flowers. Looking at her niece was like looking back in time.

"Sorry about your dress," said Jon, now sat on the riverbank.

Lyanna rinsed her hands in the cool waters. It actually felt good to have that water cold and crisp against her bare skin. But her skirts had soaked up what felt like half the river and the wet wool weighed her down as she waded ashore again.

"Nothing of it, child," she replied. "Just, keep an eye on your sister."

Arya was already off again, climbing the lower branches of a nearby tree. Jon got her in his line of sight and smiled. When he looked back at her, he had turned serious again.

"Are the Dothraki going to invade, or something?"

Lyanna began to wonder just how long he had been waiting outside that wheelhouse. "No, of course not. They never cross the sea."

"But why is the King worried about it?"

"He's not," she assured him. "It's nothing, Jon. Now watch your sister and come back to the train once you're done. It's getting late."

She ruffled his damp hair as she passed, feeling him watching her as she went. In truth, it worried her that Daenerys Targaryen was wed to a horse lord across the Narrow Sea. Not because of any potential threat of invasion. But for her sake. It was an odd match, by anyone's estimates.

Late that evening, she and Eddard walked the perimeter of their expansive camp. They were almost out of the Neck now and just about entering the Northern Riverlands. A few more miles down the road, the Twins sat straddling the Green Fork. But Robert had made the decision to not bother going that little bit farther. His reasoning being that the Frey's made up about twenty-five per cent of the entire population of Westeros as it was and room for their retinue in either of those towers was probably out of the question. After a moment, Lyanna had agreed with him.

"So, how did you find being a mother?" Eddard laughed as he asked.

"Wonderful," she replied, smiling brightly. "That's what it's all about it, isn't it? Tending them when they're hurt, or sick, or afraid. So I got a little dirty in the process? It was worth it to see them both all smiles again afterwards."

"And it worked. I checked up on them earlier and they're all sound asleep in their beds," he assured her.

"Jon overheard us talking about the Dothraki," she said. "At least he's not up worrying about that. He seemed to think an invasion of screamers was imminent."

Ned sighed. "Gods, Lya. That's all we need, for the children to start worrying as well. Does he know it's his aunt that's married the Khal?"
Lyanna shrugged. "He didn't ask, so I didn't say anything. But, Ned, what if Robert's right? It pains me that we've worked secretly to keep that girl safe just to see her married off to some brute. Whose bright idea was that? And if her brother, who is supposed to be as mad as his father, brings them over here-"

"We'll kick them straight back into the sea again," Ned cut over her, an air of finality in his tone. "Anyway, it won't happen. Their fighters don't even wear armour. Their Khal will be killed and Daenerys will be packed off to that Dosh Khaleen to live out her days among the widows of Vaes Dothrak."

_A fate worse than death_, she thought to herself.

Once in the Riverlands properly, Jon really felt that had arrived somewhere completely different. He noticed how green the fields were, how they were heavy with a late summer harvest. He enjoyed the wide, fast flowing rivers that dissected the land and laughed aloud with everyone else as the Queen charged her courser right through one for a bet with the King. Although soaked to the skin, she cost King Robert ten gold dragons. After one of their stops, Arya seemed to have struck up a friendship with a young butcher's apprentice and that kept her out of Sansa's hair which led to less squabbling. It also meant he was free from having to entertain her constantly.

On a clear day, if he looked to the west from high ground, he could see the distant peaks of the Mountains of the Moon. Snow-capped, even in the late summer, they looked vast and spectacular. More accustomed to the constant cold of the North, he found the Riverlands milder too. One afternoon he, Arya and Sansa were poled down a river by a boatman and the rays of the sun had been warm and tender on their skin.

"If we climb up that hill will we see Riverrun?" asked Sansa, standing on the prow of the barge. "That's where Mother was born."

They were miles away from Riverrun, but Jon broke it to her gently.

The Green Fork flowed into the Trident, which they reached a week after their arrival in the Riverlands. The procession crammed into Castle Darry, situated close to where all the major rivers met. Close to the spot where Jon knew his blood father's life had come to an abrupt end, months before he was born.

His earlier good mood faded somewhat as he ventured to the battlements of Castle Darry to look out over the land. He didn't know the exact spot, it all looked the same to him. Just wide, fast flowing rivers dissecting the green fields as far as the eye could see. He wondered, for a moment, if those were the broken and melted towers of Harrenhal he could see in the farthest distance. But he supposed not. It was probably just some other castle that got in the way of a war.

After moments of quiet contemplation up on the battlements, he rejoined his family gathering in the main keep. It was not a large castle and it was now crowded Lyanna and Robert's households. Trestle tables were set up in the small common hall, for use of the Starks and Baratheons, as well as their hosts.

It was growing late by the time they settled in. The food provided was a simple stew and fresh baked bread, but Jon wasn't complaining. He ate quickly, grateful to be back inside solid stone walls with any hot food at all. He sat with his sisters, close to the front of the hall, while his father and the King and Queen dined alongside the Darry women behind him, at the high table.

"Tomorrow, I'm going looking for rubies in the ruby ford," Arya declared, breaking up a bread roll
as if she was cracking a skull. "Do you want to come, Jon? I heard there's loads in there. Maybe we can find one for the Queen? She would like that after what he did to her."

The breath caught in Jon's throat as he went to shut down this conversation. Unfortunately, Sansa got there first after breaking off her chatter with Jeyne Poole. She fixed Arya with a withering look.

"Don't be so stupid, Arya. Of course there's no rubies left in the Trident. Why do you keep saying such stupid things?"

"Because that's where father and King Robert killed Prince Rhaegar, you stupid!" Arya shot back, angrily. "Everyone knows his rubies fell off and now I want to go and look for them."

"Oh, and as if no one's ever done that before in the last fourteen years, lackwit!"

"I don't care, I'm going anyway!"

Jon was aware of the silence descending over the hall as Arya grew louder in her anger. He tried to gently intervene, to quieten her without inflaming the situation. But now Sansa had been rankled too and wasn't about to take matters lying down.

"Arya, they're long gone," she tried to reason. "The Prince died years ago, so don't make a fool of yourself-"

"Both of you stop!" Jon cut in. "Now. Leave it."

"But I only want to see if I can find Prince Rhaegar's rubies," Arya protested. "It's not like he wants them anymore, is it?"

Even Jeyne looked increasingly uncomfortable. "Did Rhaegar really die here? He was really evil, wasn't he? What if his ghost still haunts this place-"

"Oh, shut up!" Arya snapped.

Jon wished he were invisible. "Arya, we'll go and look tomorrow. Now can we please stop talking about this."

"She started it!" Sansa gestured to Arya.

"I did not!" Arya shot back.

Stricken now, Jon looked over his shoulder at the high table. He breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of his father hurrying down the steps and making a bee line for their table. Seconds later and both girls had been unceremoniously packed off to bed, leaving Jon alone with Jeyne Poole. Before he went, Lord Stark ruffled Jon's hair, reassuring him that no real harm had been done.

Meanwhile, Jeyne fixed him with a most curious look.

"Are there really rubies in that river?"

Jon felt like banging his head off the table.

Later that evening, when he was on his way to bed, Lyanna caught up with him. Worried that she had overheard what Arya said, he was pleased to find her happy enough. He was also pleased to see the woollen dress he feared he'd wrecked after the Poison Kiss incident was also as good as new and freshly laundered. She was wearing it now.
"Come with me," she said, drawing level with him. "There's something I want to show you."

Now she'd said that, he found himself more curious than tired and followed gladly. She led him back the way he had just come, down the gallery. The walls were dusty in that gallery, with square patches in the dust where pictures and wall hangings had recently been removed. They had been replaced with the King's sigil, but didn't quite cover up the old.

"Do you see that?" she asked.

"Aye," he replied. "I saw it before; the place needs a clean."

"There's a reason for it," she said. "Do you know much about the Darrys?"

"Not really," he replied, truthfully.

Whatever the reason was, she didn't elaborate until they were back on ground level and descending into the cellars. Jon had Ghost with him, but the wolf shied now, so he left him at the top of the cellar stairs. It was a cold, stone stairwell that led into a darker cellar that smelled of dust and damp. But Lyanna had taken a lantern from the walls that lit up the gallery above, now holding it out in front of her as she led him downwards.

"Er, should we be going down here?" he asked.

"No, and you would be wise to not mention it to anyone else," she replied, quietly. "Not even your father."

He found himself led into a cellar full of junk. Broken timbers, upturned boxes and rusted tourney swords were propped against the far wall. A strange totem, topped with the severed head of a stag – badly taxidermied – stared at him from the far corner. It startled Jon, at first. He could see his aunt reflected in its large glassy eyes. A paper crown had been stuffed on its head. Opposite the stag, a similarly badly taxidermied wolf's head met his gaze.

They looked like props from a nightmare, until Jon applied his brain. "I guess House Darry weren't exactly fighting on father or King Robert's side in the war."

Those animal heads would have been paraded around the battlefield in an effort to intimidate the Stark and Baratheon men. Not that his father or Robert would have cared.

"You could say that," Lyanna answered. "And watch your feet there."

He almost tripped over a tapestry, probably the same one that had been hastily taken down before the royals arrived. The ones showing the three-headed dragon definitely were. The tapestry he almost tripped over showed the Doom of Valyria.

"They're still loyal to the Targaryens?" he asked. "They've got all sorts down here."

She had picked up a lacquered vase from the top of a stack of strongboxes. It was black and shone brightly by the light of the lantern, edged in gold leaf. Lyanna cradled it in her hands, frowning slightly as she turned it over.

"I found this when I was on my way up to Winterfell," she said, handing it to him. "They've kept your father's ashes."

Jon was so startled he dropped the urn and it hit the stone floor with a sharp crack. To his horror, he thought he'd broken it. But it rolled away under a table, in one piece. Blushing in embarrassment, he
dropped to his knees to fetch the urn back and returned it to his mother.

"Why have they kept him?" he asked. "They should have scattered the ashes over the river and been done with it."

"Perhaps," she replied. "But remember where his remains are, Jon."

She made it sound as if that information would one day come in handy. Meanwhile, he didn't know how he felt as he watched her replace the urn on a high shelf. Her palms had left prints in the dust, but it clearly people seldom came down here to see them.

"Why haven't you scattered them?" he asked. "You were his wife. And it's better than leaving him here, with all the castle's junk."

He looked again at the animal heads and their broken teeth and glassy eyes. Between them sat a mop with a snapped handle and several other items of more conventional rubbish.

"It's up to the Darrys now," she said.

Lyanna was already leading him back out again, casting one final look at her first husband's remains. Ash and bone, that was all he would be now. She looked like she wanted to say more, before changing her mind and disappearing into the shadow of the stairwell. It looked like the darkness had swallowed her whole.
The night they arrived at Castle Darry, Jon had made a promise; when he awoke that morning, he intended to honour it. In that insufferably dull period between the travellers waking and everything getting ready to move on to the next stop, he found Arya in the common hall and led her through the castle grounds. They left their horses in the stables and made the journey on foot, taking full advantage of a morning that had dawned with rare beauty.

It was all golden sunshine falling on tall grass, lighting up the wide rivers that all merged to form the Trident. It flowed east, through Lord Horroway's Town that marked the boundary between the Riverlands and the Vale and out into the Narrow Sea to Braavos. On a clear day, like that morning, Jon could stand and just about make out the peaks of the Mountains of the Moon – or, so he thought. Closer at hand, he followed the flow of the river and watched the wading birds take flight, fish wriggling between their beaks. Dragonflies hovered over still water and the fresh smell of the rivers permeated the air he breathed.

Arya ran ahead and Jon was happy to let her go, so long as she stayed within his sight. Her hair was in a braid, her breeches rolled up above her bony knees and she clutched a small cloth bag in her hands. He thought she was lost in a world of her own before she abruptly stopped and spun around to face him.

"Is this where the battle happened?" she called back at him. "Just here, this is where the rubies will be."

Not for the first time, he found himself wishing he could tell her the truth. That this was where his blood father had been killed. But not for anything would he spoil her mood. It was a strange thought, too. That a tranquil land like this had once formed the backdrop of a vicious civil war.

"This is the Trident, little sister," he answered. "It must be the right spot. But if there's rubies to be found, they'll be in the parts where the waters run slow."

The rubies were long gone, he knew. He hoped she would not be disappointed when she came away from this little excursion empty handed. However, she seemed to be enjoying the adventure more than the prospect of actually finding anything. Arya was like that, she always had been.

She was standing on top of the large bump in the ground, shielding her eyes from the sun as she scanned the horizon. Her skinny frame in silhouette, her untidy braid falling out of its bindings. "Father led the vanguard that day, didn't he? Even though King Robert won, I bet father was still the best fighter there. Don't you think? He would easily have killed the prince, too, I reckon."

"I'm sure father fought bravely," he answered.

Arya was a little girl hero-worshiping her father, he reminded himself. All the same, it made him sad. He could no longer summon the enthusiasm he had once had for that time and he was pleased when she changed the subject and began nattering, once more, about the rubies she was convinced were still floating around in the river.

"Hey, what about over here?" He gestured to a place where the riverbanks gently reclined into flat land, bordered by a stony shore. It was easily visible, meaning he could let her go alone, it was well away from any bends in the river and it wasn't tidal. In fact, he thought it quite a pretty spot, where they could later share the food they brought from the castle. Of which he more in his own bag.
Arya agreed and immediately set off, running ahead and swinging a stick she found, cutting off the heads of grass as she sped past. Moments later, her footsteps crunched across the stony riverbank and Jon stood in the grass, spreading out his cloak for their picnic later on.

"Aren't you coming?" she called over to him.

"No, you go on."

Arya hesitated for a moment, but soon dropped to her knees as she began removing her boots. Large stones jutted from the water, forming a neat bridge from one side to the other. Nor was the water too deep, all the same, he had some final words of warning for her.

"Don't go too far and call out right away if you need help."

As soon as she was fully occupied, Jon rose picked up the sack-cloth bag he had brought with him and retreated a little further into the field. He soon found a spot he liked. A place where tall hedges grew along the borders of farmer's fields and straggly trees stooped and trailed their branches in the waters of the Trident. Tall grass reached his middle and wild flowers grew in bright little thickets all around him. For a long moment, he took it all in.

Before setting to his task, he looked back over his shoulder. Arya briefly came into view, where she hopped from stone to stone across the river, happily immersed in her own little world. She looked back at him, met his gaze and waved before darting out of sight again. When she was gone, he opened the bag and brought out his father's urn. He had snuck back into the cellars and collected it before breaking his fast.

He had lain awake much of that night, pondering the rights and wrongs of what he was about to do. Even Lyanna had told him the urn should be left where it was, but it didn't seem right to him. And he couldn't figure out why she showed him, unless she secretly agreed. Whatever else he was, Rhaegar was his blood father and he wanted better for his final resting place than a damp, dark cellar. Pushed to the back of a shelf like a family's dirty secret.

The black enamel shone in the morning light, giving the gold leaf lettering a red hue. Rhaegar Targaryen: 259 AC – 283 AC.

He was only twenty-four, he realised. Ten years old than he, Jon, was now. That made him sad. He tried to think of Rhaegar as his father, the man who made him on some night unremembered while the world spasmed to the early eruptions of the oncoming war. He tried to gain a sense of how he was among the last relics of a dead dynasty, but it all seemed so abstract, so completely unrelated to the life he had led. And that made him sad, too.

The urn was sealed with red wax, which Jon picked off with a dirk he wore in his belt. Once the lid was off, Jon reached inside and felt his fingertips brush against fine powdered ash and chunks of wood and bone. His father's bone, probably. Something stirred inside him, a feeling he couldn't identify. Sorrow for a life unlived, sadness for a father who was a stranger to him.

However much of Rhaegar was left in that urn, it amounted to little more than a handful of ash. Jon studied it as he withdrew his fist from the urn. Charred wood and splinters. Even a nail that had been hammered through the wood of Prince Rhaegar's funeral pyre. He wished he knew some prayers of the Faith, but he had none. Sansa would have known them, he realised. He wished he had asked her, even if he forgot half the words.

A small wind blew in from the river and Jon opened his hand, watching as what remained of his father scattered in slipstream. Out over the wild flowers and the waist high grass, carried in a fine
cloud of grey, Rhaegar's mortal remains dispersed far and wide. He up-ended the urn, releasing the
dust that adhered to the inside. The last of his blood father set free across the realm he died for.

Once the deed was done, Jon paused to gather his thoughts and feelings. He should have had a state
funeral with all the trimmings. Instead, it was a secret and hurried affair involving an upturned urn
while no one was looking. It felt tainted. That, also, made Jon feel sad.

"You've done it, then."

Startled, Jon looked up to see Lyanna approaching from the direction of Castle Darry. She wore a
white woollen dress with a grey shawl wrapped around her shoulders, which she clasped together
with one hand. The wind swept her hair away from her face, he could see her sad smile.

"I couldn't leave him there," he said. "I thought to take him to Harrenhal, actually. That was where it
all began, wasn't it?"

"It's a nice thought," she agreed. "But I think Harrenhal has enough ghosts already. I think he would
like it here better."

If she was upset that he had defied her instructions from the night before, she did not look it. She
drew level with him and untied a small, leather pouch from her belt.

"I tried looking for you in the common hall, but it seems I missed you," she said. "I only wanted to
pass this to you."

Curious, Jon watched her upend the pouch and a large, chipped ruby rolled into her open palm.

"I overheard Arya, last night, and the other girls giving her a hard time," she continued. "I thought,
perhaps you could put this somewhere safe in the river, where the water's shallow and slow moving,
then let her find it. It would be something nice for her, do you agree?"

Jon was delighted at the gesture. Already, he was thinking up ways to slip the gem into the riverbed
without being seen. "Definitely, it'll make her day. Thank you, mother."

He planted a firm kiss on her cheek.

"And I'm afraid I was also sent by your father," she said. "We're about to set off in the next hour or
so, and he says you're not to tarry too long here."

Jon nodded his understanding, then watched as she turned and began walking back to the castle.
Life, he decided, was definitely better with her included.

It was an old dream, one that had not troubled Eddard in years. But two nights after leaving Castle
Darry, it found its way into his sleeping brain like an old, stray dog back for more scraps. It was him
and Ashara, dancing as they had at Harrenhal, except they were actually in the streets of King's
Landing and the city was burning all around them. Oblivious to the fighting, ignoring the screams of
Elia and the children, they swayed to a song only they could hear. Their feet glided through blood
spilling down the streets, the death grunts of dying men kept their rhythm. They pirouetted through
palls of thick, black smoke, as if they were curtains, revealing their moment upon the stage.

Their gaze met as they leaned into the kiss, her irises an incandescent purple. He has a wife. He has a
child. Neither have anything to do with the woman now in his arms but his body is no longer his
own. He could feel his hands riding up her thighs of their own volition, his amorous advances
heralded by an explosion of wildfire, bright green and beautiful against the night sky. It was all for
them. The carnage was all for them and this was their moment.

He awoke at dawn, breathless and full of fear and shame.

Hours later, he was back on the road and riding at the head of the procession that now stretched for miles. Robert rode at his left and Lyanna his right and they waved to and greeted the smallfolk as they passed. It was late in the summer, but they were gathering in the harvest and there was hope of one more before Winter made its presence felt.

All the while, he tried to stop thinking about that dream. It had always been absurd and bore little resemblance to what actually happened back then. All the same, its return disturbed him.

Or, was it Ashara that disturbed him? Like the dream itself, she rarely troubled him and he wondered why she was back now. Was it because he was so close to King's Landing again? Was it because of going over the past with Lyanna and Jon? Eddard was uncertain, but he wanted it to end. He wanted her ghost exorcised and banished back into the depths of his memory.

In the intervening years, if he did think of her, it was usually the last time they met. Something that hadn't occurred to him at the time was the smell of her home. The smell of citrus fruits: oranges and lemon trees; limes and others he could not name. If he smelled oranges now, it reminded him of Starfall. It was exotic, to a young Northman.

The last time they met, they stood in the shadow of the Palestone Sword – the same tower she would jump to her death from, just a few short weeks later. Why? Why did she do that? He analysed every word they spoke, searching for hidden clues that she was about to do what she did. He could drive himself mad, if he didn't force himself to stop. And, no matter how hard he tried, he could never find an explanation.

"Gods, you look particularly grim today," Robert noted as they passed down a wide stretch of the Kingsroad. "The further you get from the freezing snows, the more you look like a fish out of water."

Ned tried to laugh, but perhaps his smile hadn't thawed out yet. "It's been a long journey, your grace. One that cannot end too soon."

That was no lie.

"Robert, it's been the best part of a year since we left King's Landing," Lyanna pointed out. "Think about it. Four months on the outward journey, a month and a bit at Winterfell itself and now a four month return journey."

Robert looked back at her, a smile playing at his lips. "And somehow, despite all that time, I've managed to not miss a single one of those shits even a little bit."

Another couple of days and they had passed Harrenhal and were closing in on Rosby. Another castle where they could at least rest comfortably instead of having to pitch tents. Better still, the small council had ridden out from King's Landing and come to meet them there. An outrider had sent word to forewarn them.

By the time they actually reached Rosby, as exhausted as they were, they found themselves having to make the rounds and greet all the courtiers who had ridden out to meet them. Still several days ride from the capital, Ned found himself starting his new job earlier than he had anticipated.

Among the newcomers, there were some faces he recognised. Renly had grown into a handsome young man. Stannis was conspicuous only by his absence. Varys the eunuch looked broadly the
same, but kept his distance from Ned. If the gossips were to be believed, it had been he who drove the Mad King mad.

Although Renly was still a boy when last they met, he greeted Ned warmly. "Good to see you again, Lord Stark, perhaps now we can have some order restored to the Small Council. Please excuse Stannis not being here to greet you, but he's in a high sulk and gone swanning off to Dragonstone with his terrible wife and worse daughter in tow. He thinks he should have been Hand of the King."

Eddard couldn't help but wonder if there was a little more to it than that, but he let the matter lie. Meanwhile, his children had arrived. Sansa climbed out of the back of a wheel house, with Lady at her side on a leash of pink silk. Arya and Jon had ridden through the gates mounted on chestnut chargers. Their wolves trotted at their sides, easily cutting a path through the crowds that had assembled in the yards.

"Mother have mercy, does that creature move fast."

Renly was watching a man in the crowds, now engaging Sansa in conversation he could not hear. He was short and thin, but rather younger than himself. His smile didn't reach his eyes and he wore a goatee beard, neatly trimmed. It wouldn't have been quite so disconcerting, but he looked at Sansa as if trying to decide which part of her he wished to cook and devour first.

"Who is that?" he asked.

"Petyr Baelish. Master of Coin and our resident brothel keeper. I hear he knew your late brother."

At Sansa's side, Lady's fur bristled and her teeth bared in a snarl. He trusted the wolf more than he trusted the man.

Thankfully, they weren't staying another day at Rosby. The night before, Jon had been invited to sit at the high table, alongside Lord Gyles Rosby and the Queen. All through dinner the old man hacked and coughed, spitting in a small silk hanky and he and Lyanna had to be polite enough to pretend they hadn't noticed. Thoroughly exhausted from this seemingly endless journey, he had then gone up to his bed and sunk into sleep before his head hit the pillow. What felt like ten minutes later, he was awoken to the sounds of a procession quickly gearing up to leave.

Just one more stretch of the Kingsroad to go and they would be in King's Landing. It would all be over, and he would know what it was to wake up in the same place more than two days in a row. The luxury of stability he felt like he'd forgotten already. He broke his fast with Arya in the common hall, while his father and Lyanna looked on. But they soon left to fetch their horses. As he passed, his father paused by their table and whispered in his ear: "Keep your sword handy."

Before Jon could ask why, Lord Stark had caught up with his sister and they left the hall together. Assuming the warning wasn't for nothing, Jon fetched his sword from his strongbox, where it had already been loaded onto a pack mule. He then buckled the heavy leather sword belt and went about his business.

As he went to fetch his horse he had to dodge out of the path of Jaime Lannister and a woman he assumed was his infamous twin sister. Both looked flushed in the face and she had a stray ear of corn tangled in her hair. Neither of them paid him much attention as they hurried back toward the royal procession. Only Jaime briefly stopped, to talk to an old man with white hair, before carrying on his way. That same old man followed Jon into the stables, and handed him the reins of his horse. He looked much too old to be a stable boy. Maybe, he thought, the man was a simpleton, like Hodor.
Accordingly, Jon schooled his response to a polite: "My thanks, ser."

He led his horse by the bridle out into the early morning sun. His father wasn’t far away, talking to the Queen and King Robert. They were all mounted on beautiful, snowy white chargers for the final leg of their journey. Arya had gone already, but Sansa was sitting on a step reading a book about the Blackfyre rebellions. Not her usual fare, but she’d been engrossed in it for days now. Thinking to catch up with the queen, he hurried back into the stable to fetch a bag of oats for his horse and to be on his way. Only, the old man blocked his path and wouldn’t allow him to pass.

"Pardon me, but I forgot something."

The answer was the ominous whisper of steel against leather as the man drew the sword at his hip. He stood there still, his hair was white as snow with age. There was no way Jon was going to fight him and risk cutting him down with one blow.

"Actually," he said, "it matters not. I bid you good day."

He tried to turn away, but the man moved dexterously to cut off his retreat. "Mistake number one: never turn your back on an opponent."

Jon bristled. "You're not an opponent, ser. I agreed to no duel now let me pass."

He reminded Jon of one of those small men who get seriously drunk in taverns and then pick fights with the biggest guy there. It was like they had some sort of issue with their own shortcomings.

"I could, but I want to see what m'lord is made of," came the answer.

Jon hesitated, but rested his hand on the pommel of his new sword. "This is absurd. Don't make me fight you. If it pleases you-"

"It pleases me to see what m'lord is made of," he persisted.

"I'm made of flesh and blood, like any other," said Jon, in one last attempt to diffuse the situation. "Now, if you excuse me."

"I don't excuse you."

Jon sighed, closing his eyes for only a split second while trying to decide what to do. His assailant was armed with fine castle forged steel, but he was as old as the hills and wore no breastplate either. Neither did Jon, but he had strength and youth on his side. Despite these obvious advantages, the old man remained completely undeterred. Disconcertingly, there was a shine in the old man's eyes. A light that made him think this one's senses hadn't dulled a day past twenty.

"I am not going to fight you," he stated, emphatically. "We've done nothing to warrant it and you're … oh, never mind."

Even as he said the words, the old man trained the sword at Jon's neck. The point touched the soft flesh at the base of his throat, pressing in ever so slightly. Instinctively, he stepped back to clear himself of the edge while simultaneously drawing his own blade and whipping the old man's sword out of the way, almost knocking it out of his hands. The air momentarily rang with the sound of steel on steel, before echoing into nothing. It was a defensive move, he reasoned to himself, resolving not to attack.

However, before he could walk away, and with a speed and dexterity that belied his age, the man regained his posture and attacked properly. Jon blocked and parried, soon changing his mind about
not attacking as he realised the old man's might. His opponent was skilled, too skilled. Almost
unnaturally skilled. But Jon was able to match him, just. To buy himself some time and space, he
retreated by vaulting the stable door and getting it between him and his attacker. Only to have the
man vault the obstacle with just as much ease and dexterity as Jon himself had possessed. It made
him angry. No one that ancient had any business being that bloody agile.

"Fuck you, Grandpa!" he snapped as he lunged at the old man.

The man parried, sword held casually in one hand as if rubbing salt into Jon's injured pride. Not one
of his blows landed where he wanted it to, not one slash of his sword came close to even scratching
the mad old goat. From the tail of his eye, he turned to see where his father had gotten to. Surely, he
had heard the commotion and came running back to help him. On the contrary, Lord Stark was
standing at a distance watching with a keen interest. Not too far behind him, the Lannisters were
pretending to not watch, but glancing over every few seconds. Jory Cassel was there too, soothing
the horse that had bolted during the early stages of the fight. Explanations would be demanded, he
resolved. Sansa dropped the book and ran for their father, the pages of history left blowing in the
wind.

"Did an old man catch m'lord off-guard?" the white-haired attacker asked, almost tauntingly.

"I'm not your lord," Jon retorted, failing to land another attack.

He only just managed to block the next attack, but it was so strong the force of the block alone sent
him reeling backwards and sprawling in the hard-packed earth. He didn't need to yield. The old man
raised his sworn and brought it slamming, point first, into the earth an inch from Jon's face. He could
see it from the tail of his eye, wobbling slightly under the force of the blow, half buried.

"And I'm not your Grandfather," the old man replied, sounding heartily amused.

A smattering of applause rose from the small number of spectators and Jon inwardly cringed. His
father reappeared, a rare smile of approval on his face as he leaned down to help him up.

"Well fought, Jon. Very well fought," he said, setting him on his feet again.

From where was standing, Jon thought, he'd been beaten into the dirt by someone he should have
vanquished with one blow. Nonetheless, he was pleased his father so clearly disagreed with his
assessment. Perplexed, and still more than a little irritated, he watched as his father turned to his
"attacker" and shook him by the hand.

"Well, Ser Barristan, what do you make of him?" Lord Stark asked.

Jon closed his eyes and groaned inside. Only a clap on the back from the living legend himself
snapped him out of his self-recriminations.

"You show promise, young man," said Ser Barristan, still half-smiling. "Great promise. But soon,
you'll do a lot better than that, I assure you. Your training begins tomorrow, at noon, and you'll be on
time."

Although he knew full well there was no shame in being beaten into the dirt by the finest swordsman
that ever lived, Jon smiled sheepishly all the same. "Thank you, ser."

With that, he watched as his father and Ser Barristan launched straight into a discussion about the
campaigns they had fought in. They had only fought alongside each other once: during Balon
Greyjoy's rebellion. At the Trident, they fought against each other but if there was any animosity, it
did not show at all. They mounted up at last, the three of them riding out of the gates together and
Jon hung on every word they spoke.
King's Landing

At noon, almost five months after leaving Winterfell, Jon rode through the gates of King's Landing and caught his first glimpse of the Red Keep. Unable to steer his palfrey away from the main procession, he slid down from the saddle and used his own two feet to explore the city for the first time. And from the perimeter walls to the foot of the castle itself, all he could see was a maze of houses, shops, markets and businesses. Over it all, the Red Keep rose from the top of Aegon's high hill, casting its long shadow over the city and its populace.

Cautious, at first, he glanced back at the procession to see where his mother and father were. Both were greeting people, ordinary citizens who'd come out to see the return of the royal family. After that, he was soon swallowed by the crowded, narrow streets of his new home. It seemed that everywhere he turned he got in someone else's way. He dodged a washerwoman only to be pressed flat against a dirty wall by a passing oxcart. He slipped behind the cart only to career into a drayman hauling kegs on his shoulders and sidestepped him into the path of a group of hollering, barefoot children all chasing a wooden hoop.

The noise and the density of the population made him feel oddly dislocated, like there was nothing about this place or these people that he recognised as 'human'. Even the air felt different, it smelled different. So close to the sea, the breeze was salty. Salt, mixed with sweat, blood, open latrines and the spices sold at the open markets. Disorientated, he tried to find his way back to the procession, only for the procession to find him.

"Jon!"

Sansa's shrill cry sounded over the noise of drunks singing out of tune in a nearby tavern. Jon spotted her as she edged her way through a crowd, a leering loiterer openly looking down her bodice as she went. Oblivious to the lecher, she approached him with Jeyne Poole and Arya close behind her. The wolves followed and the crowds gave them no more trouble.

"Father's given us all some coin," she said, breathlessly. "Here's yours."

He caught the small leather purse she tossed to him, thanking her. Meanwhile, Arya was already getting into everything around them. While doing their own thing, the four of them loosely stuck together as they inspected market stalls and sampled the street food on sale.

Meanwhile, back at the procession, the Queen and Lord Stark had already been hauled off to a meeting of the Small Council. The servants would be unpacking their belongings, hauling it up the stairs of the Tower of the Hand. They had been given instructions to stay out of the way.

"Why are they in meetings already?" Arya asked. "It's not fair. Father only just got here."

"The last Hand died almost a year ago, silly," Sansa replied, sharply. "Father has a lot of catching up to do.

"Oh, don't squabble you two," Jon chided. "We only just got here."

Even Jeyne looked grateful for the intervention.

Sansa wanted to buy fabrics, while Arya was in search of a jeweller to set her ruby in a necklace for her – courtesy of the Queen. Jon found himself in an unlikely conversation with Jeyne Poole, the steward's daughter.
"I heard about the tourney," she said as they made their way into an open plaza. "Aren you going to compete?"

"Of course," he replied, claiming a vacant bench. "Melee or jousting, I don't know which. Perhaps duelling, if they have it."

"You'll win," she assured him. As if settling the matter once and for all, she added: "Sansa says so, too."

He had no reply to that, not one that he could speak aloud at any rate. However, they'd bought themselves some marchpane confectionary from a baker's shop. Jon focused on that, rather than trying to pick stiff conversation with a girl he barely knew.

"Do you like the Lannisters?" she asked, after a long pause.

"I have no opinion of the Lannisters," he answered, sucking the almond paste from his fingers. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, you haven't heard? Sansa might be betrothed to Lady Lannister's eldest son soon."

She was watching him carefully, as if his reaction to this might be important. But, once more, he found himself at a loss.

"I'll be sure to buy a new hat," he replied, at length.

Come dusk, they made their way home through streets that were finally thinning out. For the first time since his arrival, Jon could look up and see not just Aegon's Hill, but Visenya's, where the Sept of Baelor's bells chimed the hour. Opposite that, Rhaenys' hill, topped by the derelict dragonpit, stood silent and dark against the dusky sky. The dragons were long gone now and it stood to reason that their home had fallen into disrepair.

Jory Cassel was at the gates to show them to their chambers, all of them lodged in the Tower of the Hand and up its endless stairs. His mother and Lord Stark were still at the meeting of the small council, leaving them to find their own feet. Servants none of them knew served their supper in their father's new common hall. The food was good, but he wished his father was there, too. It was odd, just the three of them and Septa Mordane.

However, after they'd finished, Arya ran to her new chambers and returned minutes later with Needle wrapped in her cloak, hiding it from the Septa. Jon led her to their father's chambers, using the only room they could find that had been left unlocked. There were boxes stacked by a wall and their father's coat had been draped over a chair that was pushed against an ornate weirwood table. Other than that, there was nothing in there. For now, it would serve their purposes.

He used a wooden tourney sword himself, one he found among his father's possessions.

"Ready then?" he asked.

Arya nodded. "Always."

This had become their habit. Everything Ser Barristan taught him, he later taught Arya while no one was looking. Although he had not had a lesson that day, with Ser Barristan also being on the small council, he still wanted to put her through her paces again.

"Then remember the stance and attack."
He did not raise his sword to her, even it was only a wooden sparring sword. Instead, he let her attack him and showed her how to block those attacks, showing her new ways of performing the same moves. Soon, they were dancing around each other, her trying to land thrusts and cuts of her small, slender blade. She was quick, agile and switched position faster than he could blink. But still he blocked her and defended himself easily. In reality, he did not think the knight's fighting style would suit her. But, for now, it made her happy.

"Here, like this," he would say, before showing her some new move. "And don't leave your belly exposed, and don't ever present a large target."

She learned quickly, but still had accidents. As if in slow motion, he saw her quickly flick Needle to land a thrust, he leapt aside only for Arya to stab their father's coat draped over the back of the chair and leave a tear a good few inches. Arya gasped sharply, her eyes wide and sorrowful as she realised the damage she had caused. Although he heard the tear, he had rather hoped it wouldn't be as bad as all that. However, the white linen lining showed through the tear, a good few inches long, making it particularly eye-catching.

"He's going to kill me!" she said, looking up at him as if he could help.

Inwardly, Jon agreed while outwardly he cast around for a solution. "Look, it's not that bad. If you own up and explain-"

"He'll kill me," she repeated. "And he'll take Needle off me, and I'll never be allowed to learn sword fighting again!"

She looked crestfallen, her front teeth worrying at her lower lip. Needle now hung at her side, limp and useless. Meanwhile, Jon ruffled her hair in an effort to cheer her and moved the cloak. It was heavy and the tear was right down the seam down the back. Better yet, Needle had gone right through it and scratched the table, too. While he surveyed the damage, only the sound of Sansa singing sweetly filled the air.

"That's it," he said. "I know what to do."

Arya looked puzzled. "What?"

Jon said nothing as he carried the torn cloak outside, to where Sansa sat in the ante-chamber brushing Lady's coat to a shine. She glanced up at their approach, frowning in suspicion as he smiled at her in what he hoped was a winning fashion.

"Sweet sister," he said, kneeling at her side. With one hand he scratched Lady's ears, mussing up the fur that had just been brushed.

"What have you two been up to?" she asked.

"Who? Us?" he replied, exchanging a look with Arya, finding her still distraught.

"Why are you calling me 'sweet sister' and grinning at me like a lackwit, unless you want something?" she asked.

"So cynical," he sighed. "Well, listen, Arya had an accident with her needlework. And because you care about her so deeply, I thought you could use your own needlework to put it right."

"Please, Sansa, please!" Arya cried out, fighting for her final lifeline. "I'll never be mean to you again, I promise. Please, please!"
Sansa’s eyes widened in shock. "This is serious, isn't it?" she asked, monotone. "Jon, what's happened? What's going on? Is someone dead?"

She looked between them both, fearful.

"This," he said, showing her the tear. "Can you fix it?"

Sansa drew a deep breath, letting it go in a disapproving sigh. "You're playing at swords, aren't you? Well, as long as you promise not to do it indoors again, I'll fix it for you."

They may squabble and fight, but Jon knew they loved each other really. Proving the point, Arya flung her arms around her sister's neck, thanking her profusely and making all the promises she could. And Sansa hugged her right back.

"And you won't say anything to father?" Arya asked, pulling away.

"Nothing," Sansa assured her. "And I'll even get it back in father's closet as soon as I am finished."

Grateful, Jon grinned and mussed up both their hair. "Thank you, Sansa."

"You're my favourite sister," Arya declared.

Sansa laughed, but good naturedly this time. "I am your only sister!"

"I come bearing wine." Lyanna held up the bottle of dry Dornish wine, hoping it would put a smile back on her brother's troubled face. "I know you must be exhausted, but I won't stay long."

Ned had already stepped aside to grant her entry to his new apartments. There were still boxes stacked by the wall, but order was at last largely restored. His cloak was gone from where she had left it draped over the back of the chair, and a deep scratch had appeared on the table leg. A scar from one of Sweet Robin's shaking tantrums, no doubt. They all said the boy was sickly, but he could pack a punch when the mood took him. And it took him often, from what she could recall.

"I cannot sleep anyway, sister," he answered, setting down two glasses. "And the drink would be most welcome."

"That's almost decadent of you," she teased him gently as she decanted the wine. "How are you, anyway? Now that we're here, I thought homesickness might be setting in."

He shrugged shoulders that had been draped in a heavy cloak, under which he still wore his day shirt and breeches. It left her with the distinct impression that he hadn't even tried to sleep. They soon repaired to the inner chamber, where she left the wine on the scratched table and set off toward the solar. A fire had been lit inside the connecting solar, chasing away the chills of the night.

"It's strange to be back after so long," he answered. "When we rode through the city gates this morning, all I could remember was the Sack. Every street we passed, I could recall something that happened there. A woman raped, or a child put to the sword. Ashara…"

"You saved her life, Eddard," she said, using his full name to emphasise her point. "It matters not that she chose to end it not long after. It takes nothing from the honour of your actions that night."

"There was no honour in it." His tone was sharper, he couldn't meet her gaze. When he did look back at her he was sheepish. "I dishonoured Catelyn and the gods."

"Don't talk like that," she cut over him. "So, you loved Ashara while still married to Cat? You can't
help your feelings and if it was a dishonour to the gods, why did they give humans emotions?"

For the life of her, she couldn't think why he was beating himself up so badly. Even now, all these years later, he seemed to shrink against the shame of how he felt about that sad-eyed dead girl.

"The gods didn't make me act on those feelings though, did they?"

It took a second for her to realise what he meant by that, then the penny dropped resoundingly.

"Oh!" she replied, trying not to sound shocked. "You mean, you…"

"Afterwards," he confessed. "I'd found Aerys dead, Jaime Lannister sitting on the damn throne. It was all over. I found her by the quayside and … well, you can guess the rest. It was a moment of weakness."

Lyanna considered it for a long moment, sipping her wine while she gathered her thoughts. "A moment of weakness, but at a time of chaos and madness. Gods, Ned, no one can blame either of you for seeking solace in each other."

They moved away from the fireside and sat at opposite sides of the desk. Already, his books and papers had been stacked at one side. A candelabra was lit in the corner of the room, the candles guttering on a draught seeping through the window frame. Meanwhile, Ned had wrapped his cloak more snugly around his shoulders and ran a hand through his hair.

"Was her body ever found?" he asked, squinting at her through the poor light.

Lyanna shook her head. "No. Not a trace. I often wonder what became of her."

"Washed out to the Summer Sea, I suppose," he answered, voice low. After a deep sigh, he added: "And it's not just her. Father and Brandon, and all those others who went south and never returned. Ethan Glover we found in the cells, only for him to die in Dorne."

Jaime Lannister once delivered to her a detailed account of how her father and brother had died. As if she wasn't already wary enough of the throne room, she relived it every time she set foot in there for months after Lannister's graphic retelling. The horror had worn away over the years, but the guilt stayed with her always.

"Aerys was mad," she said, as though Ned didn't already know. "I thought he would kill us all. But Ned, as for your … indiscretion… just forget it. It's long over and there's no use in berating yourself."

He smiled crookedly. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

She didn't know, actually. "It's supposed to make you feel human. Flawed, but ultimately human. Brandon had a woman in every town between Winterfell and the Neck, and that was long before any war."

Ned laughed, but only weakly. "Brandon was a good man, really."

"And so are you," she pointed out. "And so was father, although I know you did not like him."

"I respected him," said Ned, thoughtfully. "But I always wanted more than just 'respect' between me and my own sons…and daughters. He would have thought that vain of me."

"Nonsense," Lyanna laughed. "There's nothing vain about wanting your children to love you. And
well I know it. I pray every day in the godswood that Jon will grow to love me."

"He does already," he assured her. "He may not say it, but just knowing you has been enough. Even more now that you've given your permission for him to take part in this tourney."

Lyanna finally allowed herself an easy smile. "I know you disapprove of them, Ned. But I honestly think it will give Jon a chance to shine now that he's in the capital. It's horrible, I know, but he most prove himself if he wants to be accepted."

Ned shrugged again, but did not look upset. "It's not that I don't approve. I worry that tourneys make a game of war. You and I both know the bitter realities behind that little myth. Anyway, all the same, Jon's had training with lance and running at rings. Robb, too. He could do well."

"Why don't we bring Robb down for it?" she asked, suddenly seized by the idea. "He could take ship from White Harbour to make good time and Jon would love to see him again."

However, Ned was hesitant. "I don't know, Lya. I'd rather he knuckle-down at Winterfell and learn to rule."

"Fair enough," she replied with a shrug.

"Rhaegar was skilled at tourneys," he added. "I'm inclined to think that might be something passed down to Jon."

_A little too skilled_, she thought to herself while remembering the day he 'crowned' her. It embarrassed her still to think of that day.

Satisfied with her work, Sansa snipped the thread and studied her stitching carefully. It was neat, the tear in her father's cloak was no longer visible, but she wanted to make doubly sure and it wasn't as if she could show Septa Mordane. Trusting in her own work, she put away her sewing kit and checked the time. Gone midnight, the grounds of the Red Keep were in darkness and the halls inside the Tower of the Hand were silent. Everyone was exhausted from their long journey south and had retired early to bed and sunk into their soft feather mattresses. She would have done the same, but for Arya's own 'needlework'.

She supposed her father would be asleep by now, too. He wasn't just tired from his journey, but from the small council meeting he was dragged off to as soon as they arrived. At least, that was what she banked on she folded his cloak over her arms and set off into the silent tower. Jon had been allocated the chambers on the level above her own. She could hear Ghost sniffing at the other side of the door. Above him was Arya, whose chambers were silent. Finally, above her, were the chambers of the Hand.

Jory Cassel was on guard duty, she could hear him pacing along the corridor that opened up at the top of the stairs. Playing it safe, she ducked into the first door she came to and found herself in a garderobe. Although the windows had no glass and just opened into the starry night, she wrinkled her nose all the same. Once Jory had passed the door and begun descending to the lower floors, she slipped out of the garderobe and into her father's chambers.

The outer-chamber was empty and dark. She took off her shoes so she would make no noise as she stole across the polished oak floor. Through a small gallery, she came to the common hall large enough to seat hundreds. Through a door at the back, she would reach Lord Stark's living quarters. She peeked nervously around the door before entering, but became emboldened by the ashes in the fire and the darkness within.
There was a closet in the inner-chamber, so she headed for that. All she had to do was slip the cloak in there and get back out, and he would be none-the-wiser. Given the warmer climate of King's Landing, father probably wouldn't even need his cloak until he returned to Winterfell to collect Bran.

However, it was there that things got complicated. To reach the closet she had to pass the door of the solar, which was ajar and a soft firelight filtered through the aperture. In the room she was in now, she could see an open bottle of wine that had been half-emptied. Better still, she could hear her aunt talking inside. Sansa froze, still with the cloak clutched in her arms. She could just dump the cloak on the table and hope that her father wouldn't notice that it wasn't there before. But the indecision had her rooted to the spot.

Meanwhile, Lyanna kept talking. Her voice a soft natter drifting through the solar door.

"The more time I spend with Jon the more I see his father in him…"

The breath caught in Sansa's throat, her gaze snapping to the door. If that wasn't her father in there, then who? She didn't want the King to catch her sneaking around the castle on her first night! But, then…

"How? I've only ever seen the Stark in him. He looks like you, Lya."

That was unmistakably her father. Bewildered, Sansa almost forgot the cloak and forgot that she wasn't supposed to be there. However, she retained enough common sense to step farther into the deep shadows of her father's room.

"It's the shape of his face," Lyanna answered. "Sometimes, the look he gets in his eyes. Rhaegar had indigo eyes, of course. But it's in the expressions. Jon has eyes every bit as expressive as Rhaegar's."

Sansa felt her jaw hit her collarbone.

"What about the nose?" her father asked. "I don't think that's a Stark nose."

"Really? I think he has my nose," Lyanna answered. "He didn't get my wolfblood, thank the gods. No, his temperament is pure Rhaegar. Quiet to the point of taciturn, but he's not like that when you get to know him."

"I tried to encourage Jon to be more outgoing, truth be told," Lord Stark replied. "Robb and Arya were always good with him, they brought him out of himself. Sansa … not so much; she's never made much effort with him, but I think she just wanted to please her mother."

Sansa blushed, but she was still too shocked to fully process what she was hearing. She tried not to hear it, she tried to render herself deaf for long enough to put the damn coat in the closet and get straight back out of those apartments.

"It's easy to be angry with Cat," Lyanna was saying. "But she was ignorant of the facts and that was our fault. Had she known Jon was a trueborn Targaryen, how would she have reacted? I think that is far too much to place on the shoulders of a woman outside the family, who didn't really know us and had no say in whether to get involved or not. It was dangerous; it still is."

"I suppose you are right," replied Lord Stark. "She's a good woman and I love her dearly. And our children… those children I would not give up for anything in the world."

Finally, Sansa pulled herself together and gave herself a rough shakedown. Trembling, with her head still in a whirl, she crept to the closet with her heart beating in her throat. She was amazed her aunt and father couldn't hear the beating from where they were, and that was much too close for comfort.
Lyanna and Eddard were still talking about Jon, but now they were talking about her brothers as well, to her relief. Very slowly, very carefully, she opened the closet door and found it empty. No longer caring whether her father found it out of place, she dumped it on the floor.

"Do you want some more wine, Lya? I'm getting a top-up now."

With a flash of horror, Sansa remembered the wine bottle on the table. Even as her father spoke, his voice grew louder as he walked into the main room. Just in time, she stepped into the closet and closed the door behind her.

"I don't mind if I do, brother." Lyanna had followed her brother into the main room. "As I was saying, you may think Robb has the Tully look, but I see a lot of you in him. Sansa's a rare beauty though, and a sweet girl with it. I hope she doesn't get eaten alive in this viper's pit."

Inside, she was cringing. Any minute now, she thought her father might decide to do a little late night unpacking and wrench open the closet door, to find her cowering inside like a thief in the night. Ashamed of what she had done, she wished she could unhear all of what was said.

Mercifully, as if the gods had heard her silent prayers, she heard the sloshing of wine into glasses and retreating footsteps. This time, her father was even kind enough to close the solar door fully after they'd returned inside. Breathing a sigh of relief, Sansa allowed herself a moment to compose herself before beating a hasty retreat.

Outside, she grabbed her shoes and slipped out of the door and straight into Jory Cassel. Their eyes met, his looking wide and startled. She couldn't begin to imagine the look on her own face.

"M'Lady, I didn't see you go in," he said.

"No, no you didn't," she replied, breathlessly. "I was looking for the garderobe, actually. I got the wrong room, I got lost. I'm sorry to have troubled you, Jory. I'll go back to my chambers now, if it please you."

Jory looked concerned. "It'll please me more to escort you, you look like you've seen a ghost. In fact, do you want me to get your father-"

"No!" she cut in. "Please, don't disturb my father. I just want to lie down."

He escorted her as he said he would, leaving her at the door. But, even once in her bed, she could not sleep. She lay awake in the darkness, looking up at the ceiling and going over what she heard repeatedly. Did Jon know? He had a right to know, but she knew she had no right to tell him. The arguments and counter-arguments tied her in knots, to the point where she groaned aloud and buried her head under her goose-down pillow. Still the thoughts split her head too much for sleep.
Heroes

Jon lurched backwards under the force of another blow, preventing a fall by digging his heels into the packed earth. It mattered not. He blocked the attack with ease, simultaneously kicking out with his left leg to send his attacker reeling into the dust. There was no time to savour his victory as the second and third attackers descended on him at the same time. Beneath the heavy breastplate he was already sweating like a stuck pig, but all the same the second man didn’t get a look in as he parried the slash and landed the knockout blow to his helm while spinning around to deal with number three. As number two yielded, three was joined by a fourth.

Breathless, feeling like he was slowly cooking alive inside his armour, he felt his professional training slip as exhaustion set in. He began lashing out blindly, losing track of what he was doing to whom. Through the slits in his own helm, he could see them circling him and getting closer. Before they cut off his retreat, he leapt backwards with a warning slash of the sword as he went. With a little space to breathe, he got a grip on everything Ser Rodrik had taught him. But it wasn’t long enough.

The fourth attacker raised his sword, bringing the blunted blade clanging off Jon’s helm so hard he saw stars. Worse, his ears rang and he couldn’t hear where they were going which set him at an even bigger disadvantage since his helm almost completely blocked his view. But working to overcome the senses he no longer had only forced him to sharpen his game, focus on his poise and the precision of his return blows. He concentrated on what little he could see through the visor in his helm and despatched one of the attackers with a vicious slash of his sword while simultaneously landing a kick to his plated stomach, sending him sprawling into the dirt.

While he was focusing on that man, the other sprang into renewed action quickly. Jon was caught in the belly, the breastplate preventing any real damage, but he was winded all the same and reeled back, losing his balance. Stunned by the blow, he didn’t right himself in time and hit the packed earth with a crunch of metal and a jarring pain that convulsed the length of his body. He lay there for what seemed an age, aware of little beyond the ringing in his ears. Footsteps approached, voices spoke but whether they were directed at him he could not tell. Soon enough, however, hands that were not his own gripped the sides of his helm. The new dents in the metal scratched against his cheeks as it was pulled roughly off his head but the feeling was neutralised by the cooler air rushing against his face.

With his view now unimpeded, he found himself looking up at Ser Barristan and the young knights he had roped into taking part in his first training exercise. To his quiet satisfaction, they all looked battered and sweaty, flushed in the face from the fight he had given them. To his even quieter chagrin, the one who had knocked him out as a bloke who, had he not been in breastplate, would have looked more at home among Sansa’s little flock of friends than any training yard. He was just as pretty as any of them.

Whatever negative feelings he had, or any disappointment, was soon banished. Within moments of his defeat, and given a little time to cool down, he was more than ready to do it all again. Sadly, however, Ser Barristan called a halt to the day’s training and extended a hand to Jon. He took it and hauled himself up, assisted by Ser Lady who gave him a hearty slap on the back. His metal gauntlet rang against Jon’s back plate.

"You fought well," he said, excitedly. "I mean it, very well. For a moment there, after you beat my cousin into the dirt, I thought you had me."

Jon found himself warming to the other man. "Thank you, Ser."

"Loras," he said, shaking Jon’s still gauntleted hand. "Loras Tyrell. I trust I’ll be seeing more of you
in the training yards from now on."

"I'm look forward to it, ser Loras," he replied.

He pulled off a gauntlet and thanked the other knights he had fought, shaking their hands and exchanging encouragement. He almost blushed as one of them – Loras' cousin – even asked him for advice on how to pull off a certain move. After a minute or so, they all began going their separate ways. They returned to their lords, while Jon returned to the shelter of the armoury to take off his heavy breastplate. As he turned, he noticed the Queen watching from the battlements of Maegor's Holdfast that towered above them, Sansa stood behind her, looking startled. She had looked startled as they broke their fast together, too. He bowed his head to them both before going on his way.

Back inside the armoury, he divested himself of the heavy armour. Every undergarment he wore now clung to his body like a second skin, soaked through with sweat. He wrinkled his nose, wishing he was back in the Northern snows, and picked at his tunic gingerly.

"Ah, there you are; I was looking for you," said Ser Barristan, stepping through the door of the armoury. "How do you think you did?"

"It was harder than I thought it would be," he admitted. "I grew tired faster than usual, I struggled with moves I thought I could do in my sleep. Back at Winterfell, I could have taken four opponents easily. But I don't know why I struggled so today."

Ser Barristan leaned against the countertop, casually returning blunted swords to their rightful homes on a rack. "I bet those four opponents you took on at Winterfell were the same four opponents. Is that the right of it?"

Jon thought about it for a second: Robb, Theon, a few others on steady rotation... "Yes, I suppose."

"You're not in Winterfell sparring with your brothers now, Jon," Ser Barristan explained, not unkindly. "All those lads you fought today: they're older than you and more experienced than you, they're trained knights, the best of their age from all over the realm. And still you held your own against them and it took four to overcome you. And when you grow used to the heat, you'll not tire so easily."

Jon hadn't thought of that and Ser Barristan was right. He'd never really competed against anyone outside Winterfell and now he was playing against the best of the best. As for the heat... he'd felt like he was cooking alive in his armour and soaked to the skin with sweat. He was used to the snow and ice, but King's Landing was all dust and dry heat.

"The tourney of the Hand takes place in a month," Ser Barristan continued. "I want you in it. Moreover, I want you winning the competitions I enter you for."

"But, Ser Barristan," he cut in. "I can't-"

"If I didn't think you could, I wouldn't enter you," the old knight interjected, giving him an encouraging smile in the process. "So no more of this 'I can't' business. With a little refinement and a lot of hard work, you can. I'll make sure you can."

And Jon knew he wanted it. He wasn't even going to try and deny it to himself. He wanted in on that tourney, he wanted to beat his rivals into the dirt and he wanted to be in the middle of a big, fat melee. The desire had sparked inside him and taken light.

"I'll train every day," he promised. "I'm weak with a lance, but I know I can improve."
"Focus on what you're good at," Barristan advised, placing his hands on Jon's shoulders. "I want you down here every day, all day. But, seeing as it's your first proper session, I'll let you off early today."

Jon grinned. "Thank you, Ser Barristan."

"Good, now run along and I'll see you first thing on the morrow," the other man replied, gently nudging him back into the light of day. "There's a short cut back to the Tower of the Hand if you go down the set of steps through the west wall and follow the passageway until you reach a mosaic. Then take the steps back to ground level and you'll find you'll be there."

Jon thanked him again, walking out into the yard with a renewed confidence. As he went, he tried to imagine what a tourney would be like, how hard it would be and what he could do to improve his game enough to be a worthy contender. So much so, he almost walked past the short cut Ser Barristan had told him about. The stone archway that marked the stairwell was made of the same red brick that had been used to construct the whole keep, making it blend in nicely with the wall. But he found it well enough on his second walk past. The stairwell was also narrow and twisting into the darkness below. Light came from beacons set at irregular intervals on the walls, their flames flickering in unseen draughts.

It wasn't entirely unlike the crypts back at Winterfell, enough to give him an uncomfortable reminder of the dreams that had plagued him as a child. The ones where he found himself walking the empty castle, the rooms filled with bones, until he reached the crypts and the darkness pulled him under.

But the Red Keep wasn't Winterfell and the vault he found himself in was somehow even stranger. It was long, but wide, with a high stone vaulted ceiling that made every one of his footsteps echo. The air was filled with dust and the dank smell of neglect. Lined up along either side of the walls were monstrous statues. Heads with long teeth, maws large enough to fit a horse and carriage through. Jon stopped, chilled by the cold, subterranean air and studied the statues carefully. Getting closer, he could see they were no statues.

'Bone,' he thought to himself, 'Dragon bone.'

The surface of the largest skull shone, drinking in the light from a nearby brazier. It was as black as onyx and, so close to it, Jon could see his own face reflected darkly back at him. Fascinated by them, he dared to touch the bone between the beast's empty eye sockets and still had the creeping feeling the thing could still sense him. Much bigger than him, he had to stand on tiptoes to reach it, then found it warm to the touch. It was if the bone retained the heat of the dragon's fires even so many centuries after its death.

He remembered seeing the dragon pit on Rhaenys' Hill the day before, and wondered what it would have been like to stand where he stood and see these magnificent creatures flying in and out like giant ravens. His forebears rode them. It was only seeing them, their skulls alone, that brought it all home to him. That, had he been born at the right time, he might have ridden a dragon himself. What would it have been like…

"Balerion the Black Dread."

Startled, Jon gasped as he whipped around toward the speaker whom he had not heard approaching. He found himself looking at a large man, thoroughly overweight and garbed in bright silks not unlike a lady's gown. The man was holding up an oil lantern, revealing dagged sleeves so deep they whispered against the stone floor as he moved closer. Jon could see his face was as smooth and round as a child's. Besides that, the man was oddly featureless.

"Erm… I'm looking for the steps that lead to the-"
"Tower of the Hand," the man finished for him. "I know who you are, Jon Stark."

He was disconcerted enough to not bristle at the sound of his name. "Well then, you'll also know my father is waiting for me. I best be on my way."

"You won't get very far if you just go charging off," replied the man, reaching for some keys on his belt. "Ser Barristan told me you were coming this way, so I better unlock the gate for you."

Relieved at the explanation for the fat man's omnipotent knowledge, Jon suppressed a sigh of relief and followed him as he led the way out. As he walked, Jon caught the smell of his scent. A sweet and cloying perfume that he was surprised he did not notice sooner. They reached an iron gate was indeed locked, and whined in protest as the fat man used the right key. Before leaving the dragon vault, however, he looked back at them.

"Beautiful really, aren't they?"

Jon agreed. "Very much so. Are they all there?"

"Oh yes," he replied. "Look to the back and you'll see the babies."

Naturally, it had been the monstrously huge ones that had caught Jon's eye. But looking back now he could see the smaller ones too, some no bigger than dog skulls, that receded the way he came. Although not as impressive, they still held a beauty of their own. Some were white, others a pale blue or red. Most were onyx black. The rage of their fires now long extinguished only served to make the silence heavier.

"I see them," he said, at length. "I'm surprised King Robert kept them."

"King Robert is full of surprises," the man replied. "Not even he would destroy such beauty, but sweep it out of the way. We will never see their likes again."

The man sounded oddly wistful, his pale eyes misting with something akin to nostalgia. For a long moment, it seemed as if he'd forgotten what he was meant to be doing. But before he could show Jon through the gates, running footsteps jolted them both.

"Jon!"

Sansa came shuddering to an abrupt halt at the sight of the large man with him. It seemed she had expected him to be alone and now she stood there, wide-eyed and glancing between them both.

"Pardon me, Lord Varys," she said, remembering her courtesies. Jon hadn't even thought to ask the man his name. "I was just looking for my brother."

"It seems you've found him," Varys replied to her. Turning back to Jon, he added: "Your sister and I are already acquainted. Isn't that so, Lady Stark?"

Lord Varys remained with them, escorting them to the hallway with the stairwell leading up to the Tower of the Hand. That was where the mosaic Barristan mentioned was. A three-headed dragon picked out in coloured tiles. Another relic of the fallen Targaryens. Meanwhile, Varys was chattering to Sansa, a relief to him since it let him off the hook. Even if he did rather mislike the line of questioning.

"I trust my lady has been meeting the young lords and knights of the court? So many to choose from, so much valour and heroism."
Jon hoped she was remembering the talk they had before they left Winterfell.

"Oh, yes. But my father will arrange a suitable match for me when the time is right, my lord," she answered.

*Good girl,* Jon thought to himself.

"I met Ser Loras, whom I think might be the most gallant knight in all the seven kingdoms," Sansa gushed. "And then I saw my brother beat him into the dirt in the sparring yard."

Jon stifled a laugh. That wasn't quite how he remembered the sparring match, but he let Sansa have her moment. Meanwhile, Varys studied her keenly for a moment.

"I know a young lord even more gallant than Ser Loras Tyrell and, trust me my lady, Loras Tyrell is really not your match," he said, ingratiatingly. "No, this young lord I know is not at Court yet. Sadly. But one day, he will be. And only the most refined and noble of young ladies will be – "

"Thank you, Lord Varys, but I am quite certain my sister's refinement and nobility quite speaks for itself," Jon cut in abruptly. "I can show her the rest of the way myself."

The way powerbrokers coveted his sisters grated on his nerves, and this was no different to the Lannisters who currently prowled around Sansa in ever decreasing circles. Whoever this young lord was, his knuckles undoubtedly grazed the ground he walked on and probably had cauliflower ears to boot. He told Sansa as much before she could round on him for being rude, after Varys had left them and they'd made it to the Tower.

"What was it you wanted to see me about anyway?" he asked. "I don't have long, I need to bathe."

The sweat had dried and he was starting to stink. Something he was keenly aware that poor Sansa must have noticed by now. She didn't let on, though, as she glanced up and down the stairs as if checking the coast was clear. After that, she opened the door of his chambers and shoved him inside with a force that took him by surprise.

"Sansa! What are you doing?"

"Shush," she said. "Listen, you've got to beat them all."

"Who?"

"All of them!" she insisted, urgently. Then fell silent, but there was something on her mind. He could tell. "At the Tourney. Make sure you beat them all."

Jon was aghast. "It's only a friendly competition, Sansa. It's not a real war. No one's lives depend upon it."

"You don't understand," she said, looking a little desperate now. "There's things you don't know and … and … and- "

She stammered into silence, growing red in the face.

"Oh, never mind! Just, make sure you beat them all. And when you do, be the most gallant about it. Like, it doesn't really matter."

Jon was confused. "But it doesn't matter. Look, whatever's brought this on, obviously I'm going to do my best and if I win, I win. All right? Now go and find Jeyne, I'm busy."
He stepped past her, leaving her in his room as he went to avail himself of his father's bath house. Every part of him, and bits he never knew he had, ached from the sparring session and drove the strangeness from his mind.

Lyanna breathed a sigh of relief when she saw Ned at the meeting of the Small Council, that afternoon. Although still pale, he looked like he'd slept and he more than held his own against his new fellow councillors. With their holidays to the North well and truly over, business commenced with as regular monotony as ever. Debts, incomes, expenditure and policy rattled along while poor Lord Rosby stooped in his seat and almost fell asleep.

All over by noon, she held back and waited for her brother to gather up his papers.

"That wasn't so bad," he said. "But court sits on the morrow. Is that throne as uncomfortable as it looks?"

She answered with a rueful nod. "Just mind where you're positioning your arse before you throw yourself down in it. A little caution prevents a highly undignified start to your reign as Hand of the King."

On the day she married Robert, once everyone had left the feast, he had carried her up the steps to the throne and attempted some kind of drunken sex act. It ended badly. Now that was an undignified start to a reign as Queen Consort. It was funny, though.

"Ser Barristan was tutoring Jon," said Eddard. "But where did Lord Varys disappear to?"

"Up his own arse, probably," she answered in an undertone. "I'm certain we'll be graced with his presence on the morrow, when you're taking petitions."

They left the throne room and found themselves crossing the inner courtyard. All around them, Maegor's Holdfast, the Tower of the Hand and the central keep towered above them, casting them in shadow. It was to the Tower of the Hand they made their way, with Ser Boros Blount of the Kingsguard following at a discreet distance. His white cloak billowed on the breeze, revealing the sword sheathed at his hip.

"I saw Jon earlier," she said. "It seems my nephew is expected to do well in this tourney."

Eddard sighed heavily in response. "You know how I feel. It's an expensive waste. All the same, I want to see the boy do well."

"So, you'll be there to watch him compete?" she asked. "Having you there would make a huge difference, Ned. If you don't look quite so miserable, it would be even better. But just having you there would be enough."

Despite himself, he laughed. "Of course I'll be there. His sisters, too. Speaking of which, I wondered if you might speak with Robert about a tutor for Arya?"

"Arya?" she asked, curiously. "Is she becoming a handful?"

"Always!" he retorted. "But no. She was upset about something, then rather guiltily admitted she had been gifted a sword – I suspect Jon, it's certainly Mikken's work. It matters not, because I am not angry. But if she wants to learn swordplay I would rather she learned from an expert and not in secret, behind my back."

Now Lyanna was laughing. "You mean, not like me."
"You both have a touch of the wolf blood," he said. "Father tried to fight it and I saw how that tactic failed him. So, with Arya, I thought I might try to harness it."

She once knocked Benjen into the pool of the godswood when she was no older than Arya. What little she had learned on the sly had long since left her and she had settled down in the end. But she would be a fool to deny that Arya was in the same place she was, all those years ago.

"Why not let her sit in on Ser Barristan's lessons with Jon?" she asked. "I'm sure neither will mind."

"No. I want her to have her own teacher," Ned insisted. "Something just for her, do you understand? Jon has his proper knight's training, even if he doesn't become a knight. Sansa will soon be learning high harp. And I want Arya to have something of her own, too."

"Of course, brother," she nodded. "And I understand. I can't really think of anyone off hand, but I'm sure Robert will. I'll ask him for you. Or, better yet, you can come and sup with us this evening and ask him yourself."

He agreed as they reached the entrance to the Tower of the Hand, she turned and dismissed her guard. After that, they proceeded to Ned's new apartments on their own.

Servants had been in during the day and Ned's household staff had organised the unpacking of whatever was left. Order had been restored and the direwolf of house stark now flew from the ramparts of the Tower of the Hand. And nor was it before time, she thought.

"I'm thinking of going to Dragonstone," said Ned, pulling out his desk chair.

Lyanna took up a place in front of it. "I'm sure Stannis will greet you with a fanfare of trumpets, brother."

Ned laughed drily. "Heralded by angels, I'm sure."

Everything was so hard to tell where Stannis was concerned. He was Robert's heir, he had been treated like Robert's heir and given Dragonstone to rule – just as the Targaryens did. But still he acted like it was a slight on his good character.

"He may not like us, but I think he respects you," she said. "But go, by all means. Try to talk him into coming back, because he still has a place on the small council."

"And then there's the Lannisters," he added.

"At least you'll be safe from them on Dragonstone," she ceded. "Well, what about them?"

"Lady Lannister, I think, is interested in marrying her eldest son to my Sansa."

Her light mood left her, bringing her cautiousness to the fore. "He's not exactly a pleasant boy, from what I hear. But rumours and words are wind. I do not know him. Cersei's at Court a lot, but she rarely brings Joffrey. And … well… the rumours."

"Rumours?"

"That they're bastards fathered by her twin brother," she said, dropping her voice. "It's only a rumour, but do you want to take the risk? With Sansa, too. If this turns out to be true after she's married Joff, she'll be cast down with him."

Wars had been started on lesser rumours than that. Personally, she didn't think it was worth it. And,
going by the look on her brother's face, he quite agreed.

Alone in her new chambers, Sansa inwardly remonstrated with herself over her failure to tell Jon what she had overheard. When she found him in the vault Lord Varys had been with him. By the time he was gone, Jon was too busy to talk and she had not seen him since. Even if she had told him, would he believe her? She still couldn't quite believe it herself. Between then and now, she had tried to lose herself in the pages of Florian and Jonquil, then taken up her needlework and later tried brushing out Lady's coat. While it helped her think, none of her usual activities eased her anguish over what to do.

Now, she perched on the end of her bed and gazed out of her open terrace door. She watched the net curtains swell on the sea breeze, curling a lock of hair around her finger as her mind wandered far and wide.

Lyanna was the first puzzle she tried to figure out. Sansa had heard the story – everyone at Winterfell had heard it – but no one ever dared talk about it. How Rhaegar had stolen her away and the war began for Robert to get her back. But she had heard Lyanna say it herself: Jon was a trueborn Targaryen and not a bastard at all. So she and Rhaegar were married, which she must have consented to.

Light-headed, Sansa rose to her feet and paced toward the open terrace door. What if, she wondered, Prince Rhaegar had been her aunt's one true love after all? What if they had eloped together and the Prince was actually saving her from some awful fate, trusting that their love for each other alone would see them right in the end? Oh, it made Sansa's heart race to think that could have happened. But they were wrong. The war began and her aunt's one true love was cruelly slain on the field of battle and his family cast into penniless exile. And Lyanna, widowed at the height of her love, left with only a helpless babe in her arms to remind her of the Prince she had loved and lost.

Sansa didn't notice the tears dripping down her cheeks. It was all too much! And that was before she considered Jon in all of this. Because of course he had to be raised in secret. He would be killed if anyone found out his real identity, just like Aegon and Rhaenys. A victim of circumstance, the last Targaryen Prince – the heir to the iron throne itself – had to be given a bastard's name and raised in secret in a castle far, far north of his rightful home. Amidst the snow and ice, he had to endure an even colder step-mother and suffer a bastard's shame. Year after year and never realising who he truly was… The rightful King.

Jon felt like the hero in a story. No, he was the hero of his own story. Perhaps, she thought, he would perform some massively heroic deed and he would be dramatically revealed before everyone as the last dragon prince and the whole realm would fall at his feet? That was how all the best stories ended.

Sansa had to stop herself, she couldn't think of it anymore. It was so… so… so unbearably romantic. She thought her heart might stop at any second, so she returned to her bed and lay down flat on her back. If she did die now, she at least wanted to look decorous for when someone found her there. So many people had warned her that life was not a storybook. From where she was looking right now, they were wrong.
Out of the Question

Whether it was the floorboards making that creaking noise or Grand-Maester Pycelle's old knees, Lyanna couldn't tell. But she could definitely hear the old man rattling about his chambers all the same. She leaned closer to the door and wondered whether she ought to knock again, but didn't want to rush the old thing either. Instead, she cleared her throat and rather awkwardly called out.

"Grand Maester … Grand Maester, it's the Queen."

From within the chamber, hands fumbled at the latch quickly followed by the groaning of the old hinges. Pycelle's wrinkled brow and voluminous white beard appeared through the aperture. He regarded her for a second, narrow-eyed as though he didn't quite believe she was who she said she was. Which was fair enough, she supposed. She even took a backward step so he could get her in view.

"Ah, your grace," he said, cheerfully. "Enter and be welcome."

Lyanna found herself being admitted to a large chamber filled with ancient tomes, strange instruments, Myrish lenses and a myriad of tools she could not put a name to. A pretty astrolabe sat on the window ledge, catching the sun. She didn't dare touch anything, so hovered in the middle of the room rather stiffly.

"With your grace's leave, I would caution against this course of action." His gravelly voice rattled from his chest, sounding like an admonishing grandfather. "It could be called unwise, in light of what happened before."

Nevertheless, he had reached for a silver vial engraved with Robert's coat of arms. She took it from him and lifted the lid, wafting the liquid inside under her nose. It had little by way of scent and she couldn't even remember what the last dose smelled like, either.

"I'll take the risk," she said. "Who knows? It might even work. Did you follow the recipe to the letter?"

The look on his face suggested she was questioning his expertise in the matter. She wasn't, of course. She didn't know the first thing about herblore or medicine. She just needed reassurance.

"Absolutely to the last letter, your grace," he said, sternly. "And, if you want my opinion, the potion is entirely useless when it comes to promoting fertility."

"But you also said that none of the ingredients in this potion would have caused an adverse reaction," she said. "That's right, isn't it?"

Pycelle frowned, the sparkle in his blue eyes sharpening in concentration. "Every herb that makes that potion is commonly used in other remedies, your grace. You've probably imbibed them in other medicines for other maladies such as sleeplessness or headaches. If you had no reaction to those, there's no reason why you should have had a violent reaction to this."

She listened to the Maester's explanations, wondering all the time why the last dose had almost killed her. The list of ingredients was utterly innocuous and Pycelle just confirmed what she already suspected.

"Your Grace, please, listen," Pycelle continued. "If you take that potion you may well fall severely ill again. It is possible. What isn't possible, is conception. You will not get with child just from taking
this."

She had told herself she was trying this concoction again purely for academic reasons. Just to see if it was this that had made her so ill, the last time. She had a feeling it wasn't. But, hearing the outright refutation of its abilities to promote fertility nevertheless brought a shiver of bitter dismay to her.

"Thank you, Grand Maester. You have the antidote you gave me last time?"

"But, there's no guarantee-"

"Thank you, Grand Maester," she cut in with finality. "I appreciate your help and I don't want to take up any more of your time."

She supposed he was worried about Robert finding out. He had pleaded with her to stop all this after the last incident. But this was different. This was about more than trying to get with child. She took another small vial, this one in gold plate and bid the old Grand Maester good day.

Outside his chambers, in a turret north of Maegor's Holdfast, she paused in the outer-gallery and sniffed at the 'fertility' potion again. She hesitated a moment, pausing with the vial touching her lips. Now or forever hold your peace, she thought to herself and swallowed the lot in one go. The taste made her wince, the knowledge that she had swallowed something that had once made her violently ill had her struggling to keep it down. But hold it down she did, then closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths to ease her racing heart.

Several minutes later, she was still alive and breathing the open air of the Red Keep's inner courtyard. Jon was fighting off several competitors with Ser Barristan shouting instructions from the side lines, Sansa was watching from the spectator's stands not far off, with Jeyne Poole at her side. Over by the perimeter wall, leading to the Mud Gate, an open wagon full of rowdy, cat-calling boys was stationary. Lyanna watched them for a moment, wondering what they were doing there. Until she remembered Yoren.

She reached for a set of keys attached to her belt and set off across the courtyard. A loud wolf-whistle rent the air as she approached, coming from the direction of the boys now jumping up and down on the wagon. Another had dived off the end, landing on his head on the cobbles.

"That's a particularly vile rabble, your grace."

Lyanna hadn't even heard Cersei Lannister's approach, but the woman herself had materialised at her side. She surveyed the riotous Night's Watch recruits with a look of cool disdain in her emerald green eyes.

"They look thoroughly charming, don't they?" replied Lyanna. "Well, the sooner I let Yoren into the black cells the sooner he can take our prisoners and be on his way. I had best get moving."

"Do you mind if I walk with you?"

"You're welcome to."

The two of them set off across the courtyard, back towards the Red Keep. Deep below the castle, a network of cells spread out in the damp and dark, with not so much as a stray chink of daylight penetrating the thick walls. It was where they kept their prisoners, many of whom boasted of being the most dangerous men in the realm. Those who refused to join the Night's Watch would be left to rot, others would be executed in due course. Whatever they chose, their future was bleak.

"Are you quite all right, your grace? You're looking a little pale." Cersei's golden brow creased.
"Am I?" Lyanna replied, abruptly. "Am I really?"

She had been feeling a little odd since taking the potion, but that was just nerves. Or was it because she really did react badly to the ingredients, last time? Cersei went to reply, but was cut off by a particularly loud catcall from the rowdy recruits just a few feet behind them.

"Teats out, blondie!"

The challenge was met with a roar of laughter from the catcaller's erstwhile companions. Cersei stiffened, her eyes turning icy.

"I think he means you," Lyanna pointed out.

Whatever happened next, it was going to be interesting. Cersei turned sharply on her heels, facing the jeering crowd of 'admirers' and began taking slow, measured paces in their direction. Instantly, the lads fell silent, grinning like idiots in the face of their impending destruction. Lyanna followed at a distance, an expectant smile on her lips. Meanwhile, Cersei was cold as ice.

"Who said that?"

She was answered by snorting laugh from the lackwits in black.

"It was you, wasn't it?" Cersei continued.

The hapless creature was rooted to the spot, gaping open mouthed at Lady Lannister's dangerously calm approach. He wore the look of a man just waiting for the axe to fall.

"They dared me – Oooh!"

His sentence turned into a strangled cry as Cersei's hand struck, quick as a viper, and clenched his groin. Lyanna watched as the other woman's fingers dug into tender flesh, vice-like, tightening and twisting. The poor catcaller could barely breathe, never mind fight back.

"As you can imagine, a woman of my standing doesn't get her teats out for just anyone," Cersei explained, as calm as a milk pond. "I like to know what's down there, I like to know if you're a real man."

She stopped talking and gave the lad's balls another thoughtful squeeze for consideration. As Lyanna watched over Lady Lannister's shoulder, the young lad was turning beet red, sweat beading on his brow. The only sound he seemed capable of making was a high-pitched, wavering whimper somewhere at the edge of hearing. His comrades looked on, torn between hilarity and horror. Not one of them stepped forward to help. In fact, a large and fat boy that cowered in the corner, covered in cuts and bruises, looked quite happy.

Lyanna feigned a sympathetic look. "It's just as well you won't be needing your manhood where you're going, isn't it?"

Another high whimper came in reply as he slowly sank to his knees in the dirt. Instead of letting him go, Cersei tightened her grip one last time and leaned down as he sank. Once he was on his knees at her feet, with sweat now dripping down his face, she leaned in close to his ear: "Tell the white walkers: Cersei Lannister sends her regards."

She released her grip and stood with her head held high, turning her back on the gasping, sweating catcaller who'd tried to humiliate her. A cheer of approval greeted her as she and Lyanna carried on with their business as if nothing had happened.
Jon watched as his mother and Lady Lannister made their way back across the yard, a wry smile on his face. "What was all that about?"

"One of those Night's Watch recruits picked on the wrong lady," Ser Barristan answered. "Well, he won't be doing that again, if he knows what's good for him."

The victim was soon back on his feet, but limping badly as he made his way back to the wagon he'd jumped off. It seemed like forever ago that he had been chomping at the bit to join the Watch. If that was the calibre of the recruits, he was beginning to think he'd made the right choice in coming south.

Losing interest in the fracas, he returned to the training yard with Ser Barristan. After the previous training session, he was fighting Ser Barristan himself today. Being put through his paces relentlessly, stopping only to have his shortcomings pointed out and to be taught new ways of defending himself while attacking others. The heat was still a problem, but he pushed himself through it and kept on fighting until every muscle ached.

When he returned to the sparring yard after Lady Cersei's brief interlude, he found Ser Loras Tyrell waiting for him. Armoured in steel, gauntleted and sword in hand, his cloak of flowers hung from his shoulders. Now it begins, Jon thought to himself. But, before it began, Ser Barristan took him aside for a quick pep talk.

"Remember everything I taught you this morning," he began. "Pace yourself, don't go rushing in. Think ahead and plan your next move."

Jon nodded. This time, it was just Ser Loras and not half his cousins too. He thought he might have a chance. However, by the time he made it back out into the sparring yard, the Night's Watch recruits were back in full force. Shouting, stamping on the wagon and throwing stones at passers-by. On the spectator's stands, Sansa shot them dirty looks.

"Seven hells, was Cersei Lannister not enough for them?" Barristan laughed.

Jon didn't think them particularly funny. They were starting to get on his last nerve. A group of them had taken to kicking a pile of cloaks, for some reason.

"You two carry on," said Ser Barristan. "I better go find Yoren and see if he can't restore order."

With that, he left Jon and Loras standing in the sparring yard with swords in hand. The aptly named Knight of Flowers extended his hand for Jon to shake.

"I didn't want to fight you the other day," he said. "Barristan told me you're only fourteen and … well, you can imagine. Safe to say, I'll not be making that mistake again."

Jon couldn't help but laugh. "That's all right, my lord. I thought Ser Barristan was just an old man, the first time we met. No one likes raising their sword to an ancient."

They took up position in the yard but, just as Jon was trying to concentrate, a fight broke out among the recruits. Even Loras noticed, swearing audibly under his breath as he glanced irritably in their direction. But something had struck Jon. The pile of cloaks he thought they were kicking. It moved now, it had arms and legs. He realised it was a person.

"Shits!" he cursed.

The one who'd been brought to his knees by Cersei Lannister had made quite a recovery and was now venting his fury on the boy at his feet. Lashing out with a wooden sparring sword, he landed a
blow on the fallen boy's head. Having put his arms up to protect himself, the blow landed on the boy's forearm.

Jon had seen enough. He pushed past Ser Loras, vaulted the low wall of the sparring yard and ran across the courtyard. Ghost had woken up and followed at his heels. As soon as he reached the gaggle of bullies now crowded around their victim, he struck out with a blunted tourney sword.

"Leave him be!" he snapped to them all.

Ghost had hunkered down at Jon's side, teeth bared in a silent snarl. But when one of the recruits went to smack Jon around the head with a wooden sword, the wolf lunged while Jon fended off another. All the while, the boy they'd been picking on lay on the floor and whimpered.

"Run!" Jon implored him as he blocked another attack. "Will you just run!"

In the moment of distraction – barely a split second – one of the attackers lunged at Jon. Leaping from the top of the wagon, he grabbed Jon from behind and tried to drag him to the ground while another kicked the tourney sword out of his hand. Jon responded by elbowing one in the face, busting his nose wide open and throwing the boy on his back over his shoulder and giving him a sharp kick in the groin. He really hoped it was the same one Lady Lannister had hurt earlier on.

Meanwhile, Ser Loras realised what was happening and come charging into the fight to help Jon.

"Get him out of here," he called over to Jon, meaning the fallen boy.

More than happy to leave this rabble to Ser Loras, he called Ghost to heel and punched another of the lads still causing trouble. With no sword, he had no other choice but to resort to his fists. However, the victim of the assault still lay quivering in a heap on the floor. His lip was swollen and bloodied, bruises formed on his face where he'd been punched and kicked. He was so afraid he could not move.

"Come with me," said Jon, holding out his hand to help him up.

The fallen boy trembled and bled.

"Come on!" Jon sounded angry now. He couldn't understand why he wouldn't even help himself. "Seven hells!"

He dragged the boy to his feet, a feat that proved impossible because of his bulk. But he came to his senses before too long and hauled himself up. Although still only a new recruit, who hadn't taken his vows because he hadn't even made it to the Wall yet, he was already dressed in clean blacks. Expensive, too. He was no barefoot urchin scooped off the streets. If Jon didn't know any better, he'd say the lad was highborn.

"Follow me," he urged him. "I know where to go."

He grabbed the lad's wrist and began running toward the Red Keep. But, overweight and completely out of shape, the other boy had difficulty keeping up. At the same time, Jon struggled to think of somewhere to hide. He didn't know the castle yet. Only the Dragonvault, where he had been the day before. Underground and out of sight, it would have to serve.

He found the steps easily, this time. Rather than waste time telling the lad following where to go, he grabbed him again and almost shoved him down the stone steps. His breathing was laboured, sweat now mingled with the blood that oozed from his busted nose and split lip – his face was a mess.
As soon as they were underground and away from the baying tormentors of the Watch, Jon slowed the pace and let the other boy catch him up.

However, at the foot of the stairwell, he collapsed. He couldn't even talk for breathing so hard. For a moment, Jon was at a loss for what to do. He had nothing to tend the wounds with and didn't even know the lad's name. But help came from an unlikely source. Jon had forgotten that Sansa and Jeyne Poole were watching from afar. Now, both of them came running down the steps with their skirts hitched above their ankles.

"We saw what happened," Sansa explained between her own laboured breaths. "We saw it all."

"Is he all right?" Jeyne was wide-eyed with fear.

"Erm," said Jon, nodding at the semi-conscious form now trembling in the stairwell. "Well, he's alive still and that's a start."

Both girls had silk handkerchiefs which they now used to dab the fallen boy's open wounds. He seemed to come around a little, his pale blue eyes slowly moving into focus. A few minutes later, supported by Jon and Sansa, he was slowly limping into the Dragonvault proper. He gasped at the sight of the monstrous dragon skulls – it seemed he was afraid of everything. He couldn't even stammer out words of thanks as Jon and the girls settled him beside one of the dragon skulls, leaning him against one of the sturdier beasts.

"Don't be afraid, Lord Tarly," said Sansa. "Jeyne and I saw everything, if anyone asks we'll tell them exactly what those boys did to you."

Lord Tarly? Jon frowned at his sister. How did she know that? She knows everyone. How does she know everyone? She caught the look on his face and pointed to a small sigil on his tunic.

"The striding huntsman," she said, sighing mightily. "House Tarly of Horn Hill, sworn to House Tyrell of the Reach. Jon, you really need to know these things."

Jon shrugged, but before he could ask why he needed to know the sigil of every Westerosi house both high and small, the boy finally talked.

"I'm Sam," he blurted out. "Just Sam."

Jon knelt to be even with him. "Well, Just Sam, we'll look after you now."

Sansa looked thrilled, smiling brightly. "Jon's my brother and he can defend anyone. I know it."

Jon's eyes narrowed as he looked at her now. For some reason, he had risen remarkably high in Sansa's favours. The days of "he's our half-brother" seemed a dim and distant memory. But why? He remembered the day he was legitimised at Winterfell, the look of mild disapproval she had worn on her face, mirroring her mother's. Now she looked at him as if he was a god among men. She's up to something…

Even settled and Lyanna was pleased to see she was still alive. The potion she took had made her a little drowsy, compelling her to let herself into Robert's chambers to sleep it off in his bed. Now she awoke with him at her side, they made love together before sharing a light meal on his terrace.

"Do you remember the fertility medicine that almost killed me?" she asked.

"Lya, we've talked about this," he replied, dropping his knife. "I never wanted bloody children
anyway and Stannis is my heir. When I die, if before you, you're free to go wherever you please and
remarry who you please, all my private assets will be yours. Get away from here, go somewhere the
sun never sets and let Stannis and Renly fight it out amongst themselves-

"It's not about that," she cut in. When she had his attention, she continued: "I took the recipe from
Lysa's chambers and showed it to Grand Maester Pycelle. He said there was nothing in that
concoction that could have caused such an extreme reaction. So I had him brew up another batch. I
took the same dose this morning and here I am, alive and well and in perfect health. What do you
make of that?"

Robert's countenance changed. Although he had mellowed with age, he still had the spark of his old
temper, the Laughing Storm reborn. She could see his palms growing itchy, ready to reach for the
Warhammer again. Acting quick, she topped up his wine.

"If that mad bitch tried to poison you-"

"I have no real proof it was her," she explained. "But it came from her directly. Why would she
poison something then hand it to me so openly? I know I wasn't meant to survive, but still it was
risky – as evidenced by the fact that I'm still here. Someone else could have gotten to it, tampered
with it. I don't know, Robert. All I know is, someone did something to it. Someone looking to be rid
of the barren Queen so their own fertile young daughter can be inserted into your bed. That seems
likely and Lysa simply does not fit that bill. She has no daughter of her own and she never seemed
interested in becoming Queen herself."

"And she's not exactly fertile herself," Robert pointed out. "Only one child; that sickly creature who
wears my name."

"She accused the Lannisters of poisoning Jon Arryn," she reminded him. "The letter she sent to
Catelyn. I told you, remember? Robert, there's something going on and I don't like it at all."

He looked troubled. "I'm getting a taster for you. It's something we should have had anyway. But …
Lysa's accusations. The Others take her, what proof has she that the Lannisters were involved?
They've given us no trouble and Tywin has held the west for us against the damn Ironborn for all
these years. Jaime is Warden of the East, until Robert Arryn comes of age … IF Robert Arryn comes
of age. If she's throwing around accusations thinking we'll cast them down then she's wrong."

Lyanna had almost forgotten that small detail. "And she lashed out at me when I suggested Robert be
fostered at Casterly Rock. Don't you remember? Nearly took my eye out."

"Angry enough to poison you?" he asked, eyebrow arched. "Have you talked to Ned?"

"I'm wary of talking to Ned," she admitted. "Lysa is Cat's own sister, I don't want to drive a wedge
between him and his wife's family."

"He needs to know, Lya," said Robert. "Talk to him, he might even know how to handle his damn
sister by law."

Reluctantly, she inwardly admitted that she no longer had a choice. "I think, as well, that we should
go further. If there's trouble brewing here, we may need to make new friens. As such, I think we
should lay to rest the last ghost of the rebellion – the Martells."

Was that a flicker of regret in his eyes? Lyanna thought so. The truth was, Robert had no quarrel
with Prince Doran, nor any other Martell. But they had issues with Robert … and her. And rightly
so.
"They will never have dealings with us, Lya," he said, quietly. "Not after what happened to Elia."

"That doesn't mean we shouldn't try. Let's invite them to the Tourney of the Hand," she suggested. "We won't push it. We won't try to talk them into it. Let's just send a messenger, letting them know they're welcome to join us. In fact, why don't I go myself?"

"No," he replied, firmly. "No, they'll capture you and kill you, for sure. Invite them here by all means, but they won't come. They only want our heads on spikes."

He was probably right. She thought she might be grasping at straws. Damning her eternal optimism, she returned to her meal and sipped at some wine.

"I might send Lysa Arryn to treat with them," she jested. "Two problems, one solution!"

Robert looked thoughtful as he drained his own wine glass. "The Lannisters are out of the question. My brothers are out of the question. House Stark is out of the question. The Tyrells are certainly out of the question. Who does that leave us with? Balon bloody Greyjoy?! Perhaps the King beyond the wall will put in a good word for us?"

It was a conundrum that left him in laughter.

"Gods, Robert, is there anyone the Martells do like?" she asked. "I hear Hoster Tully is frail, but what about his son? Surely, there's no bad blood between the Tullys and the Martells. They've never even met."

"I've heard the man's a fool," Robert replied, grumpy at the thought of it. "Look, we've a few months before the tourney is to begin. Just send Ser Arys Oakheart and be done with it. Think of some terms, I trust you. If the Martells turn us down then they can be damned."

Lyanna smiled and leaned over the table to kiss him. "Thank you, Robert. If we can win over the Martells, maybe we can still win over Lysa Arryn too."

Ser Arys was kingsguard, noble enough and he had nothing to do with the rebellion. He was as close as they got to impartial. As for Lysa, that left Lyanna cold.
Lady

Lady had always been the sweetest of the wolves. Placid and calm, trusting the people around her to do her no harm. She always sat so still while Sansa spent hours brushing out her coat and she meekly accepted the silk leash fixed to her collar. When she was walked around the castle grounds, she remained always at her owner's heel and never growled or bared her teeth at strangers. Ghost prowled around Jon, tense and spiky, traits made all the more ominous by his silence and stealth. Nymeria was unruly and prone to sulks. But, Lyanna had seen perfect strangers stop to ruffle Lady's fur – as if she was just a large version of the dogs they kept at home.

Therefore, it came as a shock when Lady reared up and snapped her huge maws in the face of Joffrey Lannister. Fury flashed in the wolf's eyes, the silk leash tearing as if it were paper. Sansa had acted quick to bring her back under control and no real damage had been done. Joffrey got out of the way, escaping with nothing more than a bad tear in the sleeve of his scarlet samite doublet.

All the same, the boy had been left shaken. A flicker of fear crossed his features, normally so supremely smug and superior. Fear, soon followed by anger at both the wolf and her owner. Moments before, the boy had been all simpering sweetness as he approached his prospective bride. But that was before he met her wolf.

Lyanna did what she could to diffuse any tension before it could build up. "I'm so sorry, Lady Lannister, I've never seen Lady behave like this before. I'll pay for any damage done, of course."

Cersei looked furious but couldn't very well pick a fight with the Queen or the Queen's twelve-year-old niece. Especially not when there was an advantageous marriage to be made. All the same, she couldn't hold back after her child had been humiliated. "Court is no place for an animal so wild and savage as a wolf. How long do you think it will be before it turns on Lady Sansa?"

"Like I said, Lady has never done anything like this before," Lyanna countered, kneeling to smooth Lady's bristling fur. "She must have felt threatened."

"Joffrey did nothing to that beast!" Cersei retorted, eyes flashing dangerously.

"And the beast did nothing to me," Joffrey cut in from afar, where Sansa was making sure he was all right. "Look, the stupid thing didn't even scratch me. Just my coat. Pathetic, really."

He held up his forearm, showing the jagged tear in the fabric. Meanwhile, Lady was still on edge, her teeth bared and ears flat against her head. Still, Joffrey Lannister salved his wounded pride with empty, self-aggrandising boasts. But Lyanna had seen the fear in his eyes and so had Sansa, something that would wound a boy like Joff far more than being snapped at by an oversized dog.

Sansa got up from where she had knelt by Joffrey's side, her face expressionless. She crossed over to where Lady now circled Lyanna and kissed the space between the wolf's eyes – a show of love in the face of a petulant boy's insults. But, just as the situation seemed to be calming down, Varys came wafting over the lawns from the gods only knew where: a place where he'd clearly seen the whole sorry incident unfold.

"Oh dear, I saw what happened and I do hope everything is all right?" he asked, smooth brow uncharacteristically wrinkled in concern. "Normally such a placid creature, too. I cannot imagine what brought that on."

"Everything is quite all right Varys, thank you," Lyanna said.
"Oh, piss off, Varys!" Cersei snapped.

Despite the gravity of the situation, Lyanna laughed. A brief and choked affair, but it was enough to diffuse the rapidly building tension. She was only sorry the Master of Whispers had provided an unwitting release valve.

"As I said, Lord Varys, it was just a very unfortunate incident that I'm certain my niece will not allow to happen again," said Lyanna.

"I won't, I promise," said Sansa. "Lady's a good girl, she's never done anything like this before."

But, even as she spoke, Lady grew tense yet again. She shied from them, circling Sansa's legs protectively. Cersei said that Joffrey had done nothing to the beast, and Lyanna realised she was right. It was Sansa that Lady was protecting. _That wolf knows something…_

Mercifully, Varys took the hint and vanished after a wary glance at the wolf. Cersei watched him leaving, a look of supreme distaste on her face. "Apologies, your grace, but that man makes my skin crawl. Anyway, after today's unfortunate event, I think Joff and I will bid you good day. Hopefully, we can try again soon, since I do think Sansa and Joff will get on ever so well. Once they understand each other better."

Lyanna highly doubted that, but she played along all the same. "I'm sure. Oh, but before you go, tell me: Ser Gregor Clegane was always a highly skilled tourney knight. I do hope he'll be competing in the Hand's Tourney?"

The question was a little out of the blue, even taking Cersei by surprise. "Yes, I suppose he will be representing House Lannister. As will Joffrey, of course."

"Excellent news!" she replied, breezily. "Good luck, Joffrey. I'm sure you'll do your mother and dear departed father proud."

Joffrey flashed her a smile that would have been ingratiating if it hadn't been for the deep scowl he also wore. However, Jon had now appeared at her side, clearly displeased about something. He watched the departing Lannisters, looking like a dog licking piss off a thistle. It seemed the Queen's day was about to get even better.

"A highly skilled tourney knight?" Jon repeated, glaring at her. "The man's an animal, you said it yourself- "

"Jon, keep your voice down!" she scolded. "We're busy and your sister is upset, you're not helping- "

"You invited the Mountain to court!" he cut in, angrily. "You're buttering up the Lannisters for Sansa's sake and it's disgusting!"

Without another word, before even explaining why he had come, Jon stalked away without so much as a backward glance. With a sinking heart, Lyanna watched him vanish through the doors, shoving past Jeyne Poole as he went. Then Jeyne met her gaze and she knew more good news was coming.

"Your Grace," the girl curtsied. "Ser Arys Oakheart of the Kingsguard has arrived, he says he received a summons."

"Oh!" she said, welcoming a well-timed happy event. "Yes, that's right. Is he waiting in Maegor's now?"
"He is, your grace."

"Return to him and keep him company until I get there, if you will Jeyne."

She turned to see where Sansa had gotten to, and found her hugging Lady next to a rose bush. The wolf had returned completely to normal, nuzzling Sansa's auburn curls. It wasn't just Joffrey, it was Varys too. Well, she supposed, he was a spy master after all.

"I don't want to see him again," said Sansa. "Lady misliked him and so do I. Why is Jon displeased with me?"

Lyanna knelt so that she was even with her niece and the wolf. Lady greeted her with a lick to the face, the rough tongue tickling her cheek. "She's a wise wolf this one, niece. And don't be worried about the Lannisters, they're all hot air. And Jon … I fear Jon has somewhat misunderstood the situation. I'll talk to him, don't fret on it."

Sansa had been looking pale and drawn lately and Lyanna worried the southern climate wasn't quite so agreeable to her after all. But with her reassurances, the girl managed a smile as she hugged her beloved wolf close.

They returned indoors, where Ser Arys was waiting for her in the common hall of her apartments. He was a young man, handsome and noble. It came as no surprise that Jeyne was looking up at him with doe-eyed innocence. She dismissed Sansa and Jeyne to the care of Septa Mordane until she was ready to tend her horses, allowing her and Ser Arys time to talk alone.

"You're to go to Dorne with a royal invitation to the Tourney of the Hand," she said. "I suppose you knew that already?"

"I did, your grace," he answered, gravely. "A very noble gesture, I think."

"Thank you. Tell them, in fact tell Prince Oberyn directly, that Ser Gregor Clegane will also be competing," she said. "Tell Oberyn that, if he wants… Well, I think we already know what Oberyn wants. Just let him know that it will be here for the taking, if he wants it still."

Arys smiled. "Oh, I think it's safe to say that he wants it still, your grace. I will pass the message on."

"I can arrange for them both to be entered into the melee," she added. "That way, it will be easier to cover up. But if Prince Oberyn mislikes this idea, I can accommodate him in another way. The jousts, perhaps."

The jousts might even be easier. A little poison on the tip of the lance and fifteen years of enmity are assuaged in the course of one tilt. But, in the chaos of the melee, anything could happen. Now, if only could tell all this to Jon.

Jon was still in high dudgeon as he stumped back into the Dragonvault below the Tower of the Hand. However, he had made good his promise to bring food for Samwell, even if his talk with the Queen hadn't quite gone to plan. It was clear he had walked into the middle of something concerning Sansa and the Lannisters, but what that was he hadn't hung around to find out.

He found Sam, being looked after by Arya, still hidden between two of the larger dragon skulls. Yoren had gone, taking the unruly new Watch recruits with him, but the escapee was still too afraid to show his face in public. Whether it was lingering fear or the bruising, Jon couldn't tell. He suspected it was both.
"Did you speak to Aunt Lyanna?" Arya asked, looking up at him. While guarding Sam, she had drawn Needle, keeping it close to hand. He noticed bruises on her bare arms and he began to seriously wonder about the true nature of her 'dancing lessons'.

"No, she was busy," he replied, gruffly. "But here, Sam. Eat like a Queen."

He had wrapped the food up in a cheese cloth when he had lifted it from Lyanna's chambers. Cheese, oatcakes, fresh churned butter and honeycombs. Now he deposited it in Sam's lap, where he received it gratefully.

"What's wrong with you?" Arya asked, watching as he flopped down to the ground beside Sam.

She always sensed even the smallest of shifts in his mood, to the point where it would have been disconcerting. "Nothing."

"Liar!" She was goading him now, grinning. "I know when something's up."

He gave an indignant huff. "I heard her talking about Gregor Clegane. Do you know what she called him? A skilled tourney Knight. And she's very much looking forward to seeing him compete in the Tourney of the Hand."

Jon couldn't remember whether Lyanna actually said that bit about looking forward to seeing Clegane compete, now he thought on it. But she might as well have and he had every right to be indignant whether she said it or not. Fact was, she had invited a child murderer to court. Meanwhile, Arya looked at him as if she couldn't see what the problem was.

"So what?" was all she said. "Don't you think you might be, er, overreacting?"

Jon aghast, even though it occurred to him she might not appreciate the weight of history as he did. Help came from an unexpected quarter.

"Haven't you heard of the Mountain?" Sam asked, a tremor in his voice.

"He's not even here and Sam's scared of him, aren't you?" Jon interjected.

Arya wrinkled her nose. "Sam's scared of everything, though."

Not nice, but true. Even Sam himself conceded the point with a shrug.

"The Mountain is understandable, though," Sam continued. "Let's see: he rubbed his own brother's face in a live fire and scarred him for life when they were just children. Rumour has it he murdered his own sister. His wives have all died suspicious deaths. He raped and murdered Princess Elia. He murdered Rhaegar's children and dashed Prince Aegon's brains out against a wall so he was nothing more than unrecognisable pulp. Once, I even heard my father say that he wouldn't cross the Mountain. If you knew my father, you'd know the significance of that."

Jon knew about the murder of the Targaryens, but not the other stuff. He looked at Sam, quietly horror-struck. "Does your father know him?"

"No," he admitted. "House Tarly is sworn to House Tyrell and we stayed loyal to House Targaryen during the rebellion."

Jon was oddly grateful for that, allowing himself a small smile. Meanwhile, Arya was finally beginning to get the point.
"Why would Lyanna invite someone like that to Court? He sounds like a monster."

"Calling Clegane a monster is a disservice to monsters," Sam replied, darkly. "If he comes to court, you would do well to stay out of his way."

Arya looked disgusted at the mere thought. "I'm not scared- "

"Then you should be," Jon cut in, temper flaring once more. Arya looked stung, but he refused to back down. "Haven't you got a lesson with your dancing master?"

"Haven't you got a lesson with Ser Barristan?" she replied, sullenly.

Realising it was long past noon, Jon swore under his breath and leapt to his feet. "I have to go. I'll see you both later. Sam, come and find me when you're ready."

With that, he took the stone steps to ground level to be greeted by another fine day. But he felt none of the sun's warmth as he hurried through the crowds toward the training yards near the stables. From within the stalls, restive destriers stamped and snorted loudly. Lyanna had brought in new ones ready for the tourney and, even now, was overseeing their training routine. Her fine silk gowns had been swapped for riding leathers and Sansa and Jeyne looked uncomfortable as they stood in the mud and manure packed earth.

Jeyne caught his eye as he passed, nodding in greeting as he went on his way. He found himself wondering what he had walked in on earlier, but now was not the time to ask. He was already absurdly late for his training with Ser Barristan. A fact the old knight wasted no time in pointing out to him in a terse rebuke.

"You're late, Jon."

"I know, I got- "

"No excuses," Ser Barristan cut in sharply. "You'll work the full lesson as planned, then you can stay behind afterwards and clean up the yard once the others have finished."

Jon swore aloud and made a point of kicking a sword rack as he entered the armoury to get ready for whoever he would be fighting today. Whoever it was, he would imagine it was Gregor Clegane under that helm. Nothing would stop him.

After the day she'd had, Lyanna was glad to be back among her equestrian friends, watching them canter in wide circles around the stud farm. All of these stables were virtually new, built for her by Robert before they were married. They had been her wedding gift. The old stalls, built by the Targaryens over the years, were all but abandoned. If she used them at all, it was to isolate sick horses until they recovered or they had to be destroyed. As such, she couldn't bring herself to go ahead and destroy them completely.

With the tourney coming up, destriers were the order of the day and she had provided accordingly. Bad tempered, aggressive and huge, they were always a challenge to break. Still, Lyanna relished that challenge. She had one in hand at that moment, slowly winning over his trust so she would let her lead him around the farm in a harness. Once accustomed to humans, the horse would be a formidable competitor in the tourney and on the battlefield. Something she would have to bear in mind when recommending him to a prospective owner.

She was about to lead him around again when she saw the unlikely sight of Robert attempting to vault the low wooden fence around the paddock. A reluctant Eddard followed him, clutching a stack
of papers.

"Robert!" she called out, happily. "And Ned."

The horse reared up at the sight of the approaching men, still skittish. But when neither newcomer showed fear, the horse settled again. Lyanna assured him by rubbing the soft fur of his snout.

"My Queen," Robert huffed as he drew level with her and kissed her cheek.


While glad to see her menfolk, she was starting to get a bad feeling about this. Robert was all smiles, as always, but he had a dull look in his eye. Ned couldn't even bring himself to make eye-contact.

"The Lannisters have, er, they've been in touch-

"Lady," Lyanna cut him off. "I saw what happened, Robert. There was no harm done."

"I've already said that Lady is the calmest, gentlest of the wolves," Ned finally spoke up, cutting Robert off. "This is absurd. The wolves are perfectly safe-"

"She wants them dead!" Lyanna cried, her raised voice unsettling the horse. "Robert, no!"

"No, my love, listen," Robert appealed, hands raised in a gesture of surrender. "We cannot dismiss the Lannisters out of hand, but we've reached a compromise. While the Lannisters are here at Court, Lady Cersei will be satisfied so long as the wolves are kept secure in the stables when they're not under supervision from the children."

"As I said, the wolves are perfectly safe when the children are around," Ned pointed out again. "I tried to tell her, but Lannister wouldn't listen."

She looked to Robert, who merely shrugged. "Just for the sake of keeping them happy, can't you just have the children secure them overnight, in the stables, well away from everyone? Even if only until that woman calms down."

Lyanna sighed heavily. The children would hate it. But there was no other course of action. "We'll tell them over supper this evening."

"Yes," Eddard agreed. "I suppose we'll have to."

They were already occasionally using the old stables as kennels, so they would have to suffice and the Lannisters be damned. The more she was around people, the more Lyanna loved her horses.

Having sparred his way through all comers with a force that took even him by surprise, Jon was left aching and exhausted. After all of that, instead of soaking his aching muscles in a hot bath, he had to compensate two hours of lateness with two hours of menial work. A punishment he chafed against as he beheld the carnage in the yard. He returned the swords to the racks, sorting them in order of size. Then he swept the yard, emptied the water troughs and packed away the battered breastplate. He tidied up the countertop in the armoury and scrubbed it with a wire bristled brush. Mindless tasks that required no thought at all, freeing him to dwell on Lyanna's inexplicable invitation to the Mountain.

As for Ser Barristan, Jon simmered with resentment. He hadn't even been given a chance to explain why he was so late and now he was stuck doing all this. It was unfair and he bristled against the pettiness of it. He tried to work quickly, but he ached all over from beating several opponents in the
sparring yard. The only thing to salve his wounded pride was the knowledge that he had beaten every one of them into the dirt. Ser Loras Tyrell among them. When he remembered hearing the words 'I yield' coming from Lord Tyrell's lips, he allowed himself a satisfied smile. A smile he quickly wiped off his face when he heard Ser Barristan returning to the armoury.

"You're still at it," Barristan observed, stepping through the door.

Brush still in hand, broom propped against the back wall, Jon would have thought the answer was obvious. He tried not to sigh, it would only sound petulant.

"Well, that's enough. Come outside with me," said Barristan.

Relieved, Jon managed a pale smile as he dropped the brush back into the bucket. "Gladly."

"Wash your hands, I brought your supper."

Barristan was already half way out of the door as Jon hastily plunged his hands into some clean water in a bucket. He rubbed the impacted dirt off as best he could and dried them on a clean enough looking rag. As hungry as he was, he wasn't about to be too fussy. And when he joined Ser Barristan outside, he found him sat on a bench at the edge of the yard, food for both of them sat on an upturned barrel.


Jon thanked the man and didn't wait to be asked twice, earlier resentment dissipating fast. He helped himself to the bread and now cold beef, only slowing down so he didn't eat like a savage while his mentor politely picked at the offerings. Meanwhile, dusk settled all around them and brazier lights began illuminating every window in the tall towers of the Red Keep. The Tower of the Hand was among them, he let his gaze travel to the top, where his father's chambers were. They were still in darkness, meaning Lord Stark was dining with the Queen.

"I am sorry I was late," he said. "My friend was in trouble and I needed to help him."

"Life happens, Jon. I understand. In future, send me a message and nothing will come of it."

It was as simple as that, but he had just lost track of time. He hid his blushes and carried on eating.

"You made up for it though," Barristan continued, sounding much more enthused. "That was easily the best fighting I've seen from you."

"Thank you, Ser Barristan," he replied, politely. "But I can still improve. What were my weak points?"

Ser Barristan looked at him approvingly. More approvingly then when he'd been praising his performance. "You only ever want to get better, don't you? That will serve you well. But, if you had a weak spot today, it's clear you were angry and that hampered your technique. You let anger get the better of you and it made you clunky, at times. It should always be smooth, like every move comes as naturally to you as breathing does. Like a dance you know by heart. Don't fret on it, it will all come to you with time."

"I suppose I was rather angry," he confessed, gulping down another mouthful. "I fought anger would drive me."

"It can," Barristan replied, magnanimously. "But it can also push you into recklessness and that can have fatal consequences on a battlefield. Discipline is more important, something I hope you have a
little more of after all this."

He gestured to the yard Jon had just been forced to clean. Even if he thought so himself, Jon believed he had done quite a good job. However, he was keen to set things straight lest Ser Barristan think him a sulky child.

"It wasn't angry because I was being punished," he stated, flatly.

"I'm not punishing you," Ser Barristan interjected. "That's not what this is. It's just instilling a little discipline. But let us not quibble over semantics. Instead, if I may be so bold, may I ask what had you in such a fury? It had you fighting like a demon."

Jon didn't see the harm in telling the truth and he was in no mood to spare his mother's blushes. "The Queen has invited Gregor Clegane to court. I heard her calling him a skilled tourney fighter. And don't tell me I'm overreacting, my sister's already done that. I'm not, he's an animal."

Ser Barristan frowned as he finished the piece of bread he'd been steadily nibbling at. His blue eyes dimmed in the light of the nearby brazier. "He's not a particularly skilled fighter. He's just huge, with a reputation goes before him."

"I'm not disputing his skill," Jon pointed out. "He could be the best there is and it would still be wrong to bring a monster like that to court."

"Ah, you're angry because of the things Ser Gregor has done," Barristan said. He was clearly puzzled. "Why? I mean, why such fury? Do you know the man? Don't get me wrong, I share your distaste. He raped and murdered a very dear friend of mine and slaughtered her infant children. If there's one sight I would cherish before I die, it's the sight of the Mountain dead on a battlefield."

Jon was quiet for a moment, anger quelled as he guessed the identities of Ser Barristan's old friends. "I'm sorry about your friend. Was it Princess Elia?"

Ser Barristan nodded, an air of sadness settling over him now. He had abandoned the rest of the food and pushed the plate over to Jon, gesturing for him to finish the lot.

"That's what I mean," Jon continued. He didn't want to run the risk of upsetting Ser Barristan any more. His clear lingering grief set his own anger to shame. But when he changed the subject, he did so subtly. If Barristan knew Elia, then he must have known Rhaegar and this private conversation was too good an opportunity to miss. "Did you know the Prince? Elia's husband, I mean."

To his relief, the old man smiled a smile that made him look twenty years younger. "I did. Another very dear friend of mine. He was a good man, Jon. I know what you've been told, but he was a good, noble and brave man."

"Really? Is that true?" he asked, almost breathless with relief and curiosity. "Was he a good prince?"

Ser Barristan hesitated, fixing him with a curious look. But Jon could not stop himself. Lord Stark was his father and no other, but he sometimes burned with the need to know about the man who bore him. And there were so few around who genuinely knew him, fewer still he could trust.

"He was a very good prince," Ser Barristan replied at length. "It's very strange, Jon. Sometimes you remind me of him. Your fighting style is really quite similar. Like yourself, he was tall and lithe, very quick and very graceful. You're graceful, when you're not angry! I trained him as I am training you now, but he started when he was older than you. Although, he learned very quickly. Rhaegar could have learned anything, so long as he put his mind to it. Music was his real talent, though. He was a staggeringly gifting musician. He played for everyone: Lords, Ladies, servants and small folk alike."
Jon loved what he was hearing, it made his heart leap and he couldn't stop himself from asking more. He had to know. "So, Prince Rhaegar didn't mind if someone was lower than him? He wasn't stuck up, like lots of royalty are."

Ser Barristan laughed aloud. "Not at all, Jon. Not at all. He always took an interest in the people around him. He wanted to protect them all, to bring them safety and prosperity…" Ser Barristan broke off, the silent melancholy descending on him once more. "But he made mistakes. Mistakes that cost him dearly. Which is why I'm somewhat surprised by your line of questioning."

"You mean because of what people say he did to my aunt?" he asked. "Oh, she told me about all that. I guess you know the truth too, don't you? That they loved each other and married in secret."

He almost laughed at the look of shock on Ser Barristan's face. "Gods have mercy, all these years she's been married to Robert and since day one she's acted as if she never crossed paths with Rhaegar. Nary a mention."

"Lyanna had to protect her family," Jon said. "Please don't hate her."

Ser Barristan drew a sharp breath, as if he was alarmed. "Oh, Jon. I didn't mean that. I didn't mean to imply I blamed her and I certainly don't hate her. She's my Queen and it is not my place to judge her. Robert's retribution against the Starks would be great, if he knew the truth. So, she's had no choice but to act her part well. And I think she's even grown to love Robert. And that hurts. No matter how much I try to reason with it. Even though I serve Robert with as much enthusiasm as I served Rhaegar and Aerys."

"There's still more to it than even that," Jon added, quietly. "It's more complicated. More dangerous. It's for the best that she forgets Rhaegar ever existed."

The same applied to him, he knew. But he just needed to know, before letting it all go. It was why he needed to visit Dragonstone with his father, the day after next. He wanted to walk where his father once walked, pass through the chambers that were once his. After that, the ghost of Rhaegar Targaryen would be exorcised once and for all.

"Was Aerys really mad, or was that just a lie too?" asked Jon.

Ser Barristan chuckled deeply, lifting the sombre mood in a trice. "Rest assured, Jon, the man was completely beyond the pale, out of his mind, insane." He paused for a moment, fixing Jon with a shrewd look. "You're awfully curious about the Targaryens."

"I am," he agreed. "There's little and less to it, though. I just want to know about them. I'll be at Dragonstone in a few days, too. Where Rhaegar used to live."

"And I," Barristan said. "Boring place, but make certain you explore the underground vaults. There's said to be all sorts buried down there. Secret stashes hidden by the Targaryens. Rhaegar and I never found anything, of course. But you might have better luck. Bring me back a dragon egg."

Jon grinned. "I'll find them, you'll have your dragon egg yet, Ser Barristan."

"Aye, sure. Bring back a whole nest full," the old man retorted. "Anyway, it's time you were gone. But, before you do, give this some thought. I'll give you a little extra help with your technique, but it will have to be in the evenings which means extra work for you."

Jon didn't need to think on it at all. "I'll be here, Ser Barristan."

Ser Barristan nodded his approval, dismissing him properly. As he made his way across the yards of
the Red Keep, he couldn't help but be intrigued by what lay beneath Dragonstone.
Flames wreathed the delicate blue petals of the sweet winter rose, but the blossom remained impervious to the fire. Where it should have blackened and shrivelled, the blue of the petals glowed like embers, as bright and sharp as ice. Melisandre frowned, stepping back from the brazier as the image faded. The Lord of Light wasn't finished with her yet. A white wolf burst from the flames, teeth bared in silent fury, chains snapping at its throat. The vision was so strong, so vivid, she recoiled as if she expected the wolf to leap out of the brazier and clamp its maws around her pale throat.

*Why?* She wondered. She asked the Lord of Light to show her the Prince that was Promised, and all she got was this. Sometimes she felt more like R'hllor's puppet than his servant. He plucked her strings at will, threw her scraps of visions and then left her to puzzle it out alone. She had followed the visions across the Narrow Sea, unsure of where she was going or how she would know when she arrived at the right place. Her doubts had almost overwhelmed her, but R'hllor delivered at the eleventh hour.

Dragonstone. Surrounded on all sides by a roiling, salty sea; shrouded in smoke billowing from a live volcano. Its landmass dominated by a castle shaped like a great stone dragon, complete with battlements lined with small stone dragon gargoyles. As soon as she saw it, she knew the Lord of Light had led her to this place. Even so, she knew it would be too much to ask of R'hllor for her to just walk through the doors and find the Prince that was Promised there to greet her. But she met his wife.

Selyse was lost. Barren and past her childbearing years, she was tolerated by her husband and openly mocked by her peers. Sickly and isolated, with just an equally ugly daughter for company. Abandoned by the Seven gods of her childhood, Selyse was ripe for the guidance and teachings of R'hllor. Melisandre was certain that Selyse would be the key to the Prince and the conduit through which the faith of the one god would finally take hold in Westeros. But, when she returned to Court with her husband, Melisandre found herself left behind at Dragonstone. Worse, the man she thought might be the Azor Ahai reborn hadn't paid the blindest bit of attention to her prophesising. He just packed up and returned to court, taking her most important convert with him.

At the time, it had felt like R'hllor was having another laugh at her expense. Was this his will? To bring her so close only to desert her when she felt Azor Ahai at the tips of her fingers. Apparently not, since Stannis and Selyse had returned unexpectedly. The King's most trusted advisor had died suddenly and Stannis feared poison. But even this happy event had been a double-edged sword. For Selyse had fallen sick, too.

Ever since they returned, she had taken to her bed and not resurfaced. A fever burned in her and Melisandre had to consult the flames for hours to try and read the signs. When she wasn't doing that, she was using her powers to keep Selyse on the right side of the beyond. While the future Queen still lived, she showed no signs of improvement. Once more, it seemed the meaning of her visions were slipping Melisandre's grasp.

Meanwhile, she returned to the fire, willing R'hllor to show his hand again. She found that the white wolf had gone, replaced with one made of cloth. She found herself lamenting her ignorance of Westerosi heraldry. The banner fluttered from the prow of a ship, a solemn faced man standing at the prow, gazing forlornly at the Windwyrm Tower.

"A grey wolf on a field of white," she said aloud, glancing toward a man half cast in shadow.
Stannis stepped into the light cast by the brazier, his jaw tense as he ground his teeth. "House Stark."

"They'll be here, but they're late. A man with a solemn face-"

"I know, I got the raven. The man's Ned Stark, I don't need R'hllor to tell me that. I remember him well enough. They can get here when they damn well like, my answer's just the same."

She masked her dismay by staring once more into the fire. Perhaps, R'hllor could have served her better by showing her this vision a few weeks ago. She might have avoided being upstaged by a messenger raven. The flames showed her a white wolf slipping into a dark cavern, a red-haired girl cradling a dying wolf in her arms, her tears soaking its fur. A blue rose and a golden rose sprang from a fertile bush, coiling around each other so close their petals merged and formed a delicate pattern. A dragon tried to take flight – finally, a vision to stop her heart – but as it tried to soar, it belly-flopped dramatically and turned to cloth as it hit the ground. Dead, black hands manipulated the strings of the puppet dragon, from beneath the fallen fabric a large spider crawled and raised its pincers.

Bitterly dismayed, Melisandre turned from the fires, waving a hand in sharp dismissal of whatever she had seen there. "Nothing," she said. "It was all a great nothing." There was no time for this. Not with the Great Other growing stronger by the day. Not with the Long Night gathering in the North.

Jon didn't like this at all. None of it sat well with him as he surveyed the scene of the yards around him. The sparring yard, where he had his lessons with Ser Barristan, was in pitch darkness and silent. There was a practise tilt yard beyond, just within the light of some distant braziers. Again, deserted. A path led to the rear of Maegor's Holdfast, where Lyanna's new stables had been built. It was behind the new stables that the old stables were built, close to the curtain wall where horses could be stabled as soon as visitors rode through the gates. It was in those vacant, decaying stalls that the Direwolves now had to be housed overnight.

It wasn't his mother's fault. She'd had no say in the matter, really. It was Cersei Lannister who claimed that Lady had tried to maul her precious son. And Jon had seen that boy strutting around the palace as if he owned the place. Earlier that day, he'd met the boy in the sparring yard and beaten him into the dirt only to have him storm off in a fit of temper afterwards. Joffrey had cordially informed him he – Jon – was the son of a nameless whore, opined that Sansa was a brazen slut who'd be better served joining the Silent Sisters and that the whole of the North could sink into a void and he, the erstwhile Joffrey, wouldn't blink an eye. Jon had laughed. In fact, everyone had laughed.

However, knowing that the petulant boy's whining had resulted in the Direwolves being banished from the castle rankled still. Beating him in the sparring yards did little to rectify Jon's ill-feelings toward the shit. Now, he called Ghost to heel and led the wolf to where his sister-wolves had already been penned up for the night.

"I'm sorry, boy," he said. "It's not my fault. Nor Lady's either, we know she'd never hurt anyone."

He'd brought some bacon with him, saving it from the supper table and wrapping it in a napkin. Although safely wrapped, Ghost could smell it a mile off and now pawed hopefully at Jon's pocket. He meant to use to soften the blow of having the wolf left outside overnight. He was also supposed to have been brought out here the night before. But, Ser Barristan had kept him back so late he hadn't heard about what happened and no one stopped him bringing Ghost back into the Tower of the Hand.

He no longer had that excuse. Just burnt bacon as a gesture of consolation.
After that, it didn't take them long to find the abandoned stables. The wolves each had a stall to themselves and while Nymeria was nowhere to be seen, Lady was watching Jon's approach with her front paws up on the lower half of the stable doors. The top half had swung open, and Jon wasn't about to close it and shut the poor girl in.

"Hullo there, little Lady," he said, feeding her the last of the bacon. "Don't feel bad. This wasn't your fault."

She took the bacon in one bite then licked the grease from his fingers, before meeting his gaze with an unmistakable look of mute appeal in her glowing eyes. Sometimes, he could swear, these wolves were trying to communicate with them. She looked so sad, which only heightened his own sorrow at having to leave them there. And he sincerely hoped there was no sign of Nymeria because Arya had found a way to keep her close, back at the Tower of the Hand. However, when Jon opened the top half of her stall door, he found her fast asleep in the straw. He put Ghost in the vacant stall beside Nymeria and slipped the chain around his neck.

Rather than dwell on matters, he secured the bolt and walked without looking back. All the same, he ducked down the steps leading to the Dragonvault, where Sam was still living out of a strongbox that contained his few possessions. Jon found him reading from a stack of books, procured from the library by Arya. A candle stub guttered at Jon's approach as he disturbed the air around it. An oil lamp had been placed inside the skull of a dragon, making strange beams of light rise from its empty eye-sockets and his mouth glow. It looked half-alive.

"Am I disturbing you?"

"Not at all, sit down." Sam let the book slam shut. It was a book so old and neglected that a small cloud of dust billowed as the two halves met with a dull thump. He must have been the first person to borrow it in centuries, Jon thought.

"Sansa was here not so long ago," Sam continued. "She's awfully upset about something."

Surely, not Joffrey. "Probably just some stupid boy she's met. Anyway, she's coming to Dragonstone with us, on the morrow."

Sam hesitated for a moment, clearly worried about overstepping some boundary. His concern eventually got the better of him. "There's a lot on her mind, I think. Things she's not telling anyone."

Jon was honest with himself: he'd noticed it. The Queen had noticed it. And now, someone who didn't actually know her had noticed it. He found himself regretting his initial dismissal of the problem. "I'll talk to her on the way to Dragonstone. We'll be sailing for hours, so there'll be no distractions. Speaking of which, you know everything, don't you?"

"Not quite 'everything'." All the same, Sam blushed. "But I try."

"Vaults under Dragonstone. Tell me what you know," said Jon.

The other lad got that excited sparkle in his eye, like a child on his name day. "You know the story of Daenys the Dreamer, don't you? That she had a prophetic dream showing her the Doom of Valyria. No one took her seriously, except her father. Lord Aenar packed up all their belongings and five dragons, before fleeing the Valyrian freehold. The Targaryens were the greatest of the dragonriders in Valyria at that time and had accumulated all manner of treasures. After landing on Dragonstone, which is a poor and barren land, it's said they hid their treasures in deep, underground vaults and sealed them in with blood magic."
"Blood magic?" he asked.

Sam now seemed less certain. "That's what they say."

"There's no such thing. Our Maester back at Winterfell, Maester Luwin, forged a Valyrian steel link. He studied magic and even he says there's really no such thing."

"Then he should read up on the history of the Wall," Sam replied. "Brandon the Builder used all sorts of magic—"

"That was thousands of years ago," Jon cut in. "It doesn't work now."

"Then why is there still a gate leading to a tunnel through the wall that requires a few words from a sworn brother to open?"

Jon was mystified. "Er, is there?"

"Yes! The Black Gate at the Nightfort. Only a man of the Night's Watch who has sworn his vows can gain access if he repeats a certain part of his vow," Sam explained patiently. "No doubt, the Targaryens had their own version of that. And the reason they wed brother to sister was to keep their magical blood potent."

It felt far-fetched to Jon, but it gave him something to mull over as he made his way to his mother's chambers, later that night. Maegor's Holdfast wasn't too far from the Tower of the Hand, they faced each other from across a large quadrangle. But it was another climb up another steep flight of steps.

Ser Jaime Lannister was at the Queen's door, fixing Jon with a narrow-eyed look as he approached. Clearly, he had heard about his nephew being beaten in the sparring yards that day.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Just as he was about to open the Queen's door, Jon froze. "I'm going to see my aunt."

"She's not your 'aunt', she's your Queen," Lannister admonished. "Wait there and I'll see if Her Grace is ready to receive you."

Jon didn't even try to disguise the indignant sigh as Lannister marched off into Lyanna's privy chambers. He was seized with a sudden urge to douse that golden armour in multi-coloured paint. A feeling assuaged by the fact that it only took a second before Lannister was back.

"Now you may enter."

Jon didn't dignify the time-waster with a reply before entering the outer-chambers, where he found his mother ready and waiting for him.

"You can just come in, you know," she said, by way of greeting. "Don't be hanging around out there."

Aghast, Jon gestured to the door. "He made me—"

"He's teasing you," she cut in. "It's what he does when he gets bored. Oh, I'll have a word later. Are you all right? I thought you'd be getting ready for Dragonstone by now."

She led him into the inner-chambers, past the place where she received her guests to where she actually lived her private life. The further one was admitted into this network of rooms, the closer they were to the inner-circle of the King and Queen.
"I promised Ser Barristan I'd bring him back a dragon egg," he said, smiling. "Do you want one, too?"

Lyanna laughed. "Good luck finding one, never mind two. They're worth a fortune. While you're down there, see if you can't find the secret stash of Valyrian swords they were supposed to have stuffed under the floorboards."

She sounded cynical, but understandably so.

"One thing Stannis is supposed to have hidden away on Dragonstone is his own shadow-binding priestess from Asshai. If you meet her let me know, will you?"

Jon nodded. "All right. But is there something wrong with it? Thoros of Myr is a red priest and he's at court."

"Thoros of Myr is a drunk," she corrected him. "But no, there's nothing wrong with it. It's just unusual, that's all. It's particularly unusual for a man like Stannis Baratheon. Besides, it's probably just another silly rumour flying around my ladies."

Jon wasn't even sure of what the red priests of the temple did. He knew fire was involved and that was as far as it went. Nor did he invest much thought in it.

"Yesterday, I spoke with Ser Barristan," he said. "I might have said more than I should."

Lyanna hesitated. "Might? About what?"

They were deep in the inner-chambers, sat in a window embrasure overlooking the stables. Jon didn't fear being overheard, so he admitted what he had done easily.

"It was nothing he didn't already know-"

"You still need to stop talking about it, Jon," she cut in, impatiently. "You've been told before and now I'm left telling you again. Was this because you were still angry about my inviting the Mountain to court?"

"No," Jon protested. "Ser Barristan started talking about the past and it was clear they were friends. Opposite him, Lyanna sighed and cupped his cheek, reassuring him it was all right. "Sorry, I didn't mean to snap. This puts me on edge, is all. Don't worry about Ser Barristan. Get him his dragon egg and he can scramble it for breakfast, or something. And while you're away, perhaps I can see about doing something with that poor boy you've got hidden in the Dragonvault. You weren't going to just leave him there, were you?"

Jon had the decency to blush. "Of course not. I just needed the right time to talk to you." He had meant to do it when he overheard her talking about the Mountain. Something he regretted now. "And I shouldn't have lost my temper over the Mountain. I still don't like it."

"No more than I do," she replied. "But I've invited the Martells of Sunspear, too. As you well know, they have an old score to settle with Clegane."

Whatever Jon was about to say next, he cut himself off as the pieces slotted into place. "Right. So, you want them to meet and…"

"These things happen in tourney's Jon. They're dangerous games. If they come, you might want to stay well clear of Prince Oberyn if he takes to the melee at the same time as Clegane. And the
jousting, for that matter. In fact, just stay away from them."

Jon intended to. That was one family feud he wasn't about to meddle in.

"However, if they bring Princess Arianne, you might want to see how you get on with her."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because you might get along … and form a bond," she replied.

Jon picked up on the inference. Despite being legitimised months ago, despite knowing his true origins, it had completely slipped his mind that he was now eligible. Highly eligible and he wouldn't be allowed to go to waste. Still … a princess. It made him feel slightly intimidated. He was Ned Stark's bastard, that was all he had known about himself for so long and the habit was hard to break.

"We'll see," was his guarded reply.

They cleared the air between them, he even let her hug him and plant a firm kiss on his head safe that no one was looking. But still his mood was tense and spiky as he worried about Ghost. Before leaving, he glanced from the window one more time, to see the stables where he was locked up with Nymeria and Lady. He could see little and less.

Ser Jaime escorted him back to the Tower of the Hand, preventing him from going outside to check the wolves again. Once he was in bed, he decided against it anyway. He was being foolish and this cloud of tension was all in his head. "Ghost," he murmured softly before falling into a fitful slumber.

But he dreamed of Bran.

The acrid smell of man cut through the heady musk of the beasts of the field that surrounded the she-wolf. It was a smell as distinct from them as night from day. But she had no fear. The barrier that restrained her, the one made from dead trees, was within the grasp of her claws so she raised herself to her hind legs and looked over the top at the dark figure moving towards her. It was not her girl. She knew her girl pup's scent anywhere. The sweetest scent there was.

She misliked this one. Bearing her teeth, she growled a warning to wake her brother and sister as they slept close by. She could smell them still, even if she could no longer see them. Besides, she kept her eye firmly on the man who scuffled at the ground. He raised his hand to her and she growled again, yelping as something hard hit her in the side of the head. Stone.

Enraged, she tasted blood and reared up, howling a warning to her still sleeping brother and sister. She could not tell if it worked before the man pointed something at her, causing a searing pain to shoot through her chest. Her howl strangled, choking off at its wavering high and Sansa awoke, breathless and dizzy, back in her own bed.

The nightmare faded, but the pain lingered. Still in a panic, she rolled out of her bed and tried to get her bearings back. But the pain in her chest felt like it was choking her. After a couple of frantic seconds, she fell against her bed and cried out in fear. She forced herself to sit upright, taking deep breaths as the pain began to subside.

Sansa had had dreams before. Some might say she did nothing but dream. But she'd never had a dream that caused pain even after she had awoken. And she had certainly never dreamed that she was Lady. Whatever that was, it was no dream. She didn't know how she knew, she just knew. She found a kirtle and tunic, which she struggled into only to put it on back to front and inside out. But she barely cared as she wedged her feet into the nearest shoes she could find and ran out of the door.
Having been awoken by her scream, Jon was running down the steps with lantern in hand. She was grateful for that, she hadn't even thought to bring one of her own.

"Sansa, wait!" he called out to her. "Where are you going?"

She had already stopped. "It's Lady-"

"I'll come with you," he cut in. "Explain on the way."

He grabbed her hand and the pair of them were soon running down the turnpike stair. Half a turn below Sansa was Arya, also awoken by the commotion. "I heard a scream," she said, still drugged with sleep. "What's happening?"

"Arya," said Jon. "Go and get Jory, tell him to wake father up we'll meet him back here."

Their younger sister was only wearing a nightdress that barely reached her skinny knees, so they left her standing there. As they made their way outside, Jon was trying to get the full story from her.

"Sansa, what's up? Lady's in the stables, I saw her myself."

"I dreamed about her," she said. She wished she had some better explanation that that. It sounded lame, even in her own ears. But it was a dream. One that lingered even after she had awoken.

Once outside, she ran ahead of Jon, leaving him running after her. She cleared the practise yard, climbed the low perimeter fence of the stud farm, tearing a long strip of fabric on a jutting nail in the process. She grabbed at it and yanked it clear, almost cussing in frustration. As she neared the vacant stalls where the wolves had been kept, she could hear Nymeria howling, thrashing against the door of her stall. Ghost, who had no voice, was silent but she could hear him violently thrashing against his stall door, his paws scrabbling at the packed earth beneath his door.

Ghost was clearly fine and Nymeria, too. Suddenly afraid again, Sansa froze outside Lady's stall while Jon freed the other two. Her own stall was still and silent, the top half of the door open but revealing only darkness within. A cold sweat prickled on her skin, slowly she became aware of the dampness seeping from beneath the stall door. A thin trickle of blood.

At her side, Jon had seen it too. "Wait here."

He was only trying to protect her, but Sansa pushed past him and shouldered open the lower half of the stable door. Lady was blocking the other side and, in the end, it took both of them to heave at it before it gave way. Meanwhile, the wolf whimpered piteously as she lay injured and bleeding heavily into the straw.

"She's alive!"

Sansa was still too shocked to speak, so it was Jon who called out the good news. While relief washed over her, she knew it was too soon to rest and thank her lucky stars. She pulled off the cloak she had been wearing and wrapped Lady up in, only to find a crossbow quarrel was jutting from her chest. Even the slightest movements seemed to cause Lady greater pain.

Meanwhile, footsteps hurried up behind them. Hoping it was her father, Sansa craned her neck to see who it was. It was Samwell, newly arrived from his hiding place close by.

"I heard the wolves," he gasped between laboured breaths. "I heard something, is she all right?"

While Jon explained, Sansa tried to think of what to do. Yank out the quarrel as quick as she could,
was her instinct. A moment of agony that would soon be over, and then Lady could mend. But as she wrapped her hand around the shaft, Sam called over to her as he barrelled through the door.

"No, don't do that. The quarrels are barbed and you'll tear her inside."

Her small flicker of hope gave way to despair. "Then what?"

"Hold it fast at the base, where it's gone through her skin," he instructed, and she did as he said. "Then – Jon! – snap it off. But leave the quarrel inside for now."

Their task was made more difficult as Nymeria and Ghost refused to leave their sister. Nymeria kept trying to lick the site of the wound clean, but soon gave up and curled herself protective around Lady, keeping her warm and steady. Ghost, tense and angry, prowled around them, snapping his huge maws. Even Jon looked worried by his behaviour.

"I'm holding the quarrel," said Sansa, "as close as I can without hurting her more."

"Lower," Sam insisted. "It'll hurt her, but it might save her."

Sansa braced herself as she slid her hands down the shaft of the quarrel, now slick with Lady's blood. The wolf howled again, trying to squirm out of their grasp but Sam held her down with all his weight, looking pale and clammy at the sight of the gore. Then Jon snapped the quarrel in one swift movement. The weight of it lifted, instantly relieving the pressure on Lady.

"Now, one of you find the arrow tip by probing with your fingers," Sam had to look away as he spoke. "Part the flesh gently and draw the arrow tip out. And don't tear anything."

Sansa wasn't even looking at the blood anymore, or thinking of the consequences of her own failure. She ran her fingers into the wound until she felt the barbs of the quarrel somewhere inside what she thought was a lung. The quarrels, she realised, were angled in such a way to do more harm coming out then they did going in. Sam had been right.

She pulled apart the wound, making a clear tunnel for the quarrel to be drawn out completely.

"Jon, now please," she said. "Hurry."

Jon did the rest, pulling out the head of the quarrel. As soon as he was done, Sansa pressed down on the now open wound, plugging it closed with the folds of her own cloak. The blood was slowly soaking through it, all the same. She bound the wound as tight as she could, silently praying for the flesh to knit back together. Until her father arrived with Arya, both pale and shaken as Jon explained what had happened.

Eventually Arya sat beside her, kneeling in the blood-soaked ground. She said nothing, but placed her small hands over the place where Lady was hurt, helping to keep Sansa's makeshift bindings in place.

Time passed, in which people came and went, but Sansa couldn't keep track of it all. The Grand Maester came at dawn and removed the bindings before pouring in a liquid that made Lady howl and the other wolves bare their teeth at him. The poor old Grand Maester looked terrified as he explained it was only a disinfectant to clean the wound. He then patched her up as he would a wounded soldier, with some stitching and a fresh poultice to help the healing begin.

The sun was rising, her father was in a fury.

"That wasn't just an attack on Lady, it was an attack on House Stark!" he was storming at the Queen
as soon as she arrived. "I want whoever did this caught, Lya. Do you understand?"

She tried to take in the meaning of what he was saying, but all she could see was Lady. Hurt and limp with pain, her head lolling in Sansa's lap, listless and resigned to whatever was happening to her. She was always such a good wolf, even now her world was now only pain and fear.

"Why didn't they go for the other wolves, too?" asked Jon. "Nymeria and Ghost were right beside Lady, yet no one tried to harm them. Their stall doors weren't even touched and it would only have taken a second."

"They were making too much noise."

"No, Ned, he's right," said Lyanna. "It would have taken a second and the wolves were restrained. Sitting targets, they were. This is strange."

"I know what it is," her father snapped back. "And you know who it was, Lya. Don't pretend you don't. No more excuses from you."

"Ned, please-"

"Save it!"

"Ignore them, Sansa, they're just angry."

Arya's voice, so much softer than usual, drew Sansa out of her fevered state. She hadn't realised how much they were upsetting her. Nymeria lay next to Lady again, sharing body heat, keeping her warm and comfortable. Occasionally, Ghost padded over and licked the site of the wound again, keeping it clean. Among her pack, Lady rallied.

"She's going to live," Sansa assured her human sister. "She's going to be fine."

Arya smiled. "Of course she will." The way she said it made Sansa a little more confident.
Shadows

When Jon was informed that they were sailing to Dragonstone as planned, he'd been more than a little dubious. More so when Sansa insisted she was still coming along, too. But after being present in the Queen's audience chamber during an ugly confrontation between Houses Stark and Lannister, he decided a few days away from court were probably for the best. He pitied Arya, being left behind with Lyanna. The last two Starks in the Red Keep.

He'd also had his misgivings about Lady being brought along. Half a day had passed since the attack and she was bound up tight. Listless and limp, she lay on the deck of the ship soaking up the warm sun. He thought travel would be the end of her, but she seemed quite happy as the ship swayed up the gullet of the Blackwater. As he passed her on deck, she lifted her head to watch him go. Sansa never left her side and had insisted the sea air would make her strong. It seemed she had a point.

Jon watched them for a moment, taking in the sight of girl and wolf enjoying an afternoon sail. He almost failed to notice his father joining him at the prow of the ship.

"Lady's bleeding inside," said Lord Stark. "I've tried to explain to your sister, but she won't hear it."

Jon turned to look up at him. "We can't give up on Lady, father."

He studied the wolf before she was carried onto the ship. She didn't look like she was in pain, except for the fact that she could barely move. But she made no fuss, she lay still and didn't growl or try to bite, as other injured animals would. Lady just looked a little fed up, was all.

"She won't ever recover, Jon," father persisted. "Had she been in the wild, she'd be dead already.-"

"But she's not in the wild, father," Jon cut in. "And don't you wonder how Sansa knew about the attack?"

A flicker of doubt marred Eddard Stark's sombre features and he quickly turned away to mask it. "I heard her say she dreamt it, but there must another explanation. The howling must have awoken her, that is all."

From what she had told him, Jon thought she dreamt it, felt it and lived it. He had never experienced anything like that with Ghost. But then, no one had ever tried to hurt Ghost. It also made him wonder why the attacker only went for Lady.

"Are the Lannisters our enemies now?" he asked, remembering that morning's confrontation with Lady Cersei. Her language had been most undiplomatic.

His father raised a pained smile. "They were never exactly our friends." After a pause to gather his thoughts, Eddard elaborated: "To tell it true, we've not had that many dealings with them. But what dealings there have been … it didn't end well, shall we say. As for their manner of doing things: Lord Tywin makes little distinction between fear and respect. To him, they're the same. To me, they're worlds apart."

"You always said a Lord couldn't rule through fear alone," said Jon. "So, there must be some respect for Tywin, somewhere."

"I'm sure there is. Somewhere. But mostly, it's fear."

While they talked, the oarsmen rowed them out into the open sea and the Red Keep on its jutting...
rock slowly receded from view. It would have been a perfect day for sailing, had it not been for the sombre mood among the travellers. All the same, he found some small solace in watching the white-capped waves rolling in the distance and the prow of their vessel cutting through the water. He’d never been at sea before, a strange sensation caused by the decks beneath his feet swaying on the swells. Small wonder it made people sick. It only made Jon laugh as he tried to navigate his way around the vessel.

Even at sundown, Sansa remained out on deck. While the sun shone, it remained cold at sea. Come dusk, the temperature slumped even more. Still Sansa sat out there, smoothing Lady's fur and singing softly in her ear. It was a sound as sweet as it was melancholy. She was still at it when Jon returned to her, where she and Lady were now bathed in moonlight. Lord Stark had clearly already spoken to her, leaving his cloak wrapped around her shoulders. Sea spray had wet the fur lining, making her look as if she’d sprouted feathers.

"How is she?" he asked, settling beside her.

Sansa kept her focus on Lady as she answered: "Father says she won't be the same, that it would be kinder to give her a quick death."

"I know," he replied. "This ship is sailing on to White Harbour. You and father could take her home-"

"No," Sansa cut in. "She will get better, I know she will. And when we return to King's Landing, father will take action against the Lannisters. They did this."

Jon wasn't about to contradict her, but he remembered his father's words. Tywin was a formidable foe, not one to take a slight against his family in an easy manner. As for which one did it: it could have been Joffrey, it could have been Cersei. Even Jaime was out and about on the night in question. As far as he could tell, no one else had a motive. All the same, they had no real proof, just suspicion.

As for Lady, he ran a hand down her flank and felt her flesh spasm in pain. Their father had been right, she was slowly dying. He couldn't see how the wolf would recover, but he couldn't bring himself to say anything to his sister about it.

"There's something else, isn't there?" he asked, turning to look at her. "You've not been yourself, not since we got to King's Landing."

She hesitated before answering: "Sometimes, I miss home. I miss mother and Robb, Bran and Rickon."

Although undoubtedly true, Jon still believed it was more than that. "I miss Winterfell, too. I suppose I just thought you had waited so long to come to court that you would be so happy here."

"So much that I wouldn't miss our home and our family?" Sansa turned to look him in the eye, stung at what he had inadvertently implied.

"I did not mean it as such, sister," he clarified. "I thought you would come into your own and fly. Instead, you're quiet and pale and you've hardly joined in any of the court festivities. This isn't you."

She turned sharply from him. "It is nothing. It is Lady and this ship and the open sea disagrees with me."

On the brink of giving up, Jon rose into his knees to hoist himself upright again. Before he could get any further, she raised her hand – gesturing for him to stay. "I heard someone say that I had always been cold with you. Although I don't deny that person told it truly, I hope you know it wasn't
because I was not fond of you."

Jon found himself somewhat taken aback, even though he had noticed the marked improvement in their relationship since his legitimisation. "Sansa, it doesn't matter. Who told you this?"

"No one."

"Was it Arya? She was probably just angry about something."

"No, not Arya," she assured him. "That's how I know it to be true. It was father."

"Father?" Jon was askance. Sansa could do no wrong in Lord Stark's eyes. "When in seven hells did he tell you this?"

Her face coloured, which always made her look like a carrot. "Well, he didn't exactly tell me." She faltered, as she always did when she suspected she had done something wrong. "Do you remember when you were teaching Arya some swordplay and she accidentally tore father's coat? You asked me to mend it and I agreed, and that night I returned the coat to father's rooms late at night. I thought he would be abed by that time, but he was in the solar, speaking with Aunt Lyanna. I did not intend to listen in, but I couldn't help it. They had the door open and I heard everything."

Relief washed over Jon, to the point where he laughed. "Is this what's been troubling you since we arrived? Sansa, it is of no matter. Perhaps you were a little stand-offish. But you and I better understand each other now, don't we?"

Sansa raised a pained smile. "We do. But there's something you may not understand."

"Which is?"

She was casting furtive glances around the deck of the ship, where they were quite alone. Satisfied of their solitude, she continued. "I heard them talk about something else, Jon, I heard Lyanna talking about you."

She looked so afraid, he couldn't help but smile again. However, having realised what she must have overheard, he was quick to end her suffering. "Was she talking about how she's my mother?"

In an instant, a century of cares seemed to fall away from her. She clamped a gloved hand over her mouth, her eyes wide with relief. "You know! I didn't think you knew. I thought I was betraying a family secret."

"No," he assured her. "But you mustn't mention it again. I know, Robb knows. No one else. Not your mother, not even Arya."

Sansa nodded eagerly. "I won't breathe a word. But we must talk, Jon. Please, or else I shall die."

"In that case, we had best talk as soon as possible," he said. "I'm sure there's somewhere under Dragonstone where you and I can speak privately."

Before leaving her, she put his arms around her and held her close. She returned the hug and he kissed her forehead. "You're still my sister, understand?"

"Yes," she agreed. "And you're my brother."

For the first time since leaving the Red Keep for Winterfell, well over a year ago, Lyanna found herself quite alone in her apartments. A little lapdog that had been a gift from Robert was curled up
and fast asleep at her feet. She leaned down to scratch his ears before picking up a battered old copy of the Seven-Pointed Star. Over the years, she had read it from cover to cover several times over. If she was to be Queen Consort, she had to understand the faith of her people, after all.

This, however, had not been a gift from Robert. Rhaegar had given it to her before they were wed, when she was staying in the Riverlands. They were not yet wed, although the time was drawing nigh.

"You do not need to convert," he assured her. "I would change nothing of you. But it would be nice for my Queen to understand a little of her people."

She could see him still, on the odd occasion he moved to the forefront of her memory. Time passed in an inexorable stream, she sometimes forgot what day it was or what she was supposed to be doing. She struggled to recall what she had been doing at a particular time on a particular day. Occasionally, she walked into a room with a purpose in mind, only to clean forget that purpose the second she crossed the threshold. Aging had done that to her. But, despite all outward appearances, she never forgot Rhaegar. Time and age had not taken him from her. Only death had done that.

Often, she dreamed of him. She dreamed of their wedding day, or of the last time she saw him. When she dozed off beside the weirwood on a hot summer's day, the dreams were always vivid. He was always furious in those dreams, her betrayal of him cutting deep. But he had died, leaving her alone with a baby to raise in a world most hostile. Strike or be stricken, that was her choice. But, despite the odds against her, she had forged a third way. A way that enabled her to pacify the enemy and restore peace to the realm she had torn up quite by accident. She had hoped Rhaegar would understand that. Perhaps, not?

The early years of her marriage to Robert had been a unique sort of hell. She wore beautiful gowns and smiled at the crowds who came to see her, she waved at them and kissed their babies. At state functions she let Robert show her off like a porcelain doll wrapped in Myrish lace. She played her role and shrivelled inside. Then, every evening, she returned to her apartments in Maegor's Holdfast where a bevy of ladies awaited her and she had to smile some more. Her role was endless, with no prospect of an interval in this relentless Mummer's farce. She had repressed every feeling she ever had until she wanted to scream out loud and smash the stained-glass windows before leaping out of them and dying quickly on spikes inside the dry moat below.

Only Jon stopped her doing it. Or at least, the thought of Jon stopped her doing it. He was almost three when she left him at Winterfell. He would have no memory of her, he wouldn't even have had a sense of her. But nothing can sever the bond between a mother and her child. While she knew he was growing up as a motherless bastard, she herself could not blot him out. She had no desire to, either. Back then, she thought Jon was the purest, sweetest part of her.

There was one memory in particular that she clung to, steadfast. It was when Jon was cutting his first teeth, but could not yet eat properly. Gage the cook would make the children of the castle special oatmeal biscuits with raisins in. Jon adored them, but could only clutch them in his little fist and drool on them until they all but disintegrated. He would be left bouncing on her hip with a face smeared in a paste of wet oats. It would be in his hair, up his nostrils and even in his ears. But nothing screamed blissful happiness quite like that child with a soggy biscuit clamped in his fist. She believed it a pure happiness that even adults should aspire to, albeit via a different route.

She could not pinpoint the moment in time in which things began to get better. There was a moment when, inside, her mood was at its blackest, and Robert had cracked a joke. As jokes went, it was painfully awful. The most awful joke she had ever heard. So bad, she laughed raucously for a full minute. When she failed the get pregnant, Robert bought her a pure-bred puppy. The same one, now
an adult dog, asleep at her feet in the present. He would keep her company when Robert was away. After that, waking up every morning knowing she had something to care for made her wake up smiling. Once, Robert bought her a little caged song bird from the Summer Isles. But she could not bear to see the little thing locked up behind bars, no matter how prettily he sang.

Back in the present, she opened her Seven-Pointed Star and read the flyleaf. She traced her finger over the fading ink where Rhaegar had written her name in his neat, florid hand. *Lady Lyanna Stark*. After he died, she wrote his name beside her own alongside a small tribute: "you did not return, my beloved, to write your name in our book. But I shall read it for always." It was the only promise to him she had been able to keep.

Pressed in the middle of the pages was an old winter rose, taken from the laurel he had crowned her with at Harrenhal. The blue had faded from the petals, the scent was no more than the ghost of a memory. But it still seemed sweet to her as she relocated it again, to look upon it one more time as her eyes swam with tears.

"Your grace."

Startled, Lyanna snapped the book shut and looked up to see Ser Jaime Lannister striding into her chambers. She had been so lost in her thoughts and memories she had not even heard his clinking armour, lobstered steel grinding against the conjoined plates.

He noticed her weeping, looking red in the face.

"Forgive me, your grace, I did not realise…"

She swiped hastily at her face and hurriedly put the book back on the shelf. "It's quite all right, Ser Jaime. Do come in."

He looked dubious, but remained where he was. "Your Grace, I came only because I wished to speak with you on behalf of my sister."

"I am quite certain Lady Cersei can speak for herself," Lyanna pointed out, tartly.

"That's one way of phrasing it," he concurred. "But, all too often, she says things she does not mean, rather like this morning. She says things to cause distress, your grace, not because they the words are particularly truthful."

"Today has been hard for all of us, Ser Jaime," she said, trying to remain diplomatic. "However, as I am sure you can imagine, Lord Stark is furious. Lady Lannister says she had no hand in the attack on my niece's beloved wolf, we have no proof-"

"But you think she did it?" he cut in, impertinently. "That is your opinion, is it not?"

"I'm not saying either way," she said, waspishly. "This matter is being investigated, Ser Jaime. And no matter who is responsible, if we catch them, action will have to be taken. Surely you understand that."

Jaime backed down, running a gauntleted hand through his golden hair and accidentally yanking out several strands of it. "Forgive my intrusion, your grace. I only wish to say that, on my honour, no Lannister had a hand in what happened to Lady Sansa's wolf."

He had a right to defend himself and Lyanna acknowledged that with a nod of assent. "Your abject denial will be taken into consideration, Ser Jaime. I thank you."
"I appreciate that, your grace," he replied. "And, of course, I also came on official business. Ser Barristan Selmy is requesting an audience with your grace, at your own discretion."

"Ser Barristan?" she replied, curiously. "Of course, tell him he may sup with me on the morrow at evenfall. We should both be free of our duties by then."

Ser Jaime replied with a stiff nod before turning back toward the door to the outer-chamber. She was about to sit back down again when he stopped and turned back to her.

"Forgive my forwardness, your grace, but when I came in just now…" He left the sentence hanging.

Lyanna smiled to make light of it. "It was nought, but the memory of an old friend no longer among us. That is all."

"I'm sorry to hear it. Should I send for the King?"

He was being awfully helpful now his family was in the shit.

"No, don't disturb him. Thank you all the same."

Still he did not leave. A whole contortion act seemed to be playing out in the expression on his face, like he was chewing thistles.

"My nephew is a difficult boy, your grace."

"On that we are of the same opinion, ser Jaime."

"Yes, quite. If it turns out he had some hand in this unpleasant business he acted of his own volition and not that of his House. And while I did escort your nephew back to the Tower of the Hand, last night, I returned to my post outside your door immediately-"

"Yes, Ser Jaime," she interjected. "I heard you returning to your post and Ser Boros Blount has confirmed you remained there until morning."

"And Cersei doesn't know one end of a crossbow from another."

"I find that very difficult to believe, ser Jaime," Lyanna laughed. "All the same, I bow to your superior knowledge of your own twin sister. Now, if that is all, you should return to your post outside my door."

"Ah, the King has seen fit to remove me from your guard's post, your grace. Ser Boros and Ser Meryn will be minding you overnight. I will be guarding your grace's horses for the foreseeable future."

It was an insult that cut deep, she could see. He'd had the dull glimmer of humiliation in his eye since he first appeared through the door. Despite the recriminations flying around between both their houses, she felt a stab of pity for him. Not that he would want it.

"Just think of the fresh air and the stars," she said. "Good evening to you."

He muttered his thanks, sketched a bow and left. Once he had left, she suddenly recalled young Samwell Tarly was due to start a new position in her household on the morrow. By way of thanks for saving Lady, he was now her personal secretary and archivist. About time, too.

Dragonstone appeared through a haze of smoke and sea mist. A giant of an edifice cut from the black...
rock cliff faces that surrounded the island. Its towers rose so high they were lost in the early morning
gloom that yet lingered in the heavens. Although it was not his, Jon's breath caught in his throat as he
got his first look at his ancestral castle. Had Rhaegar lived, he and Aegon and Rhaenys would be
living here. He would be serving his older brother and helping his sister find a suitable match. They
would be exploring the cellars and vaults together, uncovering the secrets of their ancient forebears
who had fled the terrible doom of their homeland. Valyria.

At least, that was how it played out in his head. In reality, Stannis was living there and there was a
row of sorry looking people lining the harbour ready to greet them. One, he could see, was a woman
dressed entirely in red and with red hair hanging loose about her shoulders. She stuck out rather
sharply amidst the black and grey background. Could that be the red priestess his mother had been
curious about?

Meanwhile, his father was at the prow of the ship looking forlornly up at a tall tower. It was almost
as if he expected to see someone waiting for him there. Jon followed the line of his gaze, finding the
tower windows and terraces devoid of life, but for a few sea birds.

"Father, are you well?"

At first, he thought his father had not heard him. Slowly, he turned from the tower and smiled a sad,

"What is up there?"

"A ghost. Just a ghost."

Without another word, Lord Stark walked away from him. Sensing his father's peculiar mood, Jon let
him go. All he wished to do was get the awkward presentation of the households done with so he
could go and explore every inch of the place.

"Ghost! To me!"

The white wolf came bounding across the deck of the ship and down the gangway to shore. Lord
Stark and Jory were already there. Sansa followed him, with Lady being carried to dry land on a
makeshift stretcher made from a spare sail. Jon ran to catch them up, but Lord Stark was already
shaking hands with a tall, slim man with a balding head. Beside him, the red woman broke ranks as
Ghost ran straight for her.

"Ghost, to heel!" he commanded, sharply. "My Lady, have no fear."

The red woman was not afraid and Ghost completely disobeyed him. He ran to the woman and let
her pet him. She scratched his ears and ruffled his fur, while Ghost didn't so much as shy from her. A
strange stirring, almost like jealousy, was felt in the pit of his belly.

"This is my son, Jon Stark," said Lord Stark, pointing him out to (Jon assumed) was Lord Stannis
Baratheon.

The tall balding man grit his teeth and looked down at him. "Your legitimised bastard, is it?"

Inwardly, Jon riled. It wasn't just the reminder of his original birth status, but the way the man looked
at him and proceeded to talk about him as if he wasn't there at all. His father was more tolerant.

"Yes, my lord. Jon was legitimised some time ago now."

"There's nothing wrong with that," said Stannis. He had his brother's blue eyes and that was about it.
"I don't say it to slight him, but that's what he is. A legitimised bastard."

"Quite," said Lord Stark, clearly keen to change the subject. "And this young lady is my eldest daughter, Lady Sansa."

Sansa ducked an elegant curtsey. "A pleasure to meet you, my lord."

"No need for that, I'm not your king," said Stannis.

*Seven hells,* Jon thought to himself, *he has all the charm of the bird shit dribbling down the front of the Windwyrm Tower.* He only seemed to stop grinding his teeth long enough to speak in short, declarative sentences. Anything else seemed superfluous to requirements.

"Welcome to Dragonstone, all of you," Stannis continued. "There's meat and mead in my halls, room at my hearth and all that carry on. But first, may I present my daughter: Lady Shireen of the House Baratheon."

He gestured to a small girl standing at his side, her hair arranged in such a way that didn't even come close to obscuring the terrible greyscale scars on her face, although that was obviously the intention of the style. Her ears stuck out and her jaw was rather strong, to say the least. Nonetheless, she was a pleasant and sweet natured girl who chatted with her guests far more easily than her father had. As they made their way to the castle, Jon was soon put at ease by Shireen who regaled them with a description of what they were seeing.

"That's the Drum Keep over there, you should hear the acoustics inside though, they're incredible…"

During a break in her enthusiastic narrative, Jon could overhear the conversation happening between Stannis and his father.

"Nothing's changed since your last visit, Lord Stark. Only the sigils. Damn those sigils. Bloody dragons everywhere. There was one carved into the seat of the privy in the garderobe, I tell you."

He wondered when his father was last on Dragonstone. He couldn't help but wonder if it had anything to do with the 'ghost' he was looking for in the Windwyrm Tower.

"Your sister's wolf is dying."

Startled, Jon turned to find the red woman walking at his side. Up close, he could see that even her eyes were red. She wore a ruby at her throat, it pulsed with a light of its own.

"Yes," he replied. Uncertain of what to make of her, he kept his answers short.

"Bring her to me," she said, casually. "I can heal her."

Jon had his doubts, but he was grateful all the same. "Thank you, I'll speak with my sister when we reach the castle."

"You will not be disappointed, Jon Stark."

With that, she walked back to Stannis as they made their way through a sally port in the curtain walls. Jon watched her leaving, noting how the others seemed to give her a wide berth. The elderly Maester clean walked away from her. Beyond the walls, he could see the castle properly. There was one dragon not even Stannis could remove: the one built into the castle itself. Jon couldn't help but marvel at the architecture, even if it did make the island even more forbidding that it was already.
The others had gone ahead, Stannis and his father having already entered the drum keep with little Shireen running along behind them.

Beside him, Sansa drew herself to full height. "It's really rather foreboding."

"That woman says she can help Lady," he said. "I think it's worth a try."

Sansa looked sceptical. "Yes, I suppose it is. But who is she? Has she had training in such matters?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "But we won't let them alone together, will we."

His own feelings of discomfite meant he wouldn't even be suggesting this course of action, had the situation not been so grave. Even Sansa agreed, after a moment's hesitation. With that settled, they turned to the castle and the great stone dragon. A grim place, he realised, which only served to heighten his curiosity.
"I know why you've come, Lord Stark. The only thing that surprises me is the fact that Robert noticed I had gone in the first place." Stannis sounded more weary than upset at his own brother's cold relationship. As he spoke, he looked out over the seas from the headlands of Dragonstone. Smoke from the active volcano nearby billowed out behind him, making him look as if he was on fire. "There's no love lost between us, and I'll not hear otherwise. He's my king more than he was ever my brother."

"I'm not about to contradict you, my lord," Eddard assured him. The winds were strong, flapping at his cloak as they both watched the roaring seas. On the low lying stony beach below, Ghost caught his eye as he sniffed at the rolling waves. "But you left without explanation. Some say you fled. I sent you a summons, which you ignored. Robert and I would both like to know why."

"You've seen my wife, Lord Stark," he replied, before resuming his teeth grinding. Still he did not look at Ned, he kept his eyes half-focused on a non-fixed point in the far distance. He was wishing he was out there, rather than stuck on that island being forced to account for his own absence from a court he clearly detested. "Cressen doesn't know what's wrong with her. Lady Melisandre doesn't know what's wrong with her, although she pretends she does. A slow fever burns through her, weakening her by the day."

"Had I known about Lady Selyse, I would never have intruded upon you," Eddard answered, truthfully. "My lord, why did you not just tell us? Not only would I not have imposed upon you, but Robert would have sent the best Maesters in my place."

Stannis laughed, low and mirthless. "Would he, indeed? I know what he'd like to send me, and it's not good medicine."

Eddard turned to face him, wondering what was really going on in Stannis' head. It was like trying to read the future in a granite edifice. Stannis revealed little and less. It left him wondering what was the real problem? Stannis felt slighted at not being given Storm's End, a slight made worse after he held the castle for a year against the Tyrell siege. Now he wondered whether Stannis also felt slighted at not being made Hand of the King. It would have been good for him, since he was meant to be Robert's heir. But Eddard could not change the fact that he had been the chosen one.

"Be that as it may," Ned continued. "If only you two had talked, or left a message … seven hells Stannis even a raven would have sufficed. Why can't you just talk to each other?"

"Talk about what?" Stannis demanded sharply. "I've as much time for idle chit-chat as Robert has time for me and my ills."

Eddard prided himself on his patience, but this was a sore test indeed. "Your problems. Your sick wife. Your quarrels with Robert and Renly. All of it; any of it. Running away in the middle of the night solved nothing, but created more issues."

"Robert has made it clear he has no interest in anything I might say, so what's the point?" Stannis asked. "And, I would like to remind you, I also swore a vow to protect my wife. In mine own eyes, the vows I made to Selyse were just as sacred as any vow to a king. It surprises me, Lord Stark, how even the most inflexibly honourable men often forget the vows they swear to their wives."

He was looking at Eddard now. Sidelong vivid blue eyes beneath heavy dark lashes, lowered so cynically. It was a gibe Ned bristled against. Almost as if on cue, Jon came running down the steps
of the castle and on to the beach where Ghost still chased the tide. Lady Shireen was with him, her laughter carrying on the wind.

"Quite," said Eddard, his own teeth clenched now. His eye drifted up to the Windwyrm Tower, where once he had looked for Ashara Dayne. But, something else had penetrated his cold anger at the other man. "And you say you're protecting your wife from something, but what? She has a fever, you said it yourself. Fevers are common enough. You make it sound deliberate."

Stannis was silent for a moment. His granite-hard gaze softening as he watched his young daughter paddling in the shallows. "Lysa Arryn wrote to Selyse not long after Lord Arryn died. Did you know that?"

"She wrote to Cat, too," Ned pointed out, before realising what he must have heard. Although, he was surprised Lysa told Selyse. "Did she accuse the Lannisters of poisoning Jon? She has no proof, my lord. Just fear and grief."

Stannis turned to him again, eyes narrowed in a frown. "Lady Lysa said nothing of the Lannisters. She was accusing the Queen."

Ned was aghast. "Lyanna?!"

Jon hadn't realised just how confined he had been in King's Landing, until he was set free on the island of Dragonstone. The sparse population meant that, although small, the island had open countryside where they could run and shout. The beaches he had never seen before in his life, anywhere. He loved the salty wind, the sands and the pebbles. The pebbles that Lady Shireen taught him to skim, selecting large flat ones for him to practise with. He grinned as they bounced along the surface of the sea before being swallowed by an oncoming wave.

All the while, as they covered the island, she gave him a potted history of the castle itself. She knew which bits had been built by which Prince of Dragonstone, she knew who the fittings and fixtures once belonged to, she knew the order and birthdate of every prince born with the castle's walls. She could point out the spots where the builders and craftsmen brought in by her father couldn't reach the three-headed dragons and the sigil remained, speaking of the castle's former significance. Nowadays, it had the air of a long-forgotten outpost with just the faintest whisper remaining of its former greatness.

Underneath it all, he could see she was a cripplingly lonely child, a predicament made all the more sad by the fact her only friend seemed to be a fool by the name of Patchface. Made downtrodden and timid by her facial disfigurement, with no other children to talk to or play with, she sought solace in the safety of books, the characters of whom would never judge her by her looks alone. Even so, she had had the courage to welcome him and Sansa to Dragonstone with open arms and an open heart and he admired that. She overcame her own obstacles in her own quiet way.

"Will Lady Sansa's wolf get better?" she asked, scratching Ghost's ears as they walked the beach. She was nervous at first, but soon grew bolder as the wolf remained passive. "It's awful to see an animal in pain."

"We hope so," he answered. Then remembered the red woman's offer. "Your friend here at Dragonstone, the one in red, said she can heal her for us."

"Oh, you mean Lady Melisandre?" she replied. "Mother believes her, but I don't think father likes her very much."
"Where is she from?"

"Asshai by the Shadow," replied Shireen. "Have you heard of it? It's a very mysterious place, where the streets are paved in black oily stone, the water is all poisoned and no children live there at all."

Jon had heard of the place and looked at it on the maps in Maester Luwin's chambers. Other than that, he hadn't given the place a second thought. "But what does she do?"

"She's a priestess who follows R'hllor," she answered. The wind picked up and blew her hair to the side, rudely revealing the extent of her greyscale scarring. "And she's a shadowbinder, but I'm not sure what that entails. Anyway, come on and I'll show you the vaults you were interested in."

Sensing that the subject was being changed for him, Jon no longer pressed the matter. It was his mother who had been curious about the Priestess anyway, to him it scarcely mattered. All the same, he found her strangely unsettling.

Meanwhile, Shireen led him along the beach toward a steep headland. Up above them, he could see his father and Lord Stannis deep in conversation. Neither man seemed to notice him and Shireen, instead looking out to sea. That was the Narrow Sea, Jon knew. If he jumped in and swam for long enough, he would eventually reach Braavos and the Free Cities he had read so much about.

From the stony beach, it was a steep climb up the headland, towards the place where an active volcano sent smoke billowing into the clear blue skies. They were both breathless from the climb before even reaching the top, but they kept going. Their fathers passed them on the way down, Stannis pausing to ruffle his daughter's hair as he went. An oddly intimate gesture from so stiff and formal a man.

Jon tried to gage the atmosphere between Lord Stark and Baratheon, but neither gave anything away. They both looked strained and rigid, neither speaking as they descended the rugged hillside. He couldn't help but wonder what was going on there.

"Come and look at this, Jon."

Shireen's voice snapped him out of his reverie and he found her holding a sharp, black blade. His gut reaction was to tell her to drop it before she cut herself, but she seemed quite happy with it. And there was tons of the stuff. The ground, beyond the headland, was carpeted in crushed and cracked black glass. Boulders of it had rolled down from the mountain, the core of which seemed to be made entirely from the stuff. It glittered in the bright daylight, ominous and sinisterly sharp.

"Is this obsidian?" he asked, kneeling down to get a better look.

"Yes, dragon glass," she explained. "Father says it's useless. But, I read a story once, where the Children of the Forest used it to defeat enemies during a great battle in the north. After that, they gifted one hundred obsidian blades to the Night's Watch every year."

Jon had been hearing those stories all his life. "The War for the Dawn."

Shireen smiled a lopsided smile. "Lady Melisandre says the Long Night is coming again. So, I suppose we better keep this."

She gestured to the obsidian lying all around her. She made it sound light-hearted, as if she didn't really believe it. But there it was again. The Long Night. The Others. The Last Hero. It was cropping up in his life with an uncomfortable regularity. Before he could say anything further, she led him to the opening of a cave and pointed inside.
"This is one entrance that will lead you to the vaults," she said. "It's the one that's most open. There are others. One beneath the volcano. Another through a port in the curtain walls. Another on the opposite side of the castle, but you would need to go the long way around for that. It doesn't matter which one you use, because they're all interconnected anyway."

Jon stepped inside the cave, finding it was more of a tunnel. He ran his hands along the surface of the walls and found them smooth to the touch, rather than jagged like a cave. Although daylight spilled in through the open entrance, it didn't take long for him to turn a corner and find himself in total darkness. He waited a while, seeing if his eyes would adjust. But with not so much as a stray chink of light penetrating the walls, it was impossible. He found himself feeling his way along the walls, treading lightly over the ground he could not see. Every footstep crunched and echoed back at him, as he trod the carpet of shattered obsidian.

The scene reminded him of an old dream he used to have as a child, still at Winterfell. He would search the castle, finding only bones, until he reached the crypt. The door would open onto a pitch-black tunnel, just like this one, leading him down and down and down again. The darkness closed in on him, just like this, scaring him witless but unable to let him go. Remembering it now brought him out in a cold sweat, making him shiver against the cold now settling in the pit of his stomach.

He thought he should turn back now, before he ended up lost in the darkness. But the pull on him now was the same as in the dream. Not until a voice sang out from the pitch black, catching him at unawares and sending his heart shooting into his throat.

"Wolf's blood; dragon's blood; blood on the Queen's thigh. But death for the Prince-"

The mocking rhyme was cut off as Jon swore heavily, lashing out in the blackness and his clenched fist connecting with the jaw of the lackwit fool. The wretched creature had even taken off his antlered helm with the bells, all the better for scaring the shit out of him.

"Patchface!" Shireen's voice echoed down the tunnel, soon followed by her running steps. "Get out, Patchface, you ought not be here! And don't sneak up on people."

"That fucking fool be thrice damned," Jon snapped, still engulfed in darkness. He sagged against the wall, willing his heartbeat to settle and slow before it packed in altogether. He should not have used such language in front of the lady, but she didn't seem to care as she continued to scold the fool.

However, it was the impetus he needed to return to the daylight. All the same, he knew he would be back soon enough.

Back in the common hall of the Drum Keep, Lord Stark found himself sitting opposite the mysterious Red Priestess. She fixed him with her mildly perturbing red eyes, heedless of the ruby pulsing at her throat as if it were alive. After a while, Ned disregarded her as he did his coat, by simply shrugging it off and passing it to someone else.

"Thank you, Lady Melisandre, I don't think we'll be needing the Lord of Light's intervention in this matter," said Stannis, taking the seat at the head of the table. "You may leave us."

At first, Ned thought she would protest. If she was, she soon thought better of it and rose elegantly to her feet before bidding them farewell. As she went, he tried to put an age on her, but came up short. Meanwhile, he got the distinct impression that Stannis merely tolerated her presence in his halls for Selyse's sake. Maester Cressen loathed her so much he refused to enter the common hall until after she had left.
"So tell me, my lord, why it is that Lysa Arryn thinks my sister murdered my predecessor?" Eddard asked, once Cressen was settled in Melisandre's former place. He wanted a witness for this conversation. "Surely, not to make room for me? Jon Arryn was more a father to me than my own ever was."

"No, my lord," replied Stannis. "It was known about Court that Jon Arryn was suggesting to Robert that he might need to take another wife, thus setting aside Queen Lyanna. In favour of a new wife that could prove to be more, er, fertile. Margaery Tyrell was one of the names being floated around."

If that were true, Ned would have to profess himself disappointed in his old mentor. But it was practical. Lyanna had proved barren and kings needed heirs. However, that was not the issue.

"I know my sister, Lord Stannis," he said, gravely. "If Robert really was intent on setting Lyanna aside, I know what she would do. She would hold her head high, pack her strongbox, wish Robert good fortune and return to Winterfell where we, her family, would welcome her home. She would be free to live out her days with us, or remarry if she so chose."

There was an undeniable truth that Ned could not speak aloud. That was that Lyanna would have returned to Jon, used the money from her annulment settlement to buy a little holdfast and moved them both into it where she could discreetly be a mother to him. It would have been easy to explain: getting the bastard boy out from under the feet of the step-mother who could barely stand him, employed as a page in the former Queen's new household. She certainly would not have degraded herself by clinging to a king who clearly no longer wanted her. But Robert did still want her and Lyanna continued to fulfil her duties and uphold her end of the bargain they struck at Jon's birth.

"I must confess, I did not believe the Queen capable," said Stannis. "It always seemed to me that she respected Lord Arryn and that Lord Arryn was fond of her. But he had to do his duty to the realm. And when that fever burned through him, my lord … well, it was not natural. Anyone could have seen that."

"My Lords, forgive me," Cressen spoke up, his eyes darting between both Eddard and Stannis. "We must not lose sight of the real matter here: Lysa wrote to Lady Stark blaming the Lannisters. She wrote to Lady Selyse blaming Queen Lyanna. I think we can safely assume both are lies."

For the first time since his arrival, Ned noticed Stannis looking mildly amused.

"I wonder who she's blamed in her letter to Lord Tywin?" he laughed, a sound reminiscent of cracking rock. "Wouldn't surprise me if she's tried to pin it on her own father."

Ned had to admit, he was curious. "I shudder to think what she's told the Tyrells."

Stannis laughed again. Twice, in one afternoon.

"I think I can guess, my lord," he declared. "Me, probably. Lord Mace still hasn't forgiven me for the Siege of Storm's End. As if I need his accursed forgiveness after what he did to my people."

That made all too depressing sense to Ned. "I spoke in jest, my lord, but I think you have the truth of it."

"My lords, please, I see the humour but I remind you both that this is serious."

Cressen was mildly admonishing, bringing apologies from the other two like misbehaving boys.

"Yes, and I might remind you, my lord, that Lyanna herself was recently close to being poisoned," Ned pointed out. "By a fertility treatment given to her by Lysa Arryn."
Stannis frowned, his blue eyes narrowing. "Gods, I'd almost forgotten that. We really did think she was going to die. Lord Stark, did I hear you say that Lady Catelyn was going to visit her sister?"

"You did," he answered. "My son, Brandon, has been unwell recently and she was delayed. Right now, I am of a mind to write to her and countermand her decision to go. I mislike this, my lord, I would know what Lysa is truly playing at."

"You summoned Lysa to court," said Stannis. "Any reply?"

"None," Ned answered. "And as of now, I expect none. Robert and I are remembered in the Vale. If it comes to it, we'll go there ourselves and drag her down the Mountains with our own bare hands, if need be."

He had transition from bewilderment to disbelief, and now to anger. Whatever games his sister-by-law was playing, he resented being dragged into it. He resented, even more, his sister being implicated in them. Why was she using Jon's death to play the great houses off against each other? It made him feel sick to dwell upon the real implications.

Dusk gathered and the wolf's keen eyes sharpened against the failing light. The scent of man faded, replaced by the smell of prey and blood and the acrid tang of the poisoned water below. Earlier, he had sniffed at the roiling waters, finding it repulsive. All the same, he chanced a taste of it and found it worse than its smell. Worse, the poisoned water crept closer inland, as if it wanted to engulf the whole place – earth and rock alike.

Now he prowled the hills, clinging to the great stone edifice they explored before with the help of the grey-faced girl cub. He did not know this place, and that lack of familiarity had made him more cautious than he was usually wont to be. But the smell of the damp, the sharp pine and the earthy wet mud reassured him, high up the mounds. However, the smoke was never far away. Smoke without visible fire – a feature he mistrusted most of all. It felt like a hidden predator, lurking out of the range of even his acute vision.

The ground beneath his paws turned sharp, so he picked up his pace and ran through the crack in the mountain, into the darkness beyond. He paused again, sniffing at the air, his pink nose wrinkling in the cold. Nothing moved, not even a breath of wind. Only the lack of scent gave him pause for hesitation, before he continued his journey into the darkness. His keen red eyes widened further, his ears pressed flat against his head as he moved by sense, stealth and touch.

Inside, he scented blood, undercut by the scent of water and dust. What dwelled down there held no fear for him, nor did his eyes go blind in the dark. All the same, he bared his teeth ready to snap the neck of any prey foolish enough to cross his path. Faster and faster, he ran through the endless tunnel, following the senses that pulled him deeper and deeper until he emerged in a wide-open space. His claws scratched stone, the sound sonorous in the vaulted space. He followed his nose, sniffing along the edges as far as he could go until he snapped at a rat that scurried over his paws. The blood was hot and wet and sticky as it gushed down his maws, bones crunching between his teeth. He misliked the taste and let the dead animal drop at his front paws.

He scented blood again and picked up the trail. Old blood, dead blood. Blood long gone from this place. Its scent distinct from any other, he chased it down another cavern, through the endless tunnels, his eyes piercing the darkness as he fled through the vaults long devoid of any human life. He reached the place where the smell of the old, dead blood hit him the strongest and bared his teeth in a show of pointless aggression.

At the sounds of something stirring deep beneath the rocks, his ears pricked up and strained for the
smallest movements. The stones cracked sharp as whips, startling the wolf whose fur bristled and Jon awoke breathless and dazed in unfamiliar surroundings.

All around him, the room swam slowly into view. Small, but comfortable. The Maester had allocated the room to him for his short stay on Dragonstone, and now a fire crackled happily in the hearth. He must have dozed off, tired from the overnight sailing and early arrival on the island.

Still a little disoriented, he rubbed the residue of the peculiar dream from his eyes and sat up in the feather bed he rested in. He wasn't with Ghost in the dream, he was Ghost. Remembering Sansa's dream of Lady, when she had been attacked, made his skin crawl again. Was it the same thing? His sister was in the room next door, refusing to leave Lady's side. But he could not bring himself to disturb her now.

Instead, he got out of bed and crossed the room to a window overlooking the bay. It was still early evening, with the night only now beginning to thicken. The yards were empty, but a fire burned down on the beach where earlier he had skimmed stones with Shireen. He watched as Lady Melisandre came into view, her lips moving as though in conversation with someone else. But she was quite alone down there.

After a minute, in which she seemed lost in her own world, she stopped turning a circle around the fire and lifted her gaze to his window. She held his gaze for a long moment, a smile playing at her lips.
The heat from the flames dried the tears on Sansa's face. Amazement stole the words from her lips. How? The question reverberated through her mind as Lady raised her head and met her gaze. For a moment, she feared the wolf no longer recognised her. A moment passed before the wolf set her right and found her legs, running straight for her. Sansa caught her in her open arms, letting the wolf lick her face, tail wagging madly at their reunion.

Although swept away in the joy of Lady's restoration to health, Sansa remained aware of Melisandre as the priestess stepped away from the flames. All through that ceremony, or whatever it was, she had been so close to the fire that, by rights, she should have been reduced to a pile of ash. Yet there she stood, watching the reunion between girl and wolf with a distant yet satisfied smile on her pale face.

Sansa didn't know what to say as she lifted her face from the fur at the back of Lady's neck, where she'd nuzzled and hugged the wolf close.

"Thank you, my lady," she stammered, getting back to her feet. Her knees felt like water. "But how? She was ... Lady was... she looked dead..., so, how?"

Melisandre approached more closely, placing one hand at the scruff of the wolf's neck. "The Lord of Light sent you this wolf for a purpose. You would do well to tell your brother that."

Sansa was a child of the old gods of the North, raised to respect the Faith of the Seven. She was as comfortable in a godswood as she was a sept, where she could sing along to every hymn. But in all her eleven years, no one had told her anything about a Lord of Light. Yet, here she was, having just witnessed with her own two eyes, a real miracle. She looked from the fires back to the wolf, wondering whether her eyes deceived her, whether the priestess had somehow tricked her. She remembered a time back in Winterfell, when a travelling man had stayed with them a while and he used to amuse the children by making coins materialise from behind their ears. She was amazed by the man's powers, until Arya pointed out that he had the coin up his sleeve all along. What she had just witnessed was nothing like that.

All the same, she felt like she was being tricked again. She didn't like being tricked.

"Will Lady truly be all right now?" she asked.

Lady Melisandre nodded. "She is as fit as she ever was before the attack."

Sansa almost wept again, tears of relief this time. Instead, she made a choking noise somewhere at the back of her throat. "My father can pay-"

"I don't want money. I do the Lord of Light's work and he is his own reward. But it would be nice if you could tell your brother what happened." Melisandre seemed perfectly happy with just that.

Sansa found it odd, but readily agreed all the same. As far as she knew, Jon would be inside with everyone else. Not running around a cold beach when it was beginning to get dark outside. Nevertheless, the priestess was proved right when she saw Jon walking quickly from the doors and down the steep steps towards the shoreline. He waved to her, getting her attention. Ghost shot out from behind him, running to meet Lady.
At the sight of Lady and Ghost play fighting on the footpath, Jon came to an abrupt halt. He watched them in silence before turning to Sansa. Even now, she barely knew how to explain what she had just witnessed. "Lady!" she spluttered. "Back from the dead! The Red Woman!"

Jon blinked, frowning at her as if she was mad. But even he could see that Lady had made a rather miraculous recovery. He couldn't deny what was in front of him. Still, he remained dubious and Melisandre was gone already. "She can't have been dead, Sansa. But I'm pleased she's well again. Now that's case, come with me: it's time we had that talk I promised you."

Without waiting for agreement, he stepped around her, leaving her staring after him. "What talk?"

"On the boat, remember?" he called over his shoulder. "Sansa, come on. Stop your daydreaming!"

Sansa gasped, kicking herself for being such an empty-head. How could she have forgotten?! Hitching her skirts clear of her feet, she ran to catch up, oblivious to where he was taking her.

Supper was a simple affair. Roast beef, vegetables and no fuss. It was how Lyanna liked it when it was just a private dinner rather than public banquets. Fountains made of projectile spouting cream and fireworks exploding out of dead peacock's arses were great for impressing foreign visitors. But in the privacy of her own apartments, she kept it lowkey. And she suspected an old soldier like Ser Barristan Selmy quite agreed with her.

The man himself sat opposite her at the small table in her private chamber, the lines of his face softened by the glow of beeswax candles. Calloused fingers, more accustomed to wielding swords, now broke into the crust of a fresh baked bread roll.

"Excellent fare, your grace," he said. "I thank you for it. Really, I only requested the audience to talk about Jon. The food is a welcome added bonus."

Lyanna had suspected as much. She signalled for her Lady in Waiting to leave the wine on the table. "You have my leave, Ysilla. Thank you."

Both she and Ser Barristan nodded their appreciation as the lady followed the order before curtseying her retreat. Only when they were alone did Lyanna speak again. "Jon is fond of you and he's improved immensely under your guidance. Lord Stark was telling me that just before he left for Dragonstone."

Earlier that day, Varys had been in her ear pointing out that the knight was somewhat knocking on in years and now might be a good time to mention retirement. Lyanna herself trusted that if Ser Barristan was feeling the effects of age, he'd be more than happy to tell her himself. All the same, she worried that that might have been another reason for his coming to her that evening. But why would he come to her and not Robert?

"I'm pleased with the boy's progress," he replied, at length. "And he's a good lad, not full of himself or arrogant as boys his age are wont to be. At fourteen they think they're men, wise to the world. But they're not. Not really. I suppose it's his upbringing that has him so modest. The world is unkind to bastards and has a way of keeping them in their place."

Lyanna dropped her gaze to the wax candle, watching as the melt slowly tracked the length of the diminishing stem. "I know it was not easy for him. Lord Eddard dotes on the boy as he does the other children. The same could not be said of Lady Stark."

"I suppose that was to be expected," said Ser Barristan. He took a sip of wine before continuing: "I don't know if he mentioned to you at all, but he spoke to me recently. He was late for a lesson, so I
held him back to make up for lost time. So long, in fact, I thought it only fair I brought his supper out to him. While dining, we just got talking. It was an interesting conversation."

Lyanna took up her wine glass and met his gaze again. "I would imagine it was."

Ser Barristan hesitated, as if framing his next words carefully, but then just came out with it. "He knows a lot about you, your grace. Things that not many other people would know."

She tried not to sigh; Jon hadn't exactly elaborated on what was said and she just assumed it was vague things about Rhaegar. Clearly, it had been more. "Jon did say he had talked to you and said things he, perhaps, should not have said. I believe he was angry with me at the time, because he overheard me inviting Ser Gregor Clegane to court for the Tourney."

"Yes," said Barristan. "Yes, that was it. He was late for training and in a towering bad temper. But he had quite calmed down by the time we spoke." The old knight paused, partially turning away from her as his eyes became unfocused. "Forgive an old man, my queen, but I am of an age where I find myself increasingly looking back on my life. And some of the things Jon said certainly got me thinking."

Lyanna was curious. "Really?"

"Yes. For example, I remember the first day you came to court to be wed to the King," he reminisced. "I was on guard duty when I first saw you and you walked right past me into Robert's rooms, your brother holding your arm. I wondered if I might have been invisible."

"It wasn't like that, Ser Barristan," she said. "I was not snubbing you."

"Oh! I know," he said. "But, I must admit, I spent the next year or so waiting for you to approach me. To say something to me. To make some acknowledgement of what had happened. But you always kept your silence. Before Jon spoke to me, I began to think I had imagined seeing you with the Prince, that it hadn't really happened. But when he died, he whispered your name. All these years later and I can hear it still. I know I didn't imagine that."

Least said, soonest mended. It was a saying she repeated to herself every night. But she could imagine how it looked from the outside.

"The next time I saw you, after the Trident, you were marrying Robert."

"The next time I saw you, you were guarding Robert – your life, for his."

"I had my vows-"

"And I had my reasons, which are no less sacrosanct to me than your vows are to you, Ser Barristan." She hadn't meant to sound terse, but it came out that way and the old knight shrank back from the rebuke.

"I didn't mean to imply you were being perfidious, your grace."

"I suppose it must have looked that way, Ser Barristan," she replied. Topping up their wine glasses, she continued: "When I married Robert, I built a wall in my head between him and Rhaegar. And I feel there are two of me: each one existing on opposite sides of that wall. One me is still sixteen. The other is the grown woman of thirty you see before you now. The two can never meet. If they do, if I talk too much about what happened to the other me, the wall comes crashing down, the past escapes and the grief returns. It sounds insane, and it probably is, but my silence and that wall, is nothing more than an act of desperate self-preservation."
She fell silent and wet her lips with Arbour gold. Ser Barristan had been at her wedding to Rhaegar. All those years at court she knew he knew. She had sensed him looking at her, wondering what she was doing there with Robert. As if she had betrayed the prince who had regarded him almost like a father.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, voice barely audible. "I only saw you laugh and dance and keep the courtly gallants dancing around verbal pinheads. Inside, you had your wall. Your barriers. I suppose we all did that, to an extent. But your extent seems far greater than others. But why? If Robert made you feel that way, why did you marry him in the first place?"

Lyanna smiled and blinked away the tears that began threatening to spill. "He went to war for me. We'd only met once and we barely looked at each other; he had an illegitimate daughter and I assumed he would rather have been with her and her mother, if truth be told. But he went to war for me when he found out I was gone. When he found out I was alive, do you think he would have wished me good fortune and let me be on my way?"

Ser Barristan smiled a rueful smile. "He would have chased you to the ends of the known world and back again. He'd have taken a battering ram to that wall you were talking about. I thought women were flattered by such displays of devotion? You sound as if you were afraid of him finding you, so gave up without a fight."

"Perhaps that's right," she said. "There had been quite enough fuss already, don't you agree? Perhaps you think me craven, but I think I can live with that."

"No," he replied, quietly. "It makes me think that you had something else hidden behind that wall. Something you didn't want Robert to find."

Lyanna stifled a dry laugh. "Yes, something like that."

"I know it's all a big secret," said Sansa. Jon had led her to the deepest, darkest pits below Dragonstone. She had been afraid at first, but the chatter soon distracted her and he suspected she was now so carried away she barely noticed where they were going. "But I worried because I knew and I thought you did not. It wouldn't have been right for me to have known the truth and not you. But it's wrong to share other people's secrets. I was in a terrible muddle about it all."

Jon halted their exploration and turned to look at her, where she was following close behind with the oil lantern lighting the way. She held it close to her face, so twin oil flames reflected in her eyes and the auburn of her hair looked almost aflame.

"Why didn't you talk to the Queen about it? She would have understood."

Sansa looked anguished again. "But she would ask me how I knew, and I would have had to tell her about the coat and Arya tearing it. You know I'm a hopeless liar. I try to do it but mother or father always manage to get the truth out of me and then I get told off."

"Mother wouldn't have said anything about the coat, she's not like that," he assured her. Alas, Sansa was not to have known. "She could have set your mind at ease and you could have enjoyed your time at court with all the dances and feasts and whatever else it is you do."

"Oh, but I couldn't have done that," she mildly corrected him. "Don't you understand?"

Having already spent the last hour being regaled with Sansa's version of the tragic and doomed romance of Lyanna Stark and Rhaegar Targaryen, Jon felt himself growing wary again. "Er, I don't think I do."
She sighed and smiled as if she was dealing with an obtuse child. "Even though you're still a secret, you ought to be working quietly to fulfil your destiny as a secret prince, growing up in hiding in the frozen North and biding your time until the hour comes when the world needs you. Don't you remember when you didn't recognise Lord Tarly's sigil and I told you you needed to know them all? And when I told you that you need to beat everyone in the tourney? That's because the world needs to start taking notice of you. Just small acts of valour, at first. But building steadily until everyone begins wondering about this mysterious bastard from the North, and when all seems lost you can be revealed to all the world for what you really are: the last dragon prince. The perfect blend of Aemon the Dragonknight and Cregan Stark!"

"Seven hells, Sansa!" he laughed aloud, so that the sound echoed back at them through the obsidian tunnel they were in. Although, he thought he could live with being a blend of Aemon the Dragonknight and Cregan Stark – both had been his boyhood heroes. "Even miles below ground you find a way of keeping your head in the clouds. How do you manage it?"

In reality, he admired her for it. No matter how grim or dangerous things were, she had a way of turning it on its head and transforming it into something extraordinary. And, despite her florid sighs and wistful romanticism, her recounting of his parents' meeting and elopement had been scarily accurate. The Mad King had been cast as an evil tyrant threatening to burn even his own son, their Stark grandfather had been portrayed as an overbearing patriarch cold heartedly indifferent to his children's amorous plight. Elia had been the forgotten princess, cast aside in a tower and left to weep and mourn. Robert was the philandering drunk, only hearing of his betrothed's disappearance while in bed with a bevy of whores and a tankard in his hands. Their father was the tragically doomed supporting hero, torn between his best friend and his sister, damned if he did and damned if he didn't.

Strip away the dramatics, and she wasn't a hundred miles from the basic truth.

"You can laugh," she gently chided. "But it's like a saga and that's how it goes in the sagas. And don't tell me life isn't a story, because so far yours has been. The secret prince, hidden away far from home, never knowing who he truly was and enduring the cruel scorn of others."

"Sansa, you exaggerate!" He cut in. "Not even your mother was as bad as that. Well, all right, maybe she was … sometimes. Now come on, sister, or we'll be down here all night."

Through the light of the oil lantern, Sansa began looking around as if she had only just noticed they were in a cavern, miles below the castle. "Why are we down here? It's all dirty and I got a cobweb on my skirts."

Jon smiled. "You'll see."

The wolves had come down with them, Lady growing stronger all the time. He couldn't help but wonder what had really happened with her, but he still felt wary of approaching Melisandre. There was something off about her; something he didn't quite like. Not even his gratitude to her for having saved Lady's life could shake the ill-ease she inspired in him.

He pushed the red woman aside as he followed Ghost's lead through the tunnels. On and on, deeper and deeper inside until they came upon a small, subterranean stream that trickled over black, oily stone. It wasn't obsidian, either. Sansa almost slipped on one of the jutting stones that formed a haphazard bridge. Jon caught her in time, before she fell into whatever was forming that stream of black, greasy looking water. Even the wolves shied from it. As he studied it for a long moment, he remembered Shireen telling him about Asshai – a city built from oily black stone, with water so poisonous nothing could live in it.

"Where is that water coming from?" she asked, swinging the lantern around to get a better look. She
answered her own question. "It's coming from up there, beneath that gap in the rocks."

Still poised between two of the stepping stones, Jon glanced in the direction of the lantern's beam. Sansa was right, as well. The water was trickling beneath a narrow, half-inch high slot that ran along the base of the rock. It was hot, too. Steam rose from it, it made the hems of Sansa's skirts wet and the smell of it was foul.

Ghost had reached this place in his wolf dream, it was the point at which he shied. They had already passed the great chamber built into the obsidian, finding it empty and sinister with its endless echoing alcoves. He wondered if his forebears once chained dragons up down there. The walls were certainly smooth, as if buffeted by centuries of dragon scales rubbing against them. It was a notion that intrigued him.

"Jon, I think we ought to be going back now."

Sansa's voice jolted him out of his thoughts and he thought she might be right. They had been searching the vaults and caverns for hours now and it was bound to be late. For all their efforts, they had found nothing. All the same, he had enjoyed it and was enjoying it still. And he was itching to know where that water was coming from.

"Take my hand," he said to Sansa. "And I'll take the lantern from here."

She handed it to him, then allowed him to lead her across the stream and they followed a bend in the path to where they reached another tall, black stone wall. This one covered in scratches and markings. Chunks were missing, where people had tried to smash their way inside and failed. With her free hand, Sansa knocked on it and yelped with pain and fright.

"Jon it's hot as a fire."

"And those scratches aren't scratches at all," he noted. "They're runes. And when you knocked on that wall, it was hollow. Are you all right?"

He took a look at her burned hand and then tested the wall for himself, discovering that Sansa was not exaggerating. And when he held up the lantern, he found that the scratches on the walls were actually runes. He could not read them. He didn't think anyone knew how to read runes, anymore. But there was no mistaking them.

"They're wards," said Sansa. "Don't you remember what Old Nan told us about Bran the Builder. He used runes to put wards on the Wall. It's part of the magic."

Jon smiled to himself. "Hold the lantern for just another minute. I think I found what I'm looking for."

Blood magic, Sam said, and it required a blood sacrifice. So Jon stepped into the darkness and slowly trod his way around the black stone vault they had found, picking out the runes etched into the surface. It looked like chalk had been rubbed into those etchings, to make them stand out against the dark background. Whatever the case, it was now or never.

He removed the dirk from his belt and pressed the blade to the palm of his hand. Wincing against the sting, he felt the blood ooze from between the fingers of his clenched fist. Fresh and still warm, it dripped over the black stone as he walked the perimeter. Just for a moment, he forgot what happened to Sansa and pressed his hand to the wall. His skin made contact with the stone before he could stop himself and gasped with shock to find it just pleasantly warm now. But nothing happened. He found the place at the back of the hollow vault, where the stream fed in and under another crack in the rock
and dipped his cut hand in the dark waters, finding it also pleasantly cool.

Whatever was in there, it was a strange place. A thought that no sooner occurred to him than the sound of splitting rock rent the air. Sansa yelped and came dashing around the corner, the lantern swinging from her hands.

"What was that?" he asked, coming up to meet her.

"I-I don't know," she said. "It's round the other side, where we were before."

His left hand was still bleeding, so he held Sansa's with his left as he returned to the other side where a large fissure had cut through the rock. It was splitting still, chunks of dark stone splitting from the awning of the vault and falling into the stream. Jon tried to move it, less the flow get blocked and the vaults begin to flood. Meanwhile, Sansa stood there open mouthed.

"How did you do that?"


They exchanged a look and, sensing to the door to be safely open, they stepped into the unknown vault together.

"Am I right?" asked Ser Barristan. His old blue eyes sharpened, fixing Lyanna with an unyielding look. She found herself wondering whether that was the same look he got in his eye when he faced an opponent on the field of battle. "Because I keep thinking about the things Jon said, and correlating it with the things I know, and I'm filling in the blanks using the information I have. And when I become convinced that I'm right, I kick myself ten minutes later and curse myself for a silly old fool. I'm only seeing what I want to see. I'm only believing what I want to believe."

"Do you want to believe it?" asked Lyanna.

"More than anything," he answered.

Lyanna paused, glancing into the contents of the wine glass now balanced on her knee. There wasn't much left, but she had quite lost her thirst for the stuff. She only drank what was left to give herself a second to compose her thoughts and memories.

"I was six months pregnant when I heard of Rhaegar's death," she said. "He wished to name the baby Aemon, after the uncle he wrote to at Castle Black. Visenya for a girl, but that hardly matters now. The magnitude of Rhaegar's death left me dumb and in disbelief, I don't think I realised what it meant. To the point where I wanted to name the baby Rhaegar, in honour of his father. It took an hour to realise that I could hardly do that now. The Targaryens felt as much a part of this realm as the wall – I couldn't imagine it without them. In the end, we chose Jon. I liked it. Sweet, simple and unassuming. Eddard liked it because of Jon Arryn – the man who had raised him as son, but was never his father."

She paused there, giving herself a moment to breathe and let the rolling years of guilt and shame ebb away. "And you can hold it against me that I married Robert and remember the years I spent laughing and dancing and playing along with this charade. But underneath it all I was scared out of my addled wits. Not because I was afraid Robert would find out the truth about Rhaegar and I. He can do what he wants to me. No, I was terrified he would find out about Jon. And worse, I was completely alone throughout it all."

"But you did not have to be alone and afraid," Barristan said, leaning forwards to be closer to her. "If
only you had said something, if I had known I could have done something. I don't even know what, but I would have done what I could. I would have got you to the Free Cities with Jon. I think I would have come with you. Had I known, my sword would have been his for as long as there was breath in my body."

Lyanna smiled. "That's very kind of you. But really, I could have gotten myself to the Free Cities. However, what would that have meant for Jon? A life of fear and penury, eking out a living in the backstreets of Braavos, far from home and miserable. He deserved a lot more than that."

Barristan backed down, his expression changing from one of anguish to something like guilt. "Now I know, I think I should have known. I should have guessed."

"I'm surprised Rhaegar didn't tell you, in all honesty," she said. "Although, I think he was afraid you might be angry with him."

"Angry! Why?" he looked genuinely shocked.

"Because he knew you were unhappy about him setting aside Elia and everything was still so secret," she answered. "Maybe 'angry' is the wrong word, because I think he feared disappointing you more than anything."

"How could I have been disappointed?" he asked, rhetorically. "I'm certainly not disappointed now. Gods, I couldn't be happier. To think, the boy was under our noses all this time. I must congratulate you, your grace, you hid him well."

Relief was Lyanna's predominant feeling, even though she had suspected the truth all along. That Barristan secretly remained loyal to his fallen prince. Now he swung from happy to alarmed as he ran his hands through his hair, a mild look of alarm on his face.

"Seven hells, I've been fighting him against lads far older than him," he recalled. "I've been letting him fight and joust and take on four opponents at once without so much as a scrap of padding. If I had known--"

"Ser Barristan, please, change nothing," she cut in. "He loves his training sessions and special treatment will make him feel small. Let him fight, let him get bruises and let him be defeated by his betters – it'll keep him humble."

He didn't look happy, but backed down nonetheless. "I suppose you're right. How did he take the news of his, er, real parents?"

"Not good, at first, but we're learning about each other," she replied. "He's learning about himself, actually. And I think that's more important. You know he's gone to Dragonstone. I think he wants to see the place his father once called home. But, you never know, he may uncover a little more than he bargained for."

The vault looked empty, at first. Just like all the others they had checked. But then Jon found a dusty old book hidden on a naturally formed shelf of black rook in the wall. He turned it over in his hands, finding it to be an old book about runic magic. Also on the shelf was a rolled-up tapestry showing the Doom of Valyria. Then Sansa found a large silver horn, banded with bronze and iron in an alcove, runes engraved along its edge.

"Somehow, I don't think it's meant for an orchestra," said Jon, kneeling down to look at it more closely.
Sansa looked perplexed. "Why is it in here?"

It was so hot in there they were both sweating and Sansa's hair had fuzzed up into the form of a bird's nest. Jon supposed he wasn't looking too good himself. Meanwhile, he was so wary of the horn he didn't even want to touch it.

Instead, he moved on and checked the remaining recesses in the wall. While the room remained completely devoid of ancient, hidden Targaryen treasures, he still found what he was looking for. There were three of them, grouped together on a ledge above the place the small stream was heated by the volcano that towered far above them. Jon reached behind him, taking Sansa's wrist and tugging her over to where he knelt before the dragon eggs.

"Here," he said. "These are what we came here for."

He heard her gasp, pulling back a little as if they might hatch and bite her. "Are they real? Are there baby dragons inside them?"

Jon laughed. "They're just stone, but aren't they pretty?"

She nodded, daring to gently touch one. "They feel smooth, but bumpy."

"Which one do you like best?" he asked her.

One was white with green swirls. The second was gold and silver, with veins of fiery red running through it. The third was a deep and rich red with swirls of midnight black. Sansa prevaricated, brow creased in consternation.

"They're all so beautiful," she said. "I thought they'd just look like big chicken eggs."

"I'm shocked your imagination failed you," he said. "Go on, pick one."

"Oh, I don't know," she said, pained by indecision. "Well, I think the red one."

"Red. Are you sure?" He thought it suited her, it matched her hair.

She nodded. "Yes. Is that the one you're going to keep?"

"No," he replied, picking it up with his injured hand. "That's the one I'm giving to you. To say thank you, for keeping my secret for so long."

She blushed to the roots of her hair. "Really? Thank you!" She stood on tiptoes to kiss his cheek, her egg smeared in his blood, grasped in her hands.

"The white one has to be for Ser Barristan," he said. "I wouldn't even have bothered looking for these if he hadn't made that joke. The gold and silver has to be for Lyanna."

"Wait! Aren't you keeping one?" she asked. "You found them and you're their rightful owner."

Jon wasn't much one for ornaments. "And what would I do with a big, fancy stone?"

"What if it hatches?" she asked. "You'd have to do something then."

"Sansa, it's stone!" he laughed. "Not even your flights of fancy can make stone turn back to flesh!"

"Well, we'll just share this one between us then. Just in case."
She removed her cloak so they could use it as a makeshift sack for the eggs. Normally, he would show a little reticence about removing valuable items that, strictly speaking, weren't his. But now he had used his own blood to open the vault, he wasn't about to let a Baratheon come swanning in and helping himself to the last of his ancestor's precious items. As an afterthought, he picked up the book, thinking Sam would love it.

"Maybe this is how you're revealed to the world?" Sansa pressed on, refusing to give up hope of a miraculous rebirth. "You'll hatch the egg and come riding into the arena of battle on the back of a big, red dragon. Remember what we said about Aemon the Dragonknight?"

Jon rolled his eyes. "Aemon the Dragonknight didn't ride a dragon. And even if it did hatch, it'd only be a baby. I don't think I'd be riding anywhere on it."


Jon shrugged. "Stannis can have the horn. A gift for his hospitality."

Remembering how he got into the vault, he was struck with the horrible notion of the damn thing sealing back up again with them still inside it. So, with nothing else to see, gave his sister one last nod of encouragement before shouldering her cloak with the eggs and book wrapped up while she took up their dying lantern. It was definitely time to go.

Chapter End Notes

As you're probably aware, I'm also posting this story on ff.net where it was several chapters ahead (which led to a few people thinking I was being plagiarised). Well, this is now fully up to date. Apologies again for neglecting to post here. From now on, I'll be posting here every Monday. Meanwhile, King's Blood will be updated every Friday.

Thanks again for all the comments and kudos. I try to answer everyone, but sometimes it takes time. So, thanks for being patient.
The ship in the harbour was certainly eye-catching. A great galley, with twenty oars that Jon could see and huge orange sails depicting the sigil of a sun and spear crossed. He knew that sigil, at least. He turned to find Sansa, where she was walking Lady around the deck of their own, slightly more modest ship, as they dropped anchor. "Unbowed, unbent, unbroken," he said. "House Martell. See, I do know some of the Great Houses."

Somehow, she hadn't noticed the Martell galley. "What? Oh! Are they here for the tourney?"

"The tourney," he agreed. Remembering his mother's reasons for inviting them, he added: "Among other things."

Jon considered the situation they were in. House Lannister stood accused of launching an arbitrary attack on one of House Stark's Direwolves – a claim they strenuously denied. Now House Stark had set House Lannister's bannerman up to answer for one of their more historic crimes. Whatever the outcome of this ancient grudge match, it wasn't likely to improve Stark-Lannister relations. But it would improve Stark – Martell relations, which were nearly non-existent to Jon's knowledge. They were two great houses co-existing on the same continent and that was as far as it went. Lyanna absconding with Rhaegar must have seen to that.

"This will be interesting." His father had appeared at his side, eyeing the galley with suspicion. "Well, the Queen will be pleased, but I think Robert will need to be calmed down."

"Does Robert hate them?" asked Jon. "Nothing Aerys or Rhaegar did was their fault?"

Lord Stark didn't look at him, he kept his gaze on the ship while he contemplated the answer. "Hate is not the right word. He fears them. They're a powerful House he greatly wronged. But Robert doesn't show fear, he masks it behind something else. Something less vulnerable."

Jon sighed. "Why can he not just apologise?"

Ned laughed drily. "Sorry I murdered your sister and her babes, now let's be friends."

"I know it's not exactly going to turn back time," Jon retorted, feeling a little stung. "But it's better than isolating Dorne and hoping they go away and don't come back. Without even a token gesture of contrition, the ill feelings are just left endlessly festering."

"I don't mean to be dismissive," his father replied. "You're right, of course. Animosity has been building and building for fourteen years now. But empty gestures, like just saying you're sorry, can do as much harm as good. It's meaningless, unless something is done."

Jon's brow raised. "Something like inviting them to the city to kill the person who wronged them?"

"Well, the problem is, Robert can't take action against Clegane because he was following his Lord's orders and that's his job," Eddard explained. "And taking out Clegane for a deed that secured his crown would make an enemy of Tywin Lannister – and Robert cannot afford that. But a small sleight of hand, like this one pulled by Queen Lyanna, offers an opportunity for the score to be evened in way no one can complain about and might just go some way to appeasing the wronged party, in this case, the Martells."

"But what if the Martells just want to go after Tywin, once the Mountain is killed?" he asked. "Where does it end?"
"The Others can take Tywin for all I care," Ned laughed. "But no. I am sure Lyanna has made it plain that this is where it ends. They have the Mountain, now the Starks and Baratheons must have their peace."

Jon remained unconvinced. "I still think there must be better ways of doing things."

The royals of the Red Keep and their chief advisors were already lined up on the harbour, ready to formally greet the royals of Dorne. Formalities that saw them being hurried off the ship before they could even get their belongings, so Lord Stark could get into the royal line in time to greet the visitors. They found themselves hurried down the plank, onto dry land along the harbour wall where a crowd had already assembled.

Lyanna was there, but Robert was conspicuous only by his absence. Lord Stark stood by his sister's side, trying not to look like he'd just disembarked from an overnight sailing from Dragonstone. He straightened his cloak, ran a hand through his hair to make it look less windswept and stood straight backed. Sansa stood beside their father and Jon up a place next to her.

"Sansa, what do I do?" he whispered in her ear. "How do I greet these people?"

"We kneel, because they're royal," she replied, under her breath. "But Lyanna won't because she is also royal and they won't kneel for her. And remember, Princess Arianne takes precedence over her brothers. She's the heir."

"Right," he murmured. "Of course …. Who're Arianne's brothers?"

"Quentyn and Trystane!"

However, the first person off the boat was a tall man, with dark eyes and black hair that formed a widow's peak. A handsome woman of about the same age as him was at his side, dressed in rich purples. At the sight of them, everyone but Queen Lyanna knelt and their names and styles were declared aloud by Ser Arys Oakheart of the Kingsguard, who had escorted them from Dorne.

"Prince Oberyn of House Martell and his paramour, Ellaria Sand."

Close behind came a young man of roughly Jon's own age, who was announced as "Prince Trystane of House Martell."

They took their time as they walked over. Jon risked an upward glance in an effort to read some of the body language going on. Nor did he have to squint too hard to catch it. Prince Oberyn approached Lyanna with a look of ill-concealed contempt on his handsome face. But, as they drew level, Lyanna broke protocol and bent her knee to them, her head lowered in deference. That was as far as it went and she stood back up again, sparing him the effort of raising her. But the gesture had caught him off-guard, Jon could tell.

"Welcome to King's Landing, your grace. The Red Keep is yours."

Still the Prince said nothing, but looked Lyanna up and down as if weighing her by the ounce. After a pause too long to be comfortable, he offered a terse reply: "You can keep it."

Jon watched as he moved on to his father.

"Lord Stark, I suppose."

Eddard arose, but whatever reply he had at the ready was cut off as the Prince moved on to Sansa. From here, things went much more smoothly. The Prince softened as he offered Sansa his hand,
raising her up like a gallant knight she so admired.

"Ah!" he said. "This must be the Lady Sansa, eldest daughter of House Stark, whose beauty we have already heard so much of."

Sansa blushed to the roots of her hair. But it was Prince Trystane who spoke, his first words since setting foot on dry land. "They told us lies, uncle."

"You think so, nephew?"

Jon had never seen Sansa deflate so fast. But the young prince was smiling, a glint in his dark eyes. "Yes, for they did not come close to doing justice to Lady Stark's charm and beauty."

Trystane took her hand and stooped to kiss it. Jon thought he better remain kneeling to provide his sister a soft landing for when she inevitably fainted. But she remained composed, gave a politely modest reply before Jon became the next target.

"And this young gallant is?" asked Prince Oberyn.

Jon didn't take offence, ceding that they didn't know him.

"Jon Stark," he replied, standing up straight. Sansa mouthed the word 'lord' to him, but it was too late now. "And I don't know about 'gallant' your grace. More an up-jumped Northman learning to overreach himself."

The Prince laughed heartily, clapping him on the shoulder. "There's no such thing as overreaching yourself, Lord Stark. Remember that."

With that, the awkward formalities came to an end. Ellaria looped her arm back through her lover's arms, Tyrstane wished Jon good fortune for the tourney ahead, and the three Martells set off at a brisk pace for the city and the Red Keep looming over them.

"Well, it could have been worse, I suppose," said Lyanna, breaking line to join Jon and Eddard. She didn't seem to mind that only three junior members of the Dornish royal family had turned up. "So, how did it go with Stannis? I see he is not with you."

Lord Stark drew a deep breath. "The last night we were there, Lady Selyse died in her sleep. I do not expect to see him back at court any time soon."

"No. No, of course not," Lyanna replied. "I'll make sure Robert pays his respects. Who knows, they may even set aside their differences for Selyse's sake."

It was the same night Lady was restored, Jon recalled. He and Sansa had been rescuing the dragon eggs from the vaults when it happened. But he shoved aside his uneasy feelings about the matter and joined the others running to catch up with the Martells.

Safely back at the Tower of the Hand, Lyanna sat back on Eddard's terrace and let the sun warm her face. While the initial meeting with the Martells might have seemed strained, the mere fact of their presence in the capital was progress alone. In the meantime, she set Samwell Tarly to work, getting them settled into the Maidenvault, just outside Maegor's Holdfast. It was a place at Court that managed to keep them separate from the Lannisters.

In the rooms behind her, Jon and Sansa were unpacking the bags they had taken with them to Dragonstone. The two of them chatting animatedly about something she could not make out. Eddard
had picked up Arya, bouncing her on his hip. The girl was covered in bruises, from where she had been chasing cats through the underground vaults. Something to do with a water dance, or something like that. Sometimes, Lyanna feared to ask.

While she waited for Eddard, she sipped some wine and lay back with her eyes closed. Not opening them again until Jon's voice jolted her out of the snooze that had been fast approaching.

"I have a present for you." He was grinning and hiding something behind his back.

Lyanna sat up, unable to stop the smile spreading across her face. "Sweetling, you didn't have to."

"I did. I promised you, didn't I?" he replied.

With no further ado, he revealed a large, beautiful stone that was all gold and silver swirls. She thought it was marble, at first. Then she realised what it was and gasped aloud.

"Jon! Where did you find that?"

He beamed proudly. "Under Dragonstone. You need dragon's blood to get in some of them."

She noticed a bandage on his hand for the first time and realised he meant it literally. However, rather than make an issue of it, she took the dragon egg and held it carefully. It was heavy, but smooth yet scaly. The way the gold and silver swirls caught the afternoon light was dazzling.

"Jon, this was truly, unbelievably sweet of you and I cannot thank you enough," she said, looking up at him. "But this is too much. You take it. It is yours by right."

Jon looked crestfallen, as if she was just rejecting him. The feeling of guilt was instant.

"Jon, sit down." While he complied and pulled up a chair, she continued: "Just one dragon egg is worth millions, literally millions of gold dragons of the monetary kind-"

"I don't care," he said. "You know who you are to me and I want you to have something precious."

"This isn't a rejection, child," she reiterated. "I really do love it; your generosity is quite staggering. But the value on these, the rarity … No, you should keep it."

"There were two others," he said. "Sansa and I are keeping one and, well, ser Barristan."

Lyanna couldn't help but laugh. It was a silly, throwaway comment from Ser Barristan that had started this in the first place.

"Are you being serious?" she asked. "You found three eggs?"

He leaned back into the room and called Sansa over. When she appeared, she had the other two eggs with her. Behind her, Eddard was looking mildly amused.

"I forgot to tell you, sister," he said. "These two only went and found actual dragon eggs."

"Jon and I are sharing this one," said Sansa, handing her the red one.

Lyanna set the gold and silver aside, replaced with deep a red egg, veined in black. The third, for Ser Barristan, was silvery white, veined in green. She had to laugh at the association. Like herself, she did not think Ser Barristan would actually accept such a lavish gift. She found herself wishing she could impress on Jon just how priceless and rare these eggs were. Even if only decorative, they were worth keeping.
However, she reached a compromise with herself since it seemed her refusal to accept had hurt his feelings.

"I tell you what," she said. "I'll look after this egg for you." *Until you come to your senses,* she inwardly added. Out loud, she continued: "I'll be its guardian, because it is beautiful and they do need to be kept secure, whatever you do with them."

"The Queen is entirely correct, Jon," said Lord Stark. "I'm thinking all three should be kept secure along with the Queen's jewels. Truthfully, those eggs are even more valuable than the Queen's jewels."

"They're just stones!" Jon sounded utterly exasperated. "Well, if you insist. Sansa found a packing case for them, so I can at least show Ser Barristan before we lock them away again."

Before he could run off, she caught him by the wrist. Sansa and Ned had gone back inside, leaving them quite alone.

"Thank you, my love," she said, kissing his cheek. "It's a wonderful gesture and I'll gladly take temporary charge of them. But they can only ever be yours and you know why."

Jon looked a little happier. "I know, but I don't want to go mad trying to hatch them. I don't want to end up like Aerys."

"Oh, Jon. You're as far from Aerys' as a man can be," she assured him, mussing up his hair. "Anyway, he was mad. It had nothing to do with dragon eggs, I can assure you. Also, before you go running off, it's only right you should know Ser Barristan had pretty much worked out the truth from what you told him. But not to worry, I confirmed it and he's a loyal sort."

Jon's face coloured. "I never meant for that to happen; I wasn't trying to get back at you-"

"I should think not," she said. "Anyway, go and find him. He's up in the White Sword Tower."

Sansa packed the eggs up and Jon took the box, heading for the door after kissing Lyanna's cheek. Once he was gone, she downed her wine and turned her mind to Lysa Arryn – a dragon of a different coat.

Later, once the children were settled again, she returned to her own apartments and Lysa had given way to the Martells. Ser Arys, back on duty following his trip to Dorne, let her in and bowed as she passed. Inside, a vase of fresh flowers had been placed on the table of her privy chamber and a plate of cold sweetmeats were in place. Cold, sliced egg and cheese were arranged on a side dish. She paused, wondering who put it there.

"Robert?"

No one answered, but she could hear someone bustling about inside her bedchamber. She placed Jon's dragon egg on the table, placing it deliberately to make no noise, before tiptoeing through the connecting door to her inner-chambers. She still couldn't see anyone, but napkins had been folded up and stacked on a cabinet. One of her gowns was steam cleaning in an ante-chamber and some riding gloves had been partially re-stitched.

Baffled, Lyanna picked them up and studied them carefully. If this was a burglar, it was a very useful burglar. Although, she usually just threw out her used riding gloves.

"Hello!" she called out again. "Show yourself, I am the Queen."
She heard a muffled cry of alarm, followed by the tapping of footsteps as someone hurried toward her. A girl appeared, of roughly fifteen. Beautiful and slender, her hair was a tumble of loose, golden brown curls, a colour that perfectly matched her eyes. She sank into an elegant curtsey at the sight of Lyanna.

"Rise," she said, offering her hand. "You may speak."

After kissing her hand, the girl rose. "Pardon me, your grace. My name is Margaery, of House Tyrell. Lord Baelish wrote to me offering a place at Court."

_Did he indeed._ Meanwhile, the hapless girl broke off and faltered. "This was done without your knowledge, wasn't it?"

Lyanna took pity on her, giving her head a firm shake. "Oh, not to worry. The fault is not yours. I must have forgotten, that's all. Come. Be welcome."

_And seven curses on Petyr Baelish_, she thought to herself.

Not far from the Maidenvault, Eddard paused to regarded the building thoughtfully. From what he knew of Prince Oberyn, he would not be using the place for the same reasons Baelor the Blessed had constructed it in the first place. But that was nothing to Ned, whose only hope was that, whatever was going on in there now, would not be such that he regretted bringing Sansa along. She was with him now, at his side and standing at full height.

Apparently, Lyanna had tried to get a message to him that morning, warning him of the Martell's imminent arrival. The only problem was, Eddard had remained on Dragonstone to pay his final respects to Lady Selyse before her body was committed to the Red Priestess's fires – a strange funeral custom he had not seen before. Either way, he doubted the meeting with the Martells would have gone any better, even with a bit of forewarning. He would only have had more time to fret about it.

"Father, why did Prince Oberyn appear so displeased with you?" asked Sansa. "I didn't think you had met."

Eddard turned to face her. A girl of eleven, he had not yet gone out of his way to describe the horrors of war to her.

"The Prince and I have not met, sweetling," he said. "Even so, I was once part of a group of people who greatly wronged his family."

Sansa frowned, her face contorting slightly as she tried to work it out. "But you wouldn't have done anything wrong. You wouldn't. I know you wouldn't. Not to the Targaryen babes or Elia – because that's why they hate you, isn't it."

She wasn't just upset at the idea of him doing something wrong, but the notion of lingering animosity so many years in the future. She looked afraid.

"No, I had no part in that," he assured her. "But I fought on Robert's side. I fought with Tywin Lannister. It is right that he be wary of us, until we show them we mean only to make peace."

Not long after the rebellion, Jon Arryn had travelled to Dorne. It didn't end well, but it had been considered worth a try. Now that the Martells had come to them, Ned felt it only fitting that he try again. And, having noted how graciously Oberyn and Trystane greeted Jon and Sansa, he was confident relations were not yet dead in the water.
Meanwhile, Sansa smiled and renewed her grip on Lady's leash. "And we will make peace, won't we?"

Eddard wished he shared her optimism. "We will try, and that's what counts."

Sansa linked her free arm through his as they walked the rest of the way to the Maidenvault. It was a pleasant spot, too. It got plenty of sunlight during the day, despite its proximity to both the Tower of the Hand and Maegor's Holdfast. It was set in pretty gardens, surrounded by fruit trees and wildflowers, as well as rosebushes and flowerbeds that Lyanna tended in person.

They were greeted at the door by two armed Dornish guards, their halberds crossed.

"Lord Eddard-"

"Stark!" Prince Oberyn himself finished the sentence, appearing in the open door and casually stepping through the guards. He parted the halberds with his hands. "And Lady Sansa."

"Forgive us arriving unannounced, your grace," said Ned.

"Not at all," Oberyn assured him. "Lady Sansa, might I suggest you take tea with Ellaria and Trystane?"

Sansa looked to him for approval, which he gladly granted. Ellaria even appeared, ready to show her in and Ned was satisfied she would be looked after. It was a desperate hope, but he felt Sansa would have grace enough to smooth over relations between their houses.

"Don't mind the wolf, your grace. My daughter has her well in hand."

While others gave the wolves wide berths, Oberyn was clearly fascinated by them. "I saw them earlier, when we arrived. And the white wolf. Even the littlest Stark girl has her Nymeria!"

"Ah, you've already met my youngest daughter, I see." Eddard couldn't help but laugh. "It is true, she idolises Nymeria of the Rhoynar."

Oberyn looked thrilled. It seemed Arya had already gone some way toward building groundwork between the Starks and Martells. Whatever had happened, it had made Prince Oberyn far more receptive than he had been that morning.

"And why would she not? Nymeria was a goddess among women," he said, making an expansive gesture. "She showed me her Needle and her Water Dance. Arya is a daughter any man can be proud of. But tell me, they are true Direwolves, are they not? Found south of the wall."

"Yes, south of the wall," Eddard confirmed. "Most unusual, actually."

"That's what I was thinking," Oberyn said. "They live beyond the wall, so how did a pregnant one come to be south? She was protecting her cubs from something. Your words are true, Lord Stark. Winter is coming, and I think this will be a hard and long winter."

Prince Oberyn was a man of a certain reputation. But he was well travelled, learned and highly intelligent along with it. It came as no surprise that he, of all southern lords, would not be so dismissive of irregularities happening in the far North.

"I'm afraid I share your concerns, your grace," Ned replied. "Not so long ago, I had to execute a deserter from the Night's Watch who spoke of Others being on the move south."
Unlike most lords Eddard might have mentioned this to, Oberyn did not laugh. "That is worrying, Lord Stark. Even the most fanciful of folk tales have a kernel of truth to them. And where the Others are concerned, a kernel is more than enough to justify great concern."

While they talked, they walked the gardens so carefully maintained by the Queen. Up on the terrace, Lyanna was out taking a light meal with a young lady Eddard had never met before. But they were too high up for him to see properly. This morning’s meeting between their two houses was like a monster in the room that they both knew was there, but both were skating around in hopes it would go away.

Remembering what Jon said that morning, Ned decided to address it.

"I know it cannot have been easy for you to come here. Not with Robert and Lya still so… alive and in power."

"We swore we would not return to King's Landing while Robert lives," he admitted. "The Queen is not so much a problem. But Rhaegar abandoned Elia for that woman. Now that woman is with Robert. I trust she has her reasons, but you can see how it looks to the Martells."

"She had no choice, your grace," Eddard assured him. "Robert and I fought badly after he became King. Lyanna, I'm afraid, had to be the bridge of peace between our Houses."

Eddard chafed against his own subtle manipulation of the truth.

"We heard about the fight between you," said Oberyn. "Lady Ashara informed us of it and I know what the fight was about. You're an honourable man, Lord Stark, but I cannot think why you cleave so close to that man you call King. So, I make no apologies for Princess Arienne and Quentyn, who refused to come to King's Landing. But I came for Elia's sake. For the sake of peace. For the sake of justice."

Justice, in this instance, meant Gregor Clegane's head. Eddard understood that. "For what it's worth, your grace, I pray you get all of those. Especially justice."

Oberyn regarded him for a moment, his dark eyes hardening as he smiled crookedly. "Oh, I will have justice before I return to Sunspear."

From the look in his eye, Ned had no doubt about that.

"You thought I was joking, didn't you?" Jon made the question sound like a challenge as he opened the box Lyanna had given him for the eggs. He lifted the lid and tilted it toward Ser Barristan. "Only I didn't find one egg. I found three."

The old knight got up and leaned over the table, getting a better look at what was one show. For a moment, he didn't say anything. Then he laughed heartily. "Seven hells, Jon. I thought they were lost to time."

He'd found the old knight where Lyanna had said he would be. At the very top of the White Sword Tower, home to the Kingsguard. Like all towers in the Red Keep, scaling its many stairs had been a mountaineering challenge that left him hot, short of breath and probably a little fitter than he was before. He flopped down in a chair at Ser Barristan's side, while the old knight continued studying the eggs.

"Are they even real?" asked Jon. "I've never seen one before, so I wouldn't even know."
"Oh yes, look at that one," he replied, gesturing to the white and green. "That one once belonged to King Aegon V, who I knew well. I've seen it before. The other two, I think I saw them. I cannot be sure. There were seven eggs on the night in question, but it was so long ago it's all a bit of a blur. But the green and white was definitely Aegon's."

Jon was impressed, especially since it was the one he picked out for Ser Barristan. "I was meant to bring that one back for you. But Lyanna's insisting they be kept secure in a vault with the crown jewels."

Ser Barristan laughed heartily. "The Queen is right, Jon. Don't be wasting such treasure on an old man like me. I thank you for remembering me and they are beautiful. The red's especially pretty."

"The Queen means well," said Jon. "But I didn't rescue them from one underground vault just so they could be hidden away in another. I want them to be on display, where people can see them."

"I'm not sure Robert would want them seen."

Jon was unconvinced. "Why? They're just eggs. He's kept the dragon skulls."

"He's kept the dragon skulls out of sight," Ser Barristan pointed out. "Just be discreet, that's all I'm saying. Especially under the circumstances."

Jon felt himself shrink a little. "You spoke to the Queen, she told me."

"She did," he replied, smiling ruefully. "And you're the only dragon I'm interested in keeping safely in one piece. And seven hells, if I'd known sooner you wouldn't have been fighting the likes of Loras Tyrell--"

"Ser Barristan," Jon cut in. "The only thing worse than the possibility of a violent death is the prospect of being treated like I'm made of glass."

"In that case then, I fully expect you back in the training ground first thing in the morning," said Ser Barristan. Before Jon could get up to leave, however, Barristan caught him by the wrist. "And if even the fancy takes you and want those things hatched, try not to burn to death a palace full of people while you're about it. Learn from Aegon V and Summerhall."

He wasn't jesting, either. Not that Summerhall was a reason to joke about anything. But Jon left him feeling mildly perturbed all the same. Once, a long time ago, a singer came to Winterfell and sang a song about that time. He called it Jenny's Song, but said it was much older. Some, he said, called it the Song of Ice and Fire.
Despite his earlier confidence, and the skill people said he had to justify it, Jon began to feel apprehensive as the tourney competitors rolled into the Red Keep. Most of them were the sons of Lords, others were Lords themselves. 'Aren't you forgetting something? You're the son of a Lord, too,' Sansa pointed out when he tried to tell her. She missed the point. They actually looked the part. They looked like they lived and breathed the chivalric code. Dressed in nothing short of splendour, proudly displaying the vibrant colours of their ancient houses and mounted on fine groomed destriers.

Retinues of starry-eyed squires and swooning maidens followed them everywhere. But Jon had never wanted that. He hated the way flocks of hangers-on ran around after Lords and he'd never given a second thought to the fairer sex. Growing up a bastard, all those things had been off-limits to him. Now he was being plunged head first into the deep end of their world and he had none of their flair.

"Do you want a cloak made out of flowers?" Lyanna asked him, sounding sceptical. "I wouldn't have had you down as the sort."

He had used Loras Tyrell as a fine example of the flair he lacked.

"Of course not, he looks bloody ridiculous," he had retorted.

Lyanna gave him an encouraging smile. "A trait he has in common with all the others, in case you hadn't noticed."

That was true. That was definitely true, Jon realised. There was a Summer Islander competing, wearing raiment so violently coloured it gave him a headache to look for too long.

"They're over-compensating," Lyanna continued, sagely. "They're using all this pomp and ceremony to hide the fact they're actually rather talentless where it counts the most: in the actual tourney field."

Lyanna herself was looking particularly regal, now that the competitors had finally arrived. She wore a silk gown with full skirts and dagged sleeves. Over which, she wore a long grey cloak of velvet, lined with snowy white ermine. Her personal device, a crowned direwolf, was stitched into the breast in thread of silver and gold. At her side, Robert had also made an effort and they greeted the newcomers together.

They were all keen to impress the King and Queen. Elaborate bows and pleas to wear Lyanna's favour, promises to win the tourney for her. It made Jon feel a little unwell, so he lagged behind and let the royal couple be swept away. The last he saw of her that day, she was speaking with a gruff lord whose sigil was a purple lightning bolt. A young boy of about Sansa's age, with pale blonde hair, looked up at Jon with a strange look in his vivid blue eyes.

After that brief encounter, he made his way back across the busy grounds toward the White Sword Tower. On the way, he paused up hill to look out over the curtain walls of the Red Keep, where the carpenters were busy erecting the stands and tiltyards in which the tourney would be hosted. They were huge and easily visible over the high walls. The crowned stag of House Baratheon was draped over the royal box, flying alongside Lyanna's crowned direwolf. The arenas were large enough to seat thousands.

"You look troubled," Ser Barristan greeted him. "Is something wrong?"
He was in the training yard used by the Kingsguard, laying out tourney swords ready for their session. Fat lot of good it would do him now, he thought. He went into this thinking he in was in with a chance of winning now, having seen the competition he was up against, he had a more modest goal in mind.

"Everyone expects me to do well in this tourney," he said. "I'll be happy if only I'm not the first to be knocked out of the competition."

"What's brought this on?"

"Have you seen them?" he asked. "They've been doing this since they first drew breath."

Ser Barristan shrugged. "What of it?" Before he could reply, the old knight continued: "It's true, those knights and lordlings won't look twice at you. I doubt you'll register with them at all. So, let them. What is it to you if they underestimate you. Use it to your advantage. I thought I taught you about underestimating people on the very first day we met. Now I think you are overestimating people and it's suddenly making you timid."

The first day they met, when he'd been given a thorough pasting by a seemingly harmless old man, had been an abject lesson he would never forget.

"I know," he replied. "I think it's just the thought of being first to get knocked out of the competition. I mean, someone has to be first and I can't imagine anything more embarrassing."

Now he thought on it, that really was the worst-case scenario and it chilled him. From everyone expecting him to win, or be in the top three at least, to such a catastrophic failure as coming last. But Ser Barristan seemed to find the notion funny, which wasn't helping with Jon's nerves.

"Nothing wrong with that, I got knocked out of a tourney first once. Didn't do me any harm," he reminisced. "But, I was ten years old and it was my first ever tourney. That's not going to happen to you."

One of the squires was helping him with his breastplate while Ser Barristan spoke. Fixing it in place, before handing him a blunted sword. By now, having been welcomed to the Red Keep, competitors were filing into the practise yard. Not even their private lessons would be safe for him now.

"So, who am I up against today?" he asked. "If I'm not going to be knocked out first, it had best be someone decent."

He remembered Ser Barristan's earlier threat to start wrapping him up in yards of padding, now he knew the truth about his parents. Something neither of them could now afford, if he was to avoid abject humiliation. But, as Barristan went to reply, he was cut off by someone else.

"Me."

Jon whirled around to where Ser Jaime Lannister had been inadvertently listening in on their discussion. Decked out in his golden armour, he shone like the sun as the morning light fell on him.

"Thank you, Ser Jaime. But I don't think- "

"Yes, all right then," Jon cut over Ser Barristan.

There was something about Lannister's self-satisfied smile that brought out the Northern bullishness in Jon. He thought he would be happy if he could land just one scratch on that golden armour. So much so, it didn't matter if he himself took an absolute pasting. Just one scratch was all he wanted.
"If you can hold me off for at least two minutes, there is no way you will be knocked out of the tourney first," said Jaime.

It was the kind of towering arrogance that Jon had come to expect from all his opponents. Most especially of the lion variety.

"Two minutes?" he repeated, askance. "I'm sure I could manage at least three."

"You're on," Lannister agreed. "And to even the field, I'll use a wooden sword."

Jon was having none of that. "Which means I will too."

"You will both use tourney swords," Ser Barristan interjected. "Or I'll forbid this mummer's farce, myself."

Caught between the ever-growing Stark and Lannister grudge match, Ser Barristan looked rather helpless. But Jon couldn't let the opportunity to slide. He took up a tourney sword as Lannister unbuckled his own proper sword belt, handing it to one of the squires in favour of a tourney sword.

And so it began.

Jon pivoted to the side, ensuring that Jaime's first attack swung through only air, before seizing the small advantage to land his own attack. It missed completely, but that was to be expected. But when their blades finally met in mid-air, the force of the block pushed Jon backwards. Steadying himself in time, however, he was soon able to barge forwards through sheer willpower alone.

As the sparring got into full swing, Ser Barristan circled them both like a particularly nervous vulture. He never took his eye off them. All the while, Jon was concerned only with holding Lannister off for the full three minutes. He wasn't fool enough to believe Lannister meant that the fight would only last that long, that was how long the man expected to take to cleave him – Jon – in two. If it was the last thing he did, he would get past that point.

Meanwhile, he defended himself more than he attacked. To lunge straight into an attack against a man of Lannister's calibre himself would be suicidal. So, for now, he played for time and stuck to defence and only attacked when the opportunity presented itself and to show he wasn't giving up. They circled each other, never standing still. Jon stood side-on, presenting the smallest possible target and he blocked and blocked again.

It wasn't long before a crowd began to form, watching the fight unfold. Ser Jaime Lannister sparring with a fourteen year old nobody was proving quite appealing. Jon tried to blank them out. But the blonde-haired boy he had seen with Lord Lightning Bolt was pressed right up against the sparring yard's fence, watching every move Jon made open-mouthed and wide-eyed.

Jon's inner timing told him that the three minutes must have been and gone, by now. So he launched his first offensive with more confidence than he felt. He slashed and ducked, surging himself forward as he gained each small offensive. An attack so sudden, it took his opponent by surprise and Jaime almost missed the blow Jon landed. Before long, the air was filled with the sound of their blunted tourney swords meeting and clashing off each other.

Now that Jon was fully in attack mode, Ser Barristan seemed to grow more tense as he called out instructions.

"Keep your shield up!" he called out. "Raise your sword arm higher, now attack!"

However long the sparring had lasted, Jaime had only succeeded in landing one glancing blow
against Jon's breastplate. But Jon hadn't touched him at all. Not even a solitary nick of that golden armour. But he felt himself getting closer as he surged forward, putting the man on the defensive as he slashed and lunged from behind the wooden shield.

Now, Lord Lightning Bolt's squire was mimicking Jon's moves, imitating each one as if committing it to memory. He supposed he ought to have been flattered, but in the moment it was proving quite distracting. So much so, that Jaime Lannister landed a blow so hard that Jon was seeing stars. He went reeling back, raising cheers and groans from the spectators. It seemed he wasn't alone in wanted to land a dent in Lannister's pride.

Righting himself in time, Jon gathered his scattered wits and used his misstep to feign a retreat, only to pivot around Lannister. Amidst the cheering spectators, he spotted a lone girl of about his own age, with long honey-brown hair and matching eyes. She was silent and serene as she watched the sparring, a smile playing at her lips. Just for a moment, Jon met her gaze as Jaime lumbered out of view and revealed her standing there. Deftly, Jon spun around the knight, so he had his back to the girl. He raised his sword and slashed it violently down the side of Lannister's breastplate. The attack hit its target, the blade scraping down the golden armour, leaving a long and jagged dent.

The armour wasn't gold. It had just been painted in gold leaf and Jon's blade had exposed the base metal beneath. Just like everything else about the tourney, it was all surface and little depth. There was a lesson to be learned in there, somewhere. But now wasn't the time to dwell on it.

In his mind, Jon had just won. The small crowd seemed to agree as they all laughed and jeered. But he dropped his guard after he landed the blow and Jaime knocked him clean off his feet where he stood. Before things could grow serious, Ser Barristan called a halt to the session and Jaime himself helped Jon back to his feet. They exchanged a handshake before parting ways. Before he left, however, Jon noted something like a little respect in his opponent's demeanour.

After that, it was business as usual. After fighting Jaime Lannister, taking on passing squires seemed easy. Even the more talented opponents, like Loras Tyrell or the Redwyne twins, seemed easier. When it came time to take on several at once, he breezed through them until he was faced with seven at once. After which, he almost fell black out cold with exhaustion alone, leaving his opponents to walk all over him.

Once the day was done, however, he found the blonde child had finally gone. But the girl had remained. She leaned down to Loras Tyrell, whom Jon had finally defeated, and kissed his cheek. Jon sighed impatiently at the sight of another maid swooning over him. But after that, she approached him, a smile still playing on her lips.

"Pardon me, my lord, I wanted to congratulate you," she said. "Not many people defeat my brother, Ser Loras."

"Oh! That's your brother," he said. Luckily, she could not read his thoughts. "Well, thank you, my lady…"

"Lady Margaery," she answered. "Margaery Tyrell. I know who you are, of course."

"You do?" he asked.

"You're the Queen's nephew. Jon, isn't it?" she said. "I'm her new Lady, so I suspect we'll be seeing a lot more of each other."

She seemed happy about it and Jon wasn't complaining, either.
"I suspect we will," he agreed. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance."

She ducked a small, elegant curtsey before taking her leave to rejoin her brother. Meanwhile, Jon watched her go. For a second, he had quite forgotten what he was meant to be doing.

Robert was in a buoyant mood as he stepped into Lyanna's chambers. "Have you seen what your nephew's done to Jaime Lannister's armour?"

"Pissed in the helm and watched in silence as Jaime put it on," she guessed, kissing his whiskery cheek.

"No, but that's a great idea. I might try it sometime. No, he's only gone and put a dirty, big dent in that golden breastplate." Robert paused and laughed heartily. "A boy of fourteen, no less!"

Despite her initial misgivings, Lyanna couldn't help but smile. Lannister was always bragging that no one ever got close enough to put a scratch in that armour and with the tourney a matter of days away, Jon could use the extra practise.

Robert sat at her table, helping himself to the sweetmeats Margaery had left out for them before she went to watch the knights training.

"I want to see how that boy does in this tourney," Robert continued. "At his age, if he carries on the way he's going, he could be on the Kingsguard if he plays his hand right."

It was meant as a compliment and Lyanna took it as such. "He might not want a Knighthood, though. He's a northerner, after all. Besides, he is legitimised and might wish to look for a wife."

"True," Robert ceded. "All the same, let it be known to him that it might be an option. Might give me a chance to rid myself of Blount or Trant. Fucking useless, both of them. Gods, Aerys might have been mad, but he had the best Kingsguard known to History."

"Yes. Although, it was a shame that that same legendary Kingsguard also put a sword in his back," she pointed out. "Well, one of them at any rate."

Rather than dampen his mood by dwelling on the past, she returned her attention to the present. He had been in low spirits since the Martells arrived. Not one of them had asked him for an audience. Nor had they troubled her at all. They kept to themselves, down in the Maidenvault and not even Varys could glean much information on what they were up to in there. All the same, Robert was not happy with their arrival and often demanded to know why she had even bothered to invite them.

Before sitting down to lunch with him, Lyanna opened her cabinet. It was the same one where two of the three dragon eggs were now housed, the third being kept in Sansa's chamber near the fire. She seemed to think that would help it hatch. But it wasn't the eggs she was in search of now.

"I have a gift for you," she said. "It's almost your name day, anyway. But I thought you might like these."

She withdrew two long poles shrouded in dark velvet coverings. Meanwhile, Robert put down the sweetmeats and came over for a look.

"Presents?" he enquired, looking like a child in the sugar jar. "You shouldn't have."

"But I wanted to," she said, handing them over.
Smiling from ear to ear, he pulled at the cords holing the coverings closed and pulled the opening down to reveal ornate boar spears. The pointed heads were deadly sharp and large to boot. They reflected the sunlight perfectly in their unblemished, castle forged steel. The ornate, carved handles were of white weirwood and the other of black Ironwood. Lyanna herself could see that the craftsmanship was exquisite.

"They're perfect, my love," he said, almost awestruck by the gift. "Absolutely perfect."

"They're made in the Lysene fashion, I believe," she said. "I commissioned them just for you."

He let their coverings fall to the floor so he could admire them in full. They were equal to him in height, with grips made with soft, tooled leather. Lyanna smiled, gratified at his reaction.

"That's it then," he said, still taking in the beauty of the boar spears. "Once this tourney is done, we're going hunting. Make sure the boar stocks in the Kingswood are replenished once that lot out there are done poaching on my land."

"Good," she said, happily. "Bring me back a boar, once you're done."

Since returning to the Red Keep after Dragonstone, Sansa felt like she woke up every morning still in a dream. The tourney was a matter of days away, the stands and tiltyards for jousting were already up and more buildings were being constructed all around her. The castle and streets beyond were full of knights, lords, ladies and squires, all gearing up for the seven-day spectacle that awaited. And she loved it all. She loved the constant noise, the busy and bustling streets, she loved the shouting and the singing. The singing most of all.

Best of all, she was being escorted around all the attractions and stalls by a handsome prince. And Trystane was suitably gallant, lending weight to the title. He walked at her pace, let her go to the places she wished to go and engaged only her in conversation as they wound through the market stalls that had sprung up around the castle. And it seemed they were not the only ones taking in the atmosphere of the impending tourney.

On their way through the streets, they bumped into Lord Baelish who stopped and engaged them in conversation. All the time, he looked at Sansa in that way that made her feel a little on edge. But that didn't matter, since she had Prince Trystane with her and Lady at her side. Not long after that, they saw Varys, the Master of Whispers talking to a man who'd just got off a boat. Less welcome was the sight of Joffrey Lannister and his mother, both of whom returned to court in time for the Tourney. For a moment, she thought Joffrey was about to try and talk to her. But one look at Trystane and, by that time, Arya too, and he thought better of it. Instead, they went with Arya to the godswood, where she showed them her new water dance.

"In Dorne, all the girls are taught to fight," Trystane told her, later that day. "My cousins were born with spears in their hands. That's how we know Uncle Oberyn is their father!"

The way he talked about Dorne, he made it sound so exciting. Full of exotic spices and strange customs not seen in the rest of the realm. Sansa listened to every word, building up an imagine of the place in her head. By the end of the day, she longed to see it for herself. After that, they all trooped off to where some knights were jousting. She only had time to see Ser Loras knock some poor soul clean out of the saddle before she realised how late it was getting.

From there, Trystane escorted her back to the Tower of the Hand, even walking up the endless steps with her. When they reached the door to her chamber, they stopped and stood facing each other for a moment. Now that the moment of separation had come, it seemed as if they could think of nothing
more to say to each other. Nor did he. Instead, he leaned forward and softly kissed her cheek. The kiss made her heartbeat flutter.

Once inside and alone again, she picked up the dragon egg from where it stood on the hearth. No fire had been lit that day, so it was quite cold to the touch. But smooth and it felt wonderful beneath her fingertips. After what just happened, she could not rest and found herself pacing around her rooms in a haze.

She had never had such a perfect day. Not one that she could remember. And what was better, she could still see it all from her chamber window. Her rooms were so high up, it afforded her the perfect vantage point to continue simply watching the world take shape before her eyes. For now, however, she was restless and continued pacing and reliving the events of the day.

Until she stopped beside her writing desk, the dragon egg still cradled in her arms. Something was scratching inside the wall cavity. She paused, remained stock still for a moment, and strained to catch the sound again. Frowning, she freed one hand and took Lady by the collar. But all was quiet now, except for the noise coming up from outside her windows.

"Did I imagine that?" she asked, looking down at Lady. "I think perhaps there has been too much excitement for one day."

She wondered if there was a wall cavity, which could mean rats. The thought of that made her shiver with disgust. But that wasn't the only thing she had noticed. Sometimes, the grill over her air vent seemed out of place, as if it had been pushed forward. But it was such an innocuous thing, she couldn't remember how it looked before. Perhaps it was meant to be leaning slightly forward. Perhaps the wall cavity rats were so huge, they had knocked it forward. She definitely didn't want to think about that!

Maybe she was being silly. People were always telling her she was being silly. All the same, she made a note to tell her father about it all. After that, she lay down on her bed and fell into an unexpected doze, which soon became a deep sleep. She dreamed she was Lady, sniffing around the skirting boards of her chamber. Then she dreamed of Jon, who slew a huge red rooster with his sword and she awoke with a start as if fell dead to the ground. The dragon egg rolled from her hands, hitting the wooden floorboards with a dull thump that drew Lady's attention. She was still sniffing at the skirting boards.

Dusk was settling and Jon was keen to get tidied up and back into his own chambers. His first day back in the training yard had been exhausting and exhilarating in equal measure, but now he was just bone tired and aching all over.

In a moment of sheer madness, he had agreed to take on Ser Loras in the tiltyard and gotten his first taste of jousting. The Knight of Flowers had bashed him clean out of his saddle and sent him bouncing arse over tit in the sand. All he'd won was a scolding from Ser Barristan and the task of cleaning up his horse and stabling it for the night before he could return to the Tower of the Hand.

Making matters worse, the new arrivals had been celebrating the start of the tourney all day with gallons of ale. Many of them were now roaring drunk and challenging anyone passing by to a duel. Even poor old Lord Rosby was being hassled as he went about his business and Jon had to let go of his horse to step in and make sure the old man was free to go unmolested by drunk knights.

It was as he returned from the stables that he noticed he was being followed. Footsteps fell in time with his own, stopped when he stopped and started when he started. He whipped around, expecting to find one of the drunken knights he'd warned off Lord Rosby, but he saw no one. He was close to
the place where the Lannisters had attacked Lady, which put him even more on edge. Just to be safe, he found the pommel of his sword; the proper sword of live steel that Lyanna had gifted him.

After the day he'd had, he was in no mood for more fighting. So, rather than looking for trouble or hanging around and giving trouble the opportunity to come to him, he picked up his pace. Avoidance seemed like his best bet. But the footsteps picked up again and he was in an isolated part of the castle grounds, now. Lyanna's private stables were off-limits to the influx of visitors.

Jaime Lannister was close by, speaking with the Lord Commander of the Gold Cloaks. Not wishing to trouble him after that day's sparring, Jon quickly passed them by and headed back toward the castle. All the same, the second footsteps still followed him. Not wishing to call out a challenge in earshot of Lannister and Janos Slynt, he turned kept going, picking up his pace. He led his pursuer toward the steps to the Dragonvault, where he knew the gate would be locked for the night.

Once they'd both been led down a blind alley, Jon whipped around abruptly and snapped his gauntleted hand closed around his pursuer's tunic. He was aiming for the throat, but was almost glad he missed when he saw who it was.

"What the-" he cut himself off, releasing his hold on the child immediately. "What are you doing?"

It was Lord Lightning Bolt's squire, the one who'd spent most of the afternoon gaping at him in the training yard. Jon could see him in the dull light of a nearby dragon brazier, turning bright red in the face as he stammered out explanations.

"I-I'm sorry! I didn't mean to alarm you, ser!"

"I'm not a knight," he snapped back at the fool, as if that mattered. "Who are you and what do you mean by following me?"

"I saw you with the Queen and I wanted to speak with you," he blurted out. He calmed himself down by drawing a deep breath before continuing at a more sedate pace. "I'm Ned Dayne, Lord of Starfall. I know you don't know me, but I know you. I heard all about you. I…I…I…"

He stammered off into silence as his nerves got the better of him. But Jon had to double take at the child's name. A Dayne of Starfall. Their Lord, no less. Jon softened greatly, helping the boy back to his feet after being grabbed so abruptly.

"Are you mistaking me for my brother, Lord Robb?" Jon asked. "I can't think why you would know me. I'm just Lord Stark's bastard."

"You're Jon," said Ned Dayne. "I know who you are. We're milk brothers, you know. Did you know that? Did your father tell you?"

"I've never heard of such a thing," he replied, sounding half-amused. "Look, you can't be out here on your own. Where's your Lord? He should be looking after you."

"Lord Dondarrion knows I'm here," he said. "He said if I'm annoying you, I'm to come straight back."

"You better get going then, Lord Dayne," Jon replied, a little more harshly than he meant. The sight of the child's dejection only made him feel even worse. "Look, wait. I'll take you back myself. You can't be walking around on your own. On the way, perhaps you can tell what in seven hells a milk brother is."

Jon led him back up the steps to ground level while the child explained himself.
"Wylla, she was my wetnurse too – that makes us milk brothers. Did your father tell you about her? I'm named after your father. My mother told me that. But my full name is Edric, not Eddard. Still, everyone calls me Ned – just like him. Was that your father I saw you with earlier? I wanted to say something, but I lost my nerve. I saw you fight earlier, too. You're the best and I think you could have beaten Jaime Lannister had Margaery Tyrell not put you off."

"Margaery did not put me off," Jon chided. "Listen, Lord Dayne-"

"Please, call me Ned."

Jon shook his head. "Right. Ned. Listen, thank you. But let's get you back to your Lord."

He only looked about ten or eleven and there was something unnerving about him that Jon couldn't quite put his finger on. All the same, he wondered what the Daynes had been saying. Furthermore, he wondered why they were saying it. He looked at the child with just one question on his lips: didn't my father kill your uncle? Luckily, he wasn't so crass as to actually ask it.

All in all, the encounter provided a strange end to a strange day.
Echoes

Once upon a time, Jon would have been relegated to the back tables for events like this. But the view from the high table of the throne room of King's Landing made those days looked very, very distant. He sat beside his father, one place down from the King himself, who opened the feast with a toast of Arbour gold that was met with a rapturous cheer of approval from the assembled nobility of the realm, all spread out before them. He tried to get the back of the hall in view, where normally he would have been left dining and drinking with the squires. But this feast was so exclusive, squires weren't even in attendance.

As for the food on offer, the royal kitchens had surpassed even the grandest of northern feasts. In front of his was a three-bird roast of chicken inside a duck, inside a goose all baked into a giant pastry. A whole honey-glazed boar glittered darkly in the candlelight and platters of delicacies took up every spare inch of space on the high table. A peacock that had been roasted and had all its plumage carefully reassembled made an extravagant and colourful centrepiece, offset by the whole, pure white swan that acted as its counterpart. The two whole-roast birds were arranged in a nest of rolled sweetmeats and savouries. Combined, the dishes scented the air with a rich aroma of spices and wines and roasted fat that was just the right side of appetising.

Jon couldn't help but wonder whether it was all for show, rather than eating. All the same, he politely tried a morsel of each dish that was passed down, before sending it on to the lower tables. Once more feeling like a stranger who accidentally walked in off the streets, he found himself looking at what others were doing and just copying them. So, when his father sent a whole smoked salmon of a bed of herbs down to the Blackwood's table, Jon did the same with a pork roast he found himself holding.

"No, Jon, don't send it to the same people," Eddard whispered in his ear. "Pick someone else, or they might take offence."

Down on the other side of the table, he spotted Sansa sending a sorry-looking plain boiled fish over to the Lannisters and finally caught on. Meanwhile, Arya had sent a honey-glazed boar down to Edric Dayne, which was what he was going to do. Thinking quick, he took up the swan pie decorated with snowy-white plumage.

"Send this down to Lady Margaery Tyrell," he said, the first person who came to mind. Sam ended up with the pork roast.

Down on the Tyrell table, close to the dais, Margaery caught his eye and raised her glass of wine to him in a gesture of gratitude. As she did so, the elderly lady sat beside her loudly enquired as to whether they were meant to eat the pie or wear it. Coyly, Jon acknowledged Margaery's thanks with a nod, before engaging his father in conversation about nothing in particular.

Finally, after what felt like forever and a day, the comfits and sweets had been distributed and the dining part of the banquet was done. In the past, he may have felt like an outcast while dining with the squires, but he reasoned that it really was better than having to distribute dishes every second. At least, back then, he could eat and drink as much as he wanted, without feeling the eyes of the world on him, watching what he was doing and unto whom he was bestowing the royal bounty.

At the King's command, the spent dishes were whipped away and the trestle tables pushed to the sides of the throne room to clear the hall for dancing. Musicians, previously out of sight up in the eaves, began playing and couples took to the dancefloor led by the King and Queen. For a moment, Jon was content to watch them as he finished his glass of wine. Robert was a little unsteady on his
feet, leaving Lyanna to lead the dance, but she did so with grace. Sansa danced with Prince Trystane, while their father was engaged in conversation with Prince Oberyn. Even Arya was clumsily turning on the dancefloor with little Ned Dayne. The only other person still sat at the high table was Septa Mordane, who had somehow dozed off despite the noise of the musicians. Jon almost admired her.

However, Sam soon caught his eye and he decided his best friend was probably better company than an unconscious septa. He downed the rest of his wine and hopped down off the dais to catch him up.

"Oh, hullo Jon," Sam greeted him. "Looking forward to the tourney tomorrow?"

"Surprisingly, yes," he replied, steering them both to the side to avoid colliding with the dancers. "I don't think I'll bother going in the morning though. It's only the children running at rings."

"Ah, I think the Queen expects you there, actually," said Sam, apologetically. He sighed heavily, looking a little dejected as he added: "Running at rings was the only tourney event I was ever any good at. It was all downhill from there."

Jon tried not to laugh. "Never mind, Sam. All tournies are just play-acting at war, anyway. Anyone will tell you that."

Together, they walked the length of the throne room, which somehow seemed much bigger. The rear doors were open onto the night beyond, where the lower ranks and squires were enjoying an outdoor feast and party. Again, something Jon thought was better than being cooped up indoors with the aristocracy.

As they walked, he cast wary glances over what everyone else was doing. Sansa was still with Prince Trystane, but they switched partners just as the song changed. Now she was with old Lord Rosby and Trystane was with Arya. Petyr Baelish stood in the shadows on the opposite side of the hall, watching over everyone shiftily and only smiled openly when Joffrey Lannister tried to knock Sansa's dancing partner out of the way, only for Sansa to cold-shoulder him. Suspecting trouble from Lannister, Jon bristled and came to a halt. But after a cold glare, Joffrey returned to dancing with his sister and pretended nothing had happened.

"After what happened to Lady, Joffrey's still trying to get in with your sister," said Sam, darkly.

"He can try," Jon replied. "But he's an odious shit and Sansa knows that better than any of us."

Satisfied that Joffrey had been put back in his place, Jon continued circulating around the room with Sam. Every so often, he sought out Petyr Baelish and found him, every single time, in the exact same place, doing the same thing. Just watching, as if committing it all to memory. He spotted Cersei Lannister at the back of the hall, speaking with her twin brother. Although he was meant to be on duty, Jaime danced a few steps with her but they stopped when interrupted by a rather stunted looking dwarf.

"Who is that with the Lannister twins?" Jon asked.

"The other brother, Tyrion," Sam replied. "Come up from Casterly Rock for the tourney. The Mountain’s here as well, you know."

"Good," he replied, seeking out Prince Oberyn. It seemed he would have his day. But, at that moment, he was still deep in conversation with Lord Stark and Jon wondered what they were talking about.

He spotted Lady Margaery, still sitting at a small table with the same elderly lady he had noticed earlier.
"That's her grandmother, Olenna Redwyne. Otherwise known as the Queen of Thorns," said Sam, smiling happily. "Why don't you ask her to dance?"

Jon laughed. "Because she's about ninety, Sam! I'm not saying I wouldn't, I just don't think she's capable."

"I meant Margaery!" Sam retorted. "She's really nice is Margaery, I know her from when we were children in the Reach. And she keeps looking over at us, haven't you noticed?"

He honestly hadn't but he felt himself growing red in the face at the thought of actually asking her to dance.

"She's probably looking at you, since you know each other," he replied, a little defensive now.

Sam was laughing now. "I don't think so, somehow."

"Anyway, what about that book I gave you," he said, abruptly changing the subject. "Is it interesting? I didn't get a chance to read it before leaving Dragonstone."

Books were always a safe topic with Sam. They instantly engrossed him and took over everything else. Accordingly, his face lit up again at the mention of the mysterious tome he'd stumbled across deep under Dragonstone. He grabbed Jon's wrist and led him over to a quiet alcove in which they could talk a little more clearly.

"The book deals with ancient runic magic, as it says so on the cover," he explained. "It contains some of the spells once thought to have gone into building the wall. So, those used by the Children of the Forest and Brandon the Builder. It backs up the legend that Brandon the Builder also used the same magic to build Storm's End and High Tower, as well as Winterfell but Winterfell's a given really. But there was something else in there, something not part of the original book. It's a handwritten reproduction of an ancient scroll, signed by Prince Rhaegar of House Targaryen."

The breath caught in Jon's throat. "What about? What for?"

Sam shrugged. "I can't think why. But he copied out an ancient scroll, probably just to have a record of it without damaging the original with too much handling. It's a prophesy about the Prince that was Promised, and he underscored some lines of the prophesy for emphasis. Something about the Prince that was Promised waking dragons from stone. You found those eggs down there as well, didn't you?"

Jon nodded. "Yes. I showed you, didn't I? One's sitting on Sansa's hearth and the other two are in the Queen's vault."

He wasn't particularly interested in waking dragons from stone, nor any other nonsensical prophesy. But he was very much interested in following the ever-diminishing trail of Rhaegar Targaryen through the annals of history. And this, that Sam had stumbled upon, was a particularly relishing tidbit.

"After the tourney, can you show it to me?" he asked. "I can't explain why now, but it's important."

Sam nodded. "Of course, but right now we're about to have company."

Momentarily confused by what Sam meant, Jon looked over his shoulder to where Lord Varys was approaching. Heading straight for them, he had seen them and they had seen him; it was too late to affect an escape. They were cornered.
"I must say, I am surprised to find you two boys huddled in a corner conspiring the night away together," he said. For all the spymaster's airy affectations, he was fixing them both with cold and hard look in his eyes. "With such an abundance of stunning young ladies at this banquet, it amazes me you aren't dancing, Lord Stark."

"We weren't conspiring, we were talking," Jon tersely corrected him. As an indignant after-thought, he added: "And Sam can dance too. Lots of girls wanted to dance with him. But I wanted book recommendations first."

"Is that so?" Varys replied. "How very scholastically minded of you."

"Not that it's any of your business," Jon said. "Sam, come on. Sansa asked you to dance, remember? Can't keep her waiting."

Sam flushed in the face at so obvious a lie. "And you were just about to ask Margaery Tyrell, weren't you?"

Jon thought he might have deserved being put on the spot like that. However, it had done the trick and thrown Varys off, who did not follow them as they returned to the main throng of the throne room. Margaery was still sitting with her grandmother, turning away just for a split second as she met Jon's gaze.

"Just ask her!" Sam implored.

"No!" Jon laughed, trying to pull him away. "Come, let's find people to talk to."

"I'll ask her for you, then. Wait here."

"Sam, no!" Jon protested. "Just leave it. I can't even dance."

He was growing hot in the face and it was too late; Sam pulled away from him and went striding over to Margaery. Jon willed the ground to open up and swallow him as Margaery turned her face to Sam, greeting him with a graceful smile that lit up her face. Then Sam leaned down, whispering in her ear as another voice spoke in Jon's ear, startling him.

"It's funny how history repeats, don't you think?"

He turned to his left, to find Petyr Baelish standing right by him. His smile didn't reach his grey-green eyes. First Varys and now this. Jon was running out of patience.

"What do you mean by that?"

Baelish's smile widened, looking more than a little supercilious. "Forgive me, my lord, when you get to my age you notice these strange historical echoes down the years. It wasn't so very long ago, at an event very much like this, that another Lord Stark was too shy to ask a girl to dance. And just like that beautiful girl, this beautiful girl is about to say 'yes.' History echoes, Lord Stark. Remember that."

Jon looked to Margaery, who had risen from her seat. She was looking resplendent in a silk and samite gown of blue, trimmed with pale green. She was smiling at him, beckoning him over with one hand. Baelish be damned, he thought to himself, and Varys too.

Where before he was interested in what other people were doing, now he had eyes only for Margaery as they danced together. The musicians played The Bear and the Maiden Fair, the Dornishman's Wife and The Night That Ended. They danced through them all, turning as elegantly
as he could for one so out of practise. Meanwhile, Sansa slipped away from Prince Trystane and partnered with Sam. For one so large, he danced surprisingly elegantly. Much more so than Jon himself, he thought.

But if he was dancing inelegantly, Margaery didn't seem to mind at all. She smiled and let her hands rest on his hips as they met, circled and spun around each other. And, when they parted as the final note of the final song played, he bowed and kissed her hand.

That night, he slept heavily and deeply. He dreamed he was Ghost again, only to be jolted out of the wolf and into a dark, but starry sky. In the surreal and beautiful way of all dreams, the landscape materialised all around him. An endless starry sky, over which a dragon of silver and gold spread its magnificent wings. Jon could see the dragon rider: a man in his twenties, with silver-gold hair and indigo eyes. He knew it was his real father. He wore battered breastplate with the sigil of his house picked out in rubies, but most had fallen away. Rhaegar was in no pain, though. The dragon he flew reflected the starlight, making the silver shimmer. Only as he flew past Jon did he notice his mother sitting behind the prince, her arms encircled about his waist and her face rested between his shoulders. Beneath them, a Dothraki horde sped through the endless night lands.

The stables were in chaos. It seemed every competitor wanted a new, fresh horse at the last minute and they fully expected Lyanna to have hundreds of the beasts just sitting in reserve. One person even wanted a full-grown destrier warhorse for their six-year-old son who would be running at rings that morning. She tried not to breakdown laughing in their face and found them a fine palfrey for the event while explaining destriers were strictly reserved for combat or jousting.

Then Sansa came to her complaining about rats getting into her chambers through a grill in her wall. Another problem for the household to fix. By mid-morning, however, she found a quiet spot where she could speak with Ned. He'd been pale and clammy since the night before. She had some good news she thought might cheer him up a bit.

"Catelyn's on her way down," she said. "She's sailing out from Gulltown as we speak."

"Yes, I got a raven from her this morning. The girls will be thrilled as well," he said, running a hand through his hair. "Cat's obviously been to the Eyrie, but she didn't say what transpired."

Lyanna shrugged it off. "She probably just didn't want to put it in a letter, Ned. I'd feel the same if it was one you lot going off the beaten path in the same way Lysa is."

Ned laughed. "That's awfully considerate of you. Oh, pay me no heed, sister. I'm just worried about Arya."

"She'll be fine and well you know it," Lyanna assured him. "What are you really worried about?"

He was quiet for a full minute, tugging at a loose stalk of hay that had come loose from the horse's feeding nets.

"The Dayne boy's here," he said. "He's struck up with Jon and Arya."

"His aunt's betrothed to Beric Dondarrion," she replied. "Anyway, what's the matter? He's not yours, he's too young."

Ned didn't appreciate her ribald joke, but she didn't think he would. "Very funny, Lya. They named him after me, though. Don't you think that's strange?"

"No," she answered, honestly. "The only person tearing themselves up with guilt over Ashara is you,
brother. You couldn't have stopped it, even if you knew what she would do. Which you didn't. None of us did."

"But Arthur," he said.

"If he had just talked, instead of reaching for his sword..." the rest of her sentence trailed off. She still didn't know why the kingsguard didn't just let Ned past that day. It's not like he would have dashed his own nephew's brains out. "Eddard, this is ancient history. I know you don't approve of this tourney – you made your feelings perfectly clear in the small council – but stop brooding and try to enjoy it. Now Cat's on her way down, something else to smile about."

"I know," he said, still looking anxious. "I know. Oberyn Martell spoke to me last night. We're going to begin negotiations for a marriage contract between Sansa and Prince Trystane. How does that find you?"

Lyanna smiled, genuinely happy for him. Although she regretted that Jon and Arianne looked like little more than a dream. "You couldn't do better for her, Ned. I saw them dancing last night. They're already bonded, I think. And he seems a true gallant, which is what she needs. You're not worried about the dowry, are you?"

"No," he shook his head. "No, it's not that. Even old Hoster's offered to help out with that sort of thing, anyway."

"She is his granddaughter," Lyanna replied. "In truth, I'd forgotten Cat's father was even still alive. Still, if you do need a little extra, you can always come to me-"

"She's my daughter, Lya," he cut in, abruptly. "She's my firstborn daughter. I wish I could be like our father, herding the children out of the gates as soon as they hit maturity: it made sense, it was advantageous. But I am not our father and I value my children more than I value a castle in Dorne."

Now Lyanna felt she had the truth of the matter. "I'm surprised to hear you say you even want to be like our father."

She couldn't help but laugh, and neither could he.

"Well, all right, I've tried to be as unlike him as possible," he admitted, smiling. "I suppose he wasn't all bad."

"No," she agreed. "No, he wasn't. But you're a lot better. Be assured of that, at least."

Trying to get from the Red Keep to the tourney arena was a battle in and of itself. Competitors had come flooding into the city from all over the seven kingdoms and not just the high born. It seemed to Jon that every hedge knight and chancer too had come to chance their arm at the prize money on offer. Half-way down the Street of Steel they abandoned the litter the Queen had loaned them for the day after deciding it would be easier, and quicker, to just walk the distance.

Jon regretted it almost immediately as he found himself trying to guide Septa Mordane, Sansa and Jeyne Poole through street brawls, fleeing pick-pockets gangs of rowdy knights. Going by their bawdy songs and drunken behaviour, it seemed they were yet to acquaint themselves with the chivalric code that Sansa and Jeyne set so much store by. And if they weren't dodging them, they were trying to keep out of the way of the gold cloaked city watch who gave chase to the reprobates all through the city streets.

All the same, they made it in the end and Jon could breathe easily once he had got them safely to
their seats in the royal stands. King Robert was already there, with Lord Stark sat at his right-hand side. To the left of Robert, Lyanna's seat was empty. Once he had found his own seat, directly in front of the Queen, he could look down the length of the tiltyard.

It was at least half a mile long, with quintains set at regular intervals. Roughly man-shaped, complete with a plumed helm, they had wooden arms that looked like broom-handles fixed to them. On one side was a small black shield, on the other was a ring of hempen rope. It was the job of the children competing in the event to pick up the ring on the end of their lances without causing damage to the quintain. If they did hit it, it would spin on a pivot and fall down dead. If that happened, they were immediately disqualified.

As it was an event for children, the stands were mainly populated by the parents and guardians of those taking part. In the end, Jon himself had only come to cheer on little Ned Dayne who was taking part.

"The Queen sends her apologies, she's still dealing with the horses."

Jon turned to find Margaery Tyrell leaning into his ear. "Oh, that's all right. Do you know if my sister's with her?"

"I didn't see her. Do you mind if I join you?"

"You're welcome," he assured her.

As he slid to the right to make room for her, he wondered if he should say something about the previous night's dance. But he didn't want to sound desperate. However, she spared him the effort herself.

"I had a really nice time last night, thank you."

"No, thank you," he said. "It's been years since I last danced and I wasn't very good at it then, either."

Margaery laughed his modesty away. "You were fine, I assure you. I've had to dance with some real oafs before so, trust me, I know what I'm talking about."

Next to show up was Sam Tarly, who flopped down to Jon's left after greeting Margaery with a kiss on the cheek. They lapsed into idle chatter as they waited for the event to begin, during which Jon learned Lord Tarly had been spitting fire ever since learning of his son's place at court when, instead, he should have been slowly freezing to death at the wall.

"Pay him no mind, Sam," Jon said. "Your father's an ass. If he comes here the Queen will send him packing, soon enough."

"Jon's right, Sam," Margaery continued. "You can't be forced into the Night's Watch against your will and the Queen herself made you her personal secretary. Lord Randyll can disown and disinherit you, but he cannot gainsay the queen."

Still, Sam looked pale and shaky. It amazed Jon that someone could be so under the control of an abuser even when there were leagues separating them. He'd forgotten about Lady Stark as soon as he rode through the gates of Winterfell. But then, he supposed, there was a world of difference between a few cold stares and harsh words, and the years of incessant beatings and abject humiliation Sam had endured.

"I still have nightmares that he's just going to show up here," said Sam, nervously glancing around
the faces in the stands. It was as if he expected his father to magically materialise among them. "I expect it at any minute."

"Look who is here, though," Margaery said, craning her neck to see over Jon's head. "Robert will be pleased."

He followed the direction of her gaze, to where Stannis Baratheon, his daughter and the red priestess, Melisandre, were inching along the back row of the royal stand. While Robert and Stannis exchanged terse greetings and dark looks, Jon was immensely relieved when Sansa waved Shireen over and invited her to join her, Jeyne, Trystane and the Septa. There was still no sign of Arya, though. And Jon was starting to worry that she'd been left behind.

"Never mind the Baratheons, here come the Lannisters," said Sam, continuing their running commentary on the tourney’s attendees.

"Aren't we blessed," Jon answered.

He turned to watch them taking their place. Cersei was there, accompanied by a golden-haired girl of around Sansa's age. Myrcella, he assumed. Joffrey hung back a few steps behind them, as if pretending they weren't with him. But there was no denying it when his mother tersely ordered him to sit down and cheer for his brother when it was his turn to run at the rings. The dwarf, Tyrion, was there too. Another who looked as if he'd rather be elsewhere.

Close behind them, the ominous presence of Petyr Baelish made itself visible. He smiled ingratiatingly at Margaery, before climbing up a row and sitting himself directly behind Sansa. Jon squirmed inside when the man leaned forward and whispered something in his sister's ear. Sansa laughed, but he could tell it was a polite, forced laugh. Over Sansa's shoulder, he met Jon's gaze directly, just as the first competitor rode out.

All too grateful to not be looking at Petyr Baelish, he watched as a young lad from the Vale cantered down the list on a chestnut palfrey. He scooped the first ring effortlessly, then the second and third. But on the fourth and final ring, he just nudged the quintain as his horse veered slightly. Still, it was a fine performance that earned an appreciative cheer from the spectators. The second lad fell off his horse, the third forgot to catch the rings at all and Jon began to wonder where these jesters were coming from.

Tommen Lannister was announced, to Cersei's delight. But he missed the first ring, got the second and then disqualified himself at the fourth post. Joffrey wasn't cheering, Jon noted.

"Oh, here's my cousin!" Margaery was on her feet as the lad rode out.

"Good performance, too," said Jon, watching carefully as he reached the midway point.

He made it through to the end before cantering off into one of the tents, still on horseback. Just at that moment, the Queen also finally appeared in the royal stands. Jon heard her greeting Stannis, sounding genuinely pleased to see him. As she passed him, she ruffled his hair.

"Is Arya with you?" he asked.

"She'll be here soon," Lyanna assured him.

Before he could say anything else, she was taking a horn of ale from Robert and settling down beside him to witness the rest of the competition. She was just in time to see a lad from Dorne perform competently and a lad from the Riverlands lose control of his horse.
After the Riverlands fiasco, a young and skinny boy armoured and with a cloak of grey and white over his shoulders appeared. Astride a large charger, he raced down the lists easily and effortlessly picking up each ring, spearing it on his lance and leaving the quintain standing perfectly. Easily the best yet, he got himself a standing ovation from the crowds. As did Ned Dayne, who rode out next and pulled off another flawless performance.

From there, it all started to look the same. But before Jon could question the morality of laughing at children falling off fast moving horses, the competition ended and the winners were announced. Margaery's cousin came third and he grinned cheekily as Lyanna kissed him and handed him his prize money. Second came Ned Dayne, blushing deep red as he took his kiss and a bag of silver. But the winner, as Jon suspected, was the sigil-less boy in the grey and white cloak. He'd scooped the rings in half the time it took the others. And Jon didn't even know why he was so shocked when the helm was lifted to reveal…

"Arya!"

She was beaming from ear to ear as she stood on the podium, chest out and head held high. Her name was announced, to a smattering of shocked applause. But Jon, Margaery, Sam, Sansa and Jeyne were all on their feet, cheering loud enough for everyone else. Even the Queen compromised her neutrality by giving him a wink. But Arya couldn't have cared less about the shock she had given everyone. As soon as she got her prize money, she kissed Lyanna and went dashing into her father's arms, where Lord Stark hugged her tight.

"Surely that's against the rules," Joffrey Lannister challenged, once everyone was back in place.

"No, she's under eleven," Lyanna corrected him.

"She's a girl!" he pointed out, indignantly.

Even King Robert was laughing. "Well spotted. You raised that one well, Lady Cersei, I must say."

Lyanna was still perfectly composed. "If you look at the rules for this competition, my lord, you will see it is open to children under eleven. No gender is specified."

Even Cersei was hissing at her son to sit back down and his sister was hiding her face in her hands. The only one kept his head was the dwarf who managed to guide his relatives away before things could turn nasty. To Jon's relief, Arya had seen none of the commotion, she was too preoccupied with their father. He vaulted a bench to try and reach her, only to find his path blocked by Petyr Baelish. He was smiling wolfishly as he leaned into Jon's ear.


A girl competing in a tourney; there was only one other Jon could think of. His blood ran cold. "Come out and say what you mean, Lord Baelish."

But the man was already walking away. He even raised a hand in a gesture of farewell.
Heart in throat, Sansa tried not to flinch as the two riders met with a crash much louder than she would have thought possible. The knight's lances met across the barrier, splintering into shards that flew up into the air; the sand beneath the horse's hooves forming clouds down the length of the list. Then, at the moment of impact, the rider closest to Sansa was thrown back in the saddle. For a moment, she thought her heart had actually stopped and time itself had paused, as both competitors teetered on the brink between saddle and sand. Until the horses veered and continued galloping down the list. The rider closest to her had fallen, the spurs on his ankles caught in the reins and he was dragged and bounced all the way to the other end of the list. The sand didn't quite muffle the sound of his armour crunching and grinding with every bounce. *That had to hurt,* she thought to herself.

The horses passed, the winner was obvious and she rose to her feet on a surge of excitement along with all other spectators. Cheers and applause filled the air around her, even though the winner was Joffrey Lannister. She had never seen such a wonderful spectacle as the jousts, though. So she barely cared who won and who lost. The colour of the banners, the smell of the horses and the noise of the crowds all formed an intoxicating concoction that had her walking on air from start to finish.

"Lord Beric rode well too, didn't he," said Jeyne.

She was sweet on Lord Beric Dondarrion. Sansa saw the attraction, in a certain light and from a certain angle. But she couldn't quite bring herself to share her friend's enthusiasm.

"Oh, yes. But I still think Ser Loras will win the day," she replied, sagely. "He'll definitely beat Joffrey."

That much was obvious to her. Joffrey was a boy riding his first tournament, Ser Loras was a seasoned knight. The most handsome of them all, the most accomplished and the one who had bestowed on her a beautiful red rose before the jousting began. While he was a great knight, his sister was a great lady too. Sansa could see her, a few rows down from where she and Jeyne sat, next to Jon. Since the jousting began, the two of them had been steadily inching closer together and now they were almost touching. Every so often, they whispered in each other's ears and laughed at some private jest. It made her sigh to think of Jon and Margaery together.

Likewise, she had to suppress a lovelorn sigh whenever she thought of Prince Trystane. He was sat to her left right now, watching the jousting with intense interest. As each pair ran the list, Trystane would lean in close to her and offer a little commentary on technique and horsemanship. He sounded so knowledgeable as he shared these pearls of wisdom, to which she politely listened without being able to tear her gaze away from the action.

The King's brothers, Stannis and Renly, came next. A strained silence fell over the crowd as they rode out and faced each other from opposite ends of the tiltyard.

"This will be interesting," said Trystane, quietly. "I hear there is no love lost between these two."

The stands had gone silent. Sansa glanced, as discreetly as she could, over her shoulder to where the King and Queen were watching impassively. Just for a moment, Robert's knuckles whitened as he gripped a horn of ale. Otherwise, he remained outwardly neutral as his younger brothers squared up to each other.

"Isn't your brother riding in the jousts?" asked Trystane.
It sounded like he was trying to distract her. "He's not interested in knighthood. He's fighting in the melee though."

While she explained, the brothers in front of her went thundering down the tiltyard, filling the stilted silence with the sound of lances splinting and breastplate buckling. Stannis sent Renly flying clean from the saddle and crash landing in the sand to a loud round of applause. At least Renly avoided the fate of the last rider, and he didn't get all tangled up in the horse's reins.

"When we marry, we'll have a tourney to celebrate," he assured her, confidently.

Sansa felt her face grow hot. "I'd love that!"

Her father had come to her that morning, telling her of the proposed betrothal. She had been walking on air ever since.

"The biggest tourney Dorne has seen," he elaborated. "And I will ride out with your favours and defend your honour."

Her heartbeat fluttered. Only her father's warning that the marriage wouldn't happen for years yet tempered her mood. But, as far as she was concerned, the sooner the better. "I hope I please you as a wife."

Trystane smiled, his dark eyes shining. "Of course you will. And I will make you the most happy."

During the break in the jousting, she and Jeyne found themselves browsing the market stalls close by. More and more had sprung up for the tourney as the population of the city clamoured to earn a coin from all the wealthy people swarming into King's Landing. But she was too giddy from the day's events to really see what she was looking at. She was just happy to let Jeyne chatter on about the knights, the sights and the sounds of the tourney.

Tyrstane had gone to watch a cockerel fight – something she didn't quite fancy herself. Nor the bear baiting, which actually looked quite horrible even if it had drawn huge crowds. Instead, she bought herself and Jeyne some pastries and the pair of them drifted over to a crowd of children watching a puppet show. Having arrived a little late, she couldn't tell what it was supposed to be, but she loved the puppets. One was a dragon with three heads, fashioned from scarlet silk with shiny, yellow buttons for eyes. It even had streams of yellow and orange silk flowing from its mouth to look like flames. It made her think of the dragon egg she had at home, its colouring was just right, she thought.

"I should have known you'd be down here with the other children." The voice that spoke was an unpleasantly familiar one.

Sansa only rolled her eyes. "It's a shame they have no attractions designed for lackwits, you must feel out of your depth wherever you go, Joffrey."

Jeyne let out an exaggerated laugh and Sansa appreciated the effort, letting her smile widen as she watched her opponent's reaction. She would have thought he'd still be recovering from his jousting match, but the cut on his cheek was a gratifying sight.

"You could get yourself into trouble with talk like that," he replied, ominously.

"Then don't start it," she sighed. "If you can't give as good as you get, then hold your silence. Now leave us to enjoy the puppets."

Even as she spoke, a puppet knight was slaying the puppet dragon. She wondered if it was meant to
be King Robert, but he was soon joined by a three-headed black dragon also made of silk. The black
dragon of House Blackfyre reared, besetting the red dragon with a roar of silk flame, killing it dead
in a spill of tangled cotton guts. The black dragon rose again, soaring on its little wooden poles to a
chorus of boos and jeers from the watching crowds – the adults too, Sansa noted with a laugh.

Joffrey's lip curled in derision, but Sansa was paying him no attention now. Whatever sullen
putdown he had at the ready was of no concern to her, but she did wish Prince Trystane would hurry
back and see him off. However, the next voice she heard was neither Joff nor Trystane. And the
cloyingly sweet scent that now fogged the air around her certainly wasn't Joff's.

"I hear congratulations are in order, Lady Stark. I do believe Princess of Dorne will suit you
admirably."

Joffrey looked daggers at her before stomping off into the crowd, his burly guard with a scarred face
following at a distance.

"Thank you, Lord Varys," she said, looking up at the Eunuch.

Varys, too, seemed to be enjoying the puppet show.

"I will be my lady's handmaid," Jeyne added.

"Although, I fear you'll have to be careful in the Dornish heat, especially with your red and hair and
pale complexion," Varys added, making it sound like a warning. "You don't want to get burned, do
you?"

He always did that: he made an innocuous remark and followed it up with something else meant to
scare people. She misliked it.

"I'm sure they have shade in Dorne too," she murmured.

Her reply was partially drowned out by a cheer from the crowd as the red dragon rose again, even
bigger than before. It leapt from below the puppet master's box and snapped its great jaws around the
black dragon's neck, breathing silk flames as it ascended. The black dragon fell dead, limp and
listless, it slowly slid below the box and out of sight. The red dragon triumphant, the show seemed to
be over. But when she looked to find Varys again, he'd already slipped away and out of sight.

A large splinter protruded from the fallen knight's throat, blood spilling slowly from the wound and
into the sand. More blood bubbled from his mouth, growing slowly smaller and weaker as he drew
his final breaths. Once it was over, Jon breathed a sigh of relief for his sake. The sight of it had
chilled him, but he didn't look away as death closed over the man. Only when he remembered
Margaery, who remained calm and composed, did he make sure she was all right. Mercifully, Sansa
and Jeyne had not yet returned from their wanderings and Arya was absent too.

However, the continued absence of his sisters did provide a handy excuse to slip away from this
increasingly tiresome spectacle. One gruesome death was enough to take the shine off the event for
him and it appeared to be the same for Margaery, too. When he got up, so did she and insisted on
coming with him when he offered to find her brother to keep her company instead. Anyway, the
Queen had also left the stands so she would be needed back at Maegor's Holdfast regardless.

"Do you know where she's gone?" he asked, frowning at her empty seat.

Margaery hesitated, her brow creasing slightly. "Don't you know? She's gone to meet your step-
mother off the boat. I rather thought you'd be with her, actually."
Jon's heart sank. Somehow, he'd managed to forget Catelyn was on her way down from the Vale, ready to cast her shadow over his life again. "She's not my step-mother. She's just Lady Stark."

Before long, the two of them were making their way out of the stands, apologising hurriedly to everyone they disturbed as they tried to avoid treading on toes. Once out in the city streets, however, they could finally breathe more easily. A matter expedited by the fact that things seem to have calmed down now the tourney was a few days in. The gold cloaks had found their equilibrium and seemed more relaxed, the crowds too seemed more good-natured. And, by now, all the pickpockets were populating the dungeons below the Red Keep, a bleak half-way house between either the gallows or the wall.

In this newly relaxed atmosphere, he and Margaery were able to stroll at their leisure and chatter as they liked. With neither of them in a particular hurry, he stopped at a cart to buy them Margaery a fresh-baked pastry proffered by a rosy-cheeked woman who'd come down from the Riverlands to ply her wares. Margaery held it out to him to try first. It was delicious, much like the feel of her fingertips lightly brushing his jaw.

"Are you nervous about tomorrow?" she asked, referring to the melee.

Jon shrugged. "Some. All the spectators make me nervous. But Ser Barristan says you always forget about them, once it begins."

"I hope you don't forget me!" she laughed.

He tried not to blush at the thought of her being in the crowd. The thought of her being there made his nerves twitch, a fluttering in his belly that wasn't altogether unpleasant.

"Of course, I won't," he assured her. Never had he spoken a truer word.

They had reached the curtain walls of the Red Keep, where the gates were guarded by two harassed looking gold cloaks of the City Watch. They paused there, momentarily delaying the moment of separation. Without saying anything, Margaery slipped her fingers up her sleeve and disentangled a length of green silk from inside her cuff.

"I'd be more convinced of that if you had something to remember me by," she said, passing him her favour.

The favour was soft green silk trimmed with gold thread. "Growing Strong" was picked out also in gold thread. Jon couldn't help but smile as he kissed the silk and let her tie it to his right wrist. He had never bought into chivalry before, passing it off as just a game played by southerners with too much time on their hands. But there was no mistaking the nature of the gesture. It was a sign. A show of affection. A display of feelings.

"Thank you," he said, hoping his nerves weren't showing.

"The honour is mine," she said, leaning up to kiss his cheek.

Just for a moment, he thought he should kiss her back. He wanted to. Badly. But the moment passed and he felt like he had missed some opportunity he hadn't realised was there until it was gone. Instead, he took her hand and together they hurried through the crowds of the Red Keep, toward the place where Maegor's Holdfast rubbed shoulders with the Tower of the Hand. It was there they went their separate ways and he began the ascent of the endless steps.

He found the Tower empty, which wasn't a great surprise to him. But not even his father was around, unless he had left to meet Catelyn already. Sansa, Jeyne and Arya would all be at the
tourney still and Septa Mordane too, in all likelihood. But now that he had arrived at an empty tower, he found himself restless and keen to be elsewhere. Before leaving again, he checked on the wolves who'd all be secured in the common hall. They had food and water and Ghost was chewing happily on a mutton bone.

Satisfied that they were safe and happy, he left the common hall and spoke briefly with the guards on the door. No one had been seen, no one untoward. That was a singular pleasure reserved for his descent back down the stairs of the Tower, where he found Lady Melisandre of Asshai waiting at the bottom. She appeared so suddenly, Jon almost knocked into her. That aside, she was among the last people he would have expected to find in the Tower of the Hand.

"My father isn't here," he said, assuming Lord Stark was the reason for her visit.

She seemed unconcerned. "But you are."

"Me? I cannot imagine I'd be able to help you with anything."

"How do you know unless I ask?"

She held him with her disconcerting red eyes, the ruby at her throat pulsed at her throat as if it had a heartbeat of its own. Another strangely unnerving feature of the red priestess. All the same, he found himself growing curious about what she could possibly want with him.

"I'm in a hurry," he lied, hoping it would spur her on to the point.

"I am increasingly curious about you, Lord Stark," she began, walking with him down the hallway at the foot of the steps. "You must forgive me, you see, I'd seen you in the fires before you even arrived at Dragonstone. R'hllor doesn't show me visions for nothing, his fires are not illuminations … like in a manuscript. So I asked about you and discovered that you are the bastard born son of Lord Stark, whose mother remains quite unknown."

Jon sighed, disguising how unnerved he actually was. "My mother isn't unknown, she's just not talked about. There is a difference."

"Hmm," she replied, indifferently. "All the same, I'm increasingly curious. Especially when I realised you had gained access to the vaults under Dragonstone."

"I looked under the castle," he confessed. "But I didn't find anything of note."

"Not even the dragon eggs?" she asked, glancing sidelong at him. "Was the horn in there, too?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I suspect that's not true," she smiled like a parent seeing right through their offspring's lies. "Stannis and I tried everything to get into those vaults, but they wouldn't open. Now they are closed again."

"Because they were never opened in the first place," he insisted. He was lying through his teeth, unwilling to give her anything whether she saw through the lies or not. "What are you hinting at, my lady? Do you think I can get you back into the vaults? Is that what you want?"

"I suspect there's little point now," she replied. "And don't get me wrong, my lord. I'm not accusing you of stealing. I'm honestly curious about how you managed to do it."

Jon paused, looking over at her for a second. "R'hllor didn't show you that in his fires, then?"
She looked like she had heard that one before, responding with just a subtle eye-roll. "It doesn't work like that. And I didn't need the fires to show me the bandages on your hand when you returned from the vaults. You certainly didn't arrive with a bound hand."

Nor had the self-inflicted injury fully healed. It twinged at that moment, as if the reminder had reopened the flesh. He replied with a close approximation of the truth.

"I cut my hand on the rocks down there, that's all. Obsidian is notoriously sharp, my lady."

Although he knew she knew he was lying, he saw no reason to tell her anything. Instead, he continued their dance around this verbal pinhead. Now he tried a little deflection.

"Is that why you've come to court? To find out what my sister and I were doing under Dragonstone? If so, I fear you've had a wasted journey."

"Oh, no," she replied, casually. If she was growing impatient with his refusal to yield information, she did not show it. "Stannis was returning anyway. This time, however, I made sure the invitation was extended to me as well. I am very curious about you, Lord Stark. So, don't worry, I haven't told Stannis a thing about you."

Jon didn't know if he should feel good about that or not. "I don't think Stannis would be too happy if you're only here to mither me."

She smiled again. "I don't think he cares either way. But don't worry, I won't tell him anything no matter what happened."

He still wasn't about to let himself be caught out. "I have nothing to worry about because nothing happened. Now, if you excuse me, I need to get back to the training ground. The melee is on the morrow."

He shut off further questions by turning sharply and continuing down another flight of steps, into the Dragonvault.

"There's power in King's Blood, Lord Stark," she called after him. "And only a very special blood can open those vaults."

Jon ignored her and swung into the stairwell that led underground, hoping she would not try to follow him. It was empty now and the gates unlocked. The dragon skulls watched him as he passed, heading for the narrow beam of daylight streaming down the external steps that led into the courtyards beyond. Only once he was outside again did he slacken his pace and draw a deep breath.

The longer he remained at the Red Keep, the more constrained and closed in he felt. Winterfell, like all seats of power, had always had its gossips and social climbers. But it was nothing on the scale of the Red Keep. Here, no one spoke to him unless they had an agenda to push, or a thinly veiled yet heavily coded warning to impart. The other day, it had been Petyr Baelish muttering about History repeating. If it wasn't him, it was Varys lurking in the shadows. Now it was a foreign Priestess from As'shai dogging his footsteps through holy fires.

Even outside in the open, he sometimes felt like he was being watched. All in all, these people exhausted him.

"Ned!"

At the sound of her voice, Eddard turned sharply. He looked both ways, up and down the cobbled
street he had been led to, along with Jory Cassel. All he saw were the small folk and hawkers, plying their wares to the tourney crowds. There was no sign of Catelyn anywhere.

"Ned!"

He exchanged a look with Jory, who seemed as nonplussed as him. It wasn't until Lyanna stepped in that the awful truth dawned.

"Up here, lackwit," she stated, flatly.

Eddard knew he shouldn't be surprised by the fact that Lord Baelish had brought his wife to a brothel. But, somehow, he was. Even more so that the Queen appeared to be there too. He looked upwards, to where Cat and Lya were both leaning over the terrace railing. Still, all that really mattered was that Cat had made it safely to the city.

He entered the building hardly knowing which way to look. All around him, he could hear the girls talking to their clients, some clearly play acting. His discomfiture was hardly helped by the fact that, when he did look up, the first person he saw was the High Septon being led into a private room by a scantily clad girl young enough to be his granddaughter. The same High Septon who once guardedly referred to his sister as a barren, northern heretic. He briefly wondered if Lya knew he was there… besides, so was she, if not for the same reasons as his holiness.

All that was pushed aside, however, when Catelyn appeared at the top of the stairs. Whorehouse or no, it was the first time he had seen his wife in what felt like forever and a day and they threw their arms around each other. He hadn't realised how much he had been missing her until he her arms back around him once more. They parted only reluctantly, and a little more sharply when they remembered where they were. All the same, before joining Lyanna, Ned wanted to look upon her for just a little longer.

"It's so good to see you again," he said. He wished he could phrase it more succinctly, it sounded so trite. But words had never been his forte.

Catelyn smiled. "And I, you. Now come, there is much to discuss."

She led him to the third floor of the building, where he had seen her and Lyanna out on the terrace. Jory, meanwhile, was left guarding the door.

"Your sister's waiting in Baelish's administrative rooms," she informed it.

Ned was sceptical. "Is that what he calls it.

She gave him a reproving look in response.

Nevertheless, Lyanna was in there waiting for him and the place was mercifully free of Baelish's employees. The man himself was sat behind a large desk, a ledger still open in front of him. The vellum pages were black with ink, a neat but tiny scrawl of handwriting. He looked up at Ned with the same half-smile he always wore.

"Lord Stark, can I tempt you with some wine?"

"No thank you," he replied, tersely. "Why are we here and not back at the castle?"

"Petyr's offered to help us," Catelyn said, smiling happily. "And, Ned, you know it's no good discussing these matters at Court."
He took a seat opposite Cat, beside Lyanna. "Why not? My terraces are safe enough." So safe, they had discussed Jon there on more than one occasion. "Not that it matters, we're here now. Did you see Lysa?"

"Yes, and she sticks to what she told me, Ned," she answered. "She insists the Lannisters are to blame for Jon Arryn's death and now, with the attack on Lady, it's clear they're up to something."

"And her letter to Stannis, blaming Lyanna?" he asked, increasingly curious about his sister-by-law's excuses.

Catelyn hesitated, as though she herself couldn't quite believe what she had been told. She drew a deep breath before answering: "She says she did it to throw the Lannister's off the scent."

Ned looked to Lyanna, who sat there smiling crookedly in disbelief. However, whatever misgivings she still had, she kept to herself for the time being.

"How was that throwing the Lannister's off the scent?" he asked, frowning in confusion. "Surely, throwing the Lannisters off the scent is writing to Tywin and blaming someone else. Not writing to Stannis to blame Lyanna, unless she thinks Stannis is in Tywin's pocket. Anyone with an ounce of sense can tell you that's nonsense."

Catelyn sighed heavily. "I don't know, Ned. She's changed. She's sent our uncle away, she's cut herself off from the family and she made it clear she didn't want me there."

"Which is where I come in," Baelish smiled at them. "Lysa and I have always been, er, close. Shall we say. I thought it might be helpful if I leave for the Eyrie once the tournament is over and see if I can't find out what's going on myself."

Ned was even more sceptical now. "You?"

Baelish laughed. "Lysa and I grew up together, Jon Arryn brought me to court at her recommendation. I think she will listen to me, Lord Stark."

Ned was uneasy, but he didn't see how things could be any worse. "When do you propose to leave?"

"The ship returns to Gulltown tomorrow evening. If her grace can spare me, I can be on that ship."

Ned glanced at Lyanna, noting that her grace looked as if she'd be glad to see the back of him for a while.

"This is very kind of you, Petyr," Cat was saying. "I am worried for her, she is not herself and it sounds like she hasn't been herself for quite some time."

For her sake, Ned found himself agreeing to the plan. A move that pleased Petyr so much Ned found himself having the wine all but forced on him.
Mad Dogs and Dornishmen

And so it began.

The horn blast sounded like it came from far away, but Jon knew what it was and what it meant. His heartbeat raced, scattering nerves he soothed by needlessly checking his gauntlets and helm one more time before the melee began. Ser Barristan had told him he would forget the crowds as soon as that horn sounded. Ser Barristan had lied. Jon felt like he was acutely aware of every pair of eyes now trained on the arena. He felt like a specimen under a Maester's looking glass.

His mother was there, sat beside King and his father. Margaery, Sansa, Arya, Prince Trystane; even Lady Stark was there, to his mild surprise. There was nothing Catelyn Tully would love more than to see him fail. The thought of it reawakened in him the fear he had of being the first to get knocked out of the melee. The top of the losers. The first to do the walk of shame across the tourney field.

He wouldn't let that happen, he vowed it to himself as the horn blast faded and a cheer erupted from the crowd. King Robert, an old hand at melees himself, was on his feet right from off, shouting words lost among the din. Jon found himself surging forward along with all the other competitors, reaching for his sword without even thinking about it. And there was no hanging around. The first thing he saw was a morning star sailing toward his face, which he blocked with his shield before stepping deftly around his attacker and delivering a sharp blow with his tourney sword to the back of the man's legs. He buckled and fell to his knees, yielding easily.

Jon knew he would not be the first to do the walk of shame. On the contrary, he'd sent the first victim into the stands of ignominy himself. He could have laughed, only all of Ser Barristan's training had returned to him. He was not the first. His confidence returned. He remembered the moves, the dives and sliding side-steps that had him dodging every attack that came his way.

Ser Barristan hadn't really lied. The crowds receded from his conscious mind, the melee became his world and little else mattered. He measured his pace and watched his step as he lunged straight into the fray.

Jon may not have been his son, but Ned couldn't have been prouder when his nephew scored the first scalp of the melee. The defeated knight who'd tried to sneak up on him with that morning star was now slinking off to the side lines, spurred on by the deafening cheers of the crowd. The Starks were on their feet, applauding and calling out words of encouragement Ned had no doubt Jon had no chance of actually hearing. Only Catelyn remained seated, studying her fingernails intently.

Meanwhile, Oberyn Martell took down three hedge knights in one swift move with the spear. Ned had to admit, he was impressed. Bringing up the opposing side of the melee, Gregor Clegane was head and shoulders above everyone else competing. But there was still some distance between him and Martell. It was only a matter of time, however, and his nerves were already on edge. Just as a Knight of the Vale took on a knight of the Riverlands, Margaery Tyrell let out a cheer as she declared Jon had taken down another opponent. Ned quickly scanned the competitors, but his nephew was now lost in the thick press of fighting men.

"Your bastard has a keen supporter," Catelyn stated.

Lost in the melee, Ned didn't give much thought to his reply. "I think they're sweet for each other."

A lack of thought he soon regretted.
"Don't you think Lady Tyrell is a more fitting match for your trueborn son?"

"I said they're sweet for each other, I didn't say they're betrothed," he pointed out, curtly. "That matter is in the hands of Lord Tyrell."

Catelyn fell silent, but he could tell this wasn't the end of the matter. That morning, Ned distinctly recalled a green and gold silk favour tied to Jon's wrist. A detail he decided not to bring up with his wife just at that moment. Instead, he watched as Thoros of Myr triumphed against a Northern competitor, a Manderly he thought.

The melee was moving with lightning speed, with competitors being knocked out every few seconds. Ned scanned each one, checking to make sure they weren't Jon. The chaff was being cut away with alarming speed: the hedge knights and chancers in search of glory, the ones who'd bitten off more than they could chew. And he found Jon again, leading the way now but still moving through the mock-battle lines at a steady pace. Each move was measured, each attack well timed. The training with Ser Barristan had paid off dividends.

Speaking of whom, the man himself now appeared in the stands and made his way to where Ned was sat.

"I was just thinking of you, Ser Barristan," Ned greeted him. "It seems your lessons have paid off already."

The old knight smiled. "He's the best man on that field, I'm sure of it."

Catelyn shot him another dark look, but held her silence as Ned moved up a little to make room for Barristan. By the looks of things, the old knight was as nervous as he was. He leaned forwards, chewing his nails as he glared into the melee. All Ned could make out now was a tangle of limbs, a cloud of dust and swords and weapons swinging through the air. Still the injured and the defeated came limping down the side lines, spat out of the fray like driftwood from a sea storm.

Once the competitors thinned, leaving only the most skilled, Ned could finally pick out his nephew easily. His armour was still in place, he was still on fine form and showing no signs of tiring even when taking on two competitors at once. Ned was on his feet as a third joined the fray, but Jon weaved through all three, attacking and blocking with impressive fluidity. In the stands, Sansa had cried herself hoarse and Arya had climbed up on her seat to get a better view, eyes as wide as saucers as her brother continued to triumph.

"Ned!" Catelyn's voice cut through the noise of the crowds. "I was trying to talk to you. I was asking if you've even got a match for Robb, yet. Wouldn't it be wise to speak with Lord Tyrell before this folly between Jon and Margaery gets out of hand?"

"Seven hells, Catelyn, does the prospect of Jon being happy really frighten you that much?" Lyanna leaned forward, inserting herself between Eddard and Catelyn. "You need to remember, Jon is marriageable now. I thought you'd have gotten used to it."

Eddard suppressed a groan. He loved his sister, he always had and always would. But her temper had snapped, despite the smile on her face. Now Catelyn was looking daggers at them both. But without another word, she got up, gathered her skirts and turned her back on them as she left the stands.

"Was that necessary?" Ned snapped at his sister.

"Actually, Ned, I rather think it was," she replied, sharply. "In fact, I think it might have been
somewhat overdue."

"Why are you fighting?"

Exasperated, Ned turned to where Sansa had noticed the disagreement breaking out. "It's nothing, sweetling. No one's fighting. Keep watching the melee, look out for your brother."

While Sansa was watching, Lyanna bit her tongue. Then, by the time they settled again, Oberyn Martell was standing chest to chest with Gregor Clegane. Ned's nerves twisted, his stomach knotting. Oberyn removed his helm and raised his spear and looked his sister's killer in the eye. Ned couldn't take it. He got up sharply and gave chase to his wife, apologising to the people whose feet he found himself treading on.

"Where are you going? What about Jon?" Lyanna's voice trailed after him.

"We'll back in a minute," he assured her, eyes on the two old foes. Inwardly, he resigned himself to missing the whole thing.

Oberyn and the Mountain appeared almost out of nowhere. Jon almost slammed right into them, and only realised who Oberyn was once the helm was off and tossed to the ground. The Dornishman faced his nemesis with a smile on his face. A smile that made Jon's blood run cold. But he couldn't afford to stand and watch. He had opponents attacking him and he'd already sustained a blow to the head. True, his helm had borne the impact, but he was still seeing stars in the aftermath. As well as that, he had the taste of blood in his mouth and nostrils clogged with dirt and dust that was kicked up all around him.

Now Oberyn and the Mountain were facing off, he was twice as cautious. But he did step in to stop a knight from the Reach getting to the Mountain before Oberyn could. He parried the man's blow, drawing his attention away from what the Dornishman and the mad dog of House Clegane were up to. Once challenged, he couldn't let Jon slip by. So he found himself engaged again and it wasn't long before two others joined the fight.

While swords clashed and oaths were shouted, Jon could hear something else. Something low and ominous and personal.

"Elia Martell, Princess of Dorne. You raped her. Your murdered her. You killed her children."

In the blink of an eye, an already chaotic melee suddenly erupted. Jon had to duck as Oberyn's spear swung through the air. As he ducked, he swung his own sword and cracked the knees of a Lannister man who was coming to the Mountain's aid. He was felled immediately and Jon whacked him around the head just to make sure he wasn't getting up again. A competitor from the Riverlands fell into step with Jon, calling in his ear.

"You better leave those two to it, lad!"

Jon grinned, unseen behind his helm. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

He spun around, getting the Dornishman and the Mountain back in his view. Clegane was huge, but he was slow. He was weighted down by the armour he wore, while Oberyn was quick and lithe. His spear spun, arced and swung, while Clegane's sword clunked around in slow, cumbersome movements. More than once, a Lannister henchman moved in to try and break up the fight only for Jon and the Riverlands lad to fight them off. The pair of them working together to ensure this old grudge match was settled once and for all.
"You raped her, you murder her. You killed her children!"

Oberyn's voice was clear about the clangour of the melee now, and it seemed he didn't care who heard him. The pain, the years of grief, the pent-up fury in his voice made Jon's skin prickle. Elia's children. Aegon and Rhaenys. They were his brother and sister. Having grown up in the bosom of the Starks, his real brother and sister felt so distant to him. But right now, as their uncle exacted his revenge against their killer, Jon thought he could feel them standing right beside him. Them and Princess Elia, too.

Jon seized a moment to look at what they were doing. Oberyn's spear glanced off the Mountain's armour, much too fast for the huge knight to stop it. But it had no effect. All the while, the Prince was shouting his sister's name. Over and over, as if Elia might come back from the dead. Up until the spear finally wedged between the plates of the Mountain's armour. The huge man bellowed, lashing out with his fists as he tried to swat Oberyn away. But he was so slow and cumbersome, Oberyn had already dodged that mailed fist.

The spear tip came away coated in blood, but the Mountain didn't fall. He lurched off, lashing out at all who got in his way. But Oberyn seemed satisfied. He pulled off his leather armour and let it, and the spear fall to the ground. He clapped Jon on the back as he turned and walked away. At the start of the melee, what felt like half a day ago, Jon had referred to what Oberyn was doing now as the 'walk of shame'. But the Dornish prince walked away with his head held high, like a winner. He'd done what he came to do.

All the same, Jon was perplexed. The Mountain was fighting on, now turning his attention to another Lannister as if he'd forgotten whose side he was meant to be on. Jon shrugged his shoulders and plunged straight back into the fight, taking on three more opponents and taking them all down, earning himself a fine crop of injuries in the process. He didn't know how much time had passed before a crash so loud it startled him sounded. It was the Mountain, falling to the dirt so hard he sent up a thick plume of dust. In the split second Jon turned to look, a morning star slammed into his shoulder, the spikes cutting through the leather and biting into the skin beneath. An attack from behind that he took personally as he spun around dealt with the culprit. Onwards and upwards, he thought to himself.

"Catelyn, you're being unreasonable!" Ned's voice echoed around the common hall as he tried to catch her up. She had fled from him all through the Red Keep.

"Am I?" she rounded on him as soon as he closed the door. "You've brought that boy to the capital, you've given him the best trainer gold can buy and now you're encouraging him to take up with the most eligible bride in the seven kingdoms. What am I supposed to think, Ned?"

"I'm not encouraging anything!" he shot back, trying to make her see reason. "They're young, Catelyn. They're both away from home for the first time. They're both becoming adults. Of course they're attracted to each other. It means nothing. Come back next week and they'll both be looking at someone completely different. Why are you turning this into something so much bigger? You know he's close with Randyll Tarly's son, as well. Does that bother you, too?"

"He can be friends with who he wants," Catelyn replied, defensively. "But this is more than that, Ned. You know it is. Sansa is to be married to Prince Trystane and you didn't consult me. Now Jon is sniffing around the Tyrell girl, so what was I supposed to think?"

Ned gave no answer. He turned away from her, crossing the room to the terrace so he could see out over the walls. There was no chance of being able to make out what was happening in the melee, but it did put some space between himself and his wife. With Jon away from Winterfell and residing at
the Red Keep, he honestly believed bitter days were behind them. Now it seemed Catelyn had been storing them up, just waiting to vent.

"Cat, Jon is none of your concern anymore," he said, looking at her through the open terrace doors. "Why are we still having these arguments?"

"You know why, Ned. Because you brought that whore's whelp into our home and expected me to raise him as one of my own. Without so much as a word as to who that whore was or what was so special she made you forget your honour for a whole night. A whore, Ned!"

That's no way to speak of your Queen, he thought to himself, remembering Jon's insult back in Winterfell.

Distant, muffled cheers drifted from over the walls of the Red Keep. A cheer that went on and on, rising and falling in pitch. He had a sinking feeling that it was the announcement of the winner. Instead of witnessing it, he was here fighting the same fight he and Catelyn had been having for almost fifteen years now.

"If Jon's won that melee and I'm not there to see it, I will be..." he trailed off as the cheers came again.

"Of course, because it's all about Jon, isn't it?" Catelyn stated, acidly. "And what about Arya, Ned? What is she doing? It looks like she's been left to her own devices while you run around after Jon and marry off our eldest daughter to the first prince who crosses her path!"

"Now you're being ridiculous," Ned retorted. "It's unworthy of you, Catelyn."

He pulled away from her again and poured them both some wine. They both needed to breathe and calm down, before the girls returned and heard them fighting.

"Sansa is head over heels for Prince Trystane and he feels the same about her," he said, handing her a glass. "They've been inseparable ever since they met. And he's a young gallant, Cat. Exactly what she needs."

Catelyn drank her wine in one gulp, but it seemed to do the trick as it forced her to stop arguing for nearly a minute. Just enough time for her to compose herself.

"After all these years, I long since gave up on the hope that you might grow to love Jon," said Ned, draining his own glass. "But Cat, you need to make your peace with him."

"Whatever for?" she demanded.

Ned sighed heavily and bought a little more time for himself by topping up their glasses. "Do you remember what he said to you before he left Winterfell? And Benjen and I told you it was a lie. Don't repeat it, just tell me if you remember."

"I remember," she said. Her hand shook as she took the glass, her face paling. "Oh gods, Ned. Oh gods, don't tell me..."

He tried to meet her gaze, finding it more and more difficult.

"Prince Rhaegar," he whispered so only she could hear. "I couldn't tell you, Cat. I couldn't-"
open and Sansa came running into the room ecstatic. Arya was hot on her heels.

"He won!" Sansa called out.

"Jon!" Arya added. "Jon won-"

"Out!" Catelyn yelled over them. "Get out!"

Ned could tell she regretted it instantly. Both girls were so shocked they stood there rooted to the spot, Sansa looking tearful and Arya just plain stunned. Catelyn swooped down on them both, pulling them into her arms and apologising.

"Girls, your father and I are talking," she assured them, her calm tone was much too forced to be convincing. "There will be celebrations for your brother's win. Go and join them. I'll give you both some coin-"


"No, sweet child!" Ned was quick to assure her. He was perturbed that she would even think that. Catelyn echoed his words, cupping the child's face and kissing her cheek.

"Your father and I," Catelyn explained to Arya. "We're being silly. But we will talk and all will be well again. I'll give you coin and then you should go to the feast."

"I have coin," said Sansa. "Arya, come."

The girls, more accustomed to sibling rivalry, joined hands as they hesitantly left the common hall. Ned watched them leave, feeling the regret of the last fifteen years returning to him. Alone with Cat again, he looked up at her where she had taken up place beside the empty hearth.

"Surely, he's still a bastard," she said, her voice low.

The truth was out now, so there was no going back. "I wish he was. But he isn't."

Catelyn sounded like she was choking, but she knew as well as he they could not talk about it there. When he tried to say more, she raised her hand to silence him.

"No more," she said, turning away. "On the morrow, I sail for Winterfell. When I see you again, I see you again. But on the morrow, I'm leaving. I cannot deal with all this right now."

"Cat, no-"

But she was already gone.

"I don't understand what happened between Oberyn and the Mountain." Even when he was getting his champion's purse, Jon was wondering what happened between those two. In his head, when he imagined the moment before it happened, he envisioned Oberyn hacking Clegane to pieces in a fit of righteous rage. What actually happened was an awful lot of shouting followed by barely a scratch of a spear tip. When Oberyn walked away from the competition, the Mountain fought on. "I thought the Martells only came here to kill him?"

"They did," Lyanna answered as she emerged from the shadows of an antechamber. She had a linen cloth in her hands, ready to bathe his wounds. "The Mountain isn't dead yet. But Oberyn did kill him."
"So, it was poison then?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," Lyanna assured him, wringing out the cloth. "After what he did to Elia and the children, did you think Prince Oberyn would make it quick? Gregor Clegane's a dead man walking."

A slow acting poison? Jon shuddered as he removed his shirt and perched on the edge of the Queen's dining table. Cuts, scratches and grazes mostly. However, the crop of bruises he'd inevitably picked up wouldn't even be felt until the next day. A nice surprise for him to wake up to, a patchwork of purples and blacks breaking out over his battered limbs. For now, however, his mother seemed to be making up for lost time. Compensating for all those skinned knees and grazed elbows she missed while he was growing up in Winterfell.

"Hold still," she bid him, wringing out the cloth. "And drink your mead before you die of thirst."

There was one particularly nasty cut over his left shoulder blade, where he'd taken a whack from a morning star. There were blood spots on his shirt, over the site of the wound, mapping out the spikes of the weapon perfectly. Now that the surge of victory was over, he could feel the sting as Lyanna pressed the cloth into the wound.

"You're not disappointed about your father not being there, are you?" she asked.

He was. "Not really."

Nor did he wish to draw attention to how disappointed he really was by asking why Lord Stark and Catelyn had left. Besides, he thought he could guess. Lady Stark had been sat rigid in her seat the whole time, determined to have a thoroughly miserable time no matter what. It seemed, from where he was in the arena, that even Sansa and Arya had left her to it. His father alone had stood no chance.

"Lady Stark seems to think you're being too friendly with Lady Margaery," said Lyanna.

Yes, he had been right all along. "She wants Margaery for Robb, I suppose. I know it makes sense, I'm not a fool. All I have to offer her is a tenuous claim to the throne that I cannot press without plunging the realm into war."

She rinsed out the cloth and there was more blood there than he expected. "It doesn't have to be like that. And you don't have to be in Robb's shadow anymore. The Tyrells were loyal to the last for your blood father."

"I know, but that would entail telling them," he replied. "More and more people seem to be finding out and I mislike it."

Lyanna moved to his front and dabbed at the dried blood around his nose. "Very well, but there are other ways, there doesn't need to be anything explicit. But it's more than that: I worry you still see yourself as second best, even after winning melees and proving yourself in the sparring yard. There's certainly no need to humble yourself for Catelyn Tully's sake."

"I'm not," he protested. "But it always causes fights."

"The fights aren't your problem," Lyanna pointed out. "When you marry, the match must be a good one and Catelyn be damned. There is no reason why you shouldn't have a good match with a girl who will make you happy."

While she continued to tend the myriad of cuts he'd sustained, he gazed out of the window. From Maegor's he could see the Tower of the Hand, they faced each other from across a quadrangle with
the throne room separating them at the far end. But there was no sign of life from any of the windows or terraces. Only Sansa and Arya emerged from the exit at the foot of the tower, his elder sister instantly recognisable by the bright auburn of her hair. Not long after them, Catelyn came running out but she didn't catch her daughters up. She lagged behind and sat on a low wall, her arms wrapped tight around her middle.

"Is she all right?" he asked.

"Who?" Lyanna asked, setting her cloth aside to see what he was looking at. "Catelyn? Just leave her be, Jon. Whatever's going on, your father's best placed to sort it out."

It was growing dark and she was all alone down there. Not even Ser Rodrik was watching over her, but he couldn't be far behind. Jon watched for what he thought was nigh on ten minutes, but still she didn't move. Then, even more suspect, the next person on the scene was Petyr Baelish.

"He should be gone by now," Lyanna said, glancing out of the window.

"Where?" he asked, looking up at her.

"The Eyrie," Lyanna answered. "He's friendly with Cat's sister and we thought he might be able to help with a small issue we're having."

By the time he looked back Catelyn had gone back inside and Petyr followed the same route Sansa and Arya had taken several minutes before.

"He's odious," said Jon, quietly. He then proceeded to tell Lyanna all that Baelish had told him during the feast and what he'd said about Arya competing in the tourney. The parallels between him and Ned, the parallel between Arya and Lyanna. In conclusion, Jon stated insistently: "He knows."

"He knows nothing," Lyanna replied, dismissively. "First up, everyone knows your father danced with Ashara Dayne that night and everyone knows it only happened because Brandon spoke to Ashara first."

"And Arya competing in the tourney?"

"He didn't say anything, did he?" she pointed out. "Jon, Baelish has a way of inserting himself into many lives, into many events without him actually knowing or stating anything. Personally, I don't even recall seeing him at Harrenhal. And I doubt he would have lived with this knowledge and never once hinted at it to me. Forget him and enjoy your victory. Go to the closing feast tonight and forget Baelish and Catelyn."

Jon drew a deep breath and realised she was right. Winning the melee had been a strange event. He had crossed the finish line, exhausted and aching all over, and wondered where everyone else was. It took a full minute to realise they were all behind him, lying in the dirt, and that he was the first of the last three to make it home. From there, his victory dawned on him quickly. As soon as Lyanna had handed him his purse of gold, he realised he now had nothing to do and nothing to work towards.

He'd been so consumed by the tourney and his role in it, it had accounted for every moment of his waking life. Now it was over and he'd reached the plateau, only to realise there was nothing there. It was a peculiarly flat feeling, as if his enthusiasm had been tipped off the edge of the winner's podium.

"Yes," he agreed. "I suppose I should celebrate."

Lyanna bestowed a smile on him. "That's generally what comes next."
Catelyn had returned at nightfall. Tearstained and drained, her hair was loose and her dress beginning to unlace itself. Ned rose to his feet, unsure of how to greet her. Did she want him to kiss her, hold her or pick up the fight exactly where they'd left off? Despite rising to his feet, he thought it best to let her make the next move.

"I always did wonder what the big secret was," she said, her voice was hoarse. "You've taken a risk by bringing him here."

"It was Lya's idea," he pointed out. "And he agreed himself."

"Knowing you didn't trust me hurts," she continued as if he hadn't spoken. "Did you think I'd shout it from the battlements? Did you think I'd dash his brains out, like Gregor Clegane? Is that the monster you thought I was?"

"No!" he shot back, emphatically. "But Lyanna didn't know you. Gods, Cat, neither did I. Would it have been fair of us to put that burden on you?"

"But you did, Ned. Whether I knew or not, that burden was still on me. Can't you see that? And if I had known, I could have helped. I could have found a way to pass him off as mine. He and Robb are almost the exact same age and twins aren't always identical. A boy that looks like his mother and a boy who looks like his father. The only person present at Robb's birth was Luwin, who we trust with our lives."

"That would have been impossible," Ned pointed out. Had they known each other better, had the boys not been born at opposite ends of the realm, had Catelyn not been grasping at straws right now… "Maester Luwin was known to you, not me. Not Lyanna."

"He would have kept the secret, Ned. And so would I!" she said. "Even if I am talking madness, I still could have done something. But you lied instead. And it's led to this: a lifetime of enmity. Now there's this wedge between us … this lifetime of lies. And I don't even know what to do now."

Catelyn's antipathy for Jon played into the backstory, but Ned didn't point that out to her. This situation had brought out the worst in all three of those involved and he knew that well enough without having to illustrate it further.

"When I left you this afternoon, I remembered something," Catelyn said, her gaze drifting into the middle distance. "It was just before Brandon ran off to King's Landing, after he heard about the so-called abduction. My father tried to stop him, to talk him down. We were supposed to be getting married, after all. But my father didn't believe for one minute that the Prince had abducted anyone. I should have guessed, but you've made me a fool."

"You weren't to know," he assured her. "And it was safer when you didn't."

The girls returned during a lull in their conversation. They'd been escorted across the grounds by Jon, who saw them to the door and immediately returned to the throne room and the feast inside. Ned watched him making his way across the quadrangle, where he thought he could see Margaery Tyrell waiting for him in the entrance.

"The girls are coming up," he warned Catelyn.

They changed the subject and tried, for all it was worth, to make it look as if all was well. But Arya went straight to bed and Sansa didn't hang around for long. She kissed them both before turning in for the night, seeming tired and happy as she left them alone. Ned watched her leaving, amazed at how much she had grown and matured since arriving at the capital.
"We need to talk properly," he said, once the girls were gone.

"It's not even safe to talk properly here," she pointed out.

"Then we'll go somewhere else. It'll be quiet here now the tourney is over, I can be spared for a day at least."

When last they spoke, she insisted she was returning to Winterfell. But he couldn't let them part on an argument. Deep down, he knew she felt the same. And when she didn't immediately brush him off, he thought he might be getting somewhere.

"I don't know," she said. "I just don't know."

Jon left the throne room to be greeted by the earliest rays of dawn. That still and silent hour, poised between day and night, unseen by anyone except the late-night drunks and the night workers walking the city walls. Despite the rarity of existence at this hour, he didn't hang around to savour the moment. He walked Margaery back to Maegor's then returned to the Tower of the Hand.

The drink was still making his head spin and he hadn't slept for over a day. Accordingly, finding his way back to his own bed was all that occupied his mind. He began the ascent of the stairs up the Tower of the Hand wearily. They knew when he was tired and seemed to extend themselves accordingly, just to piss him off. As such, he paused for breath outside Arya's door on the first landing before continuing up to the second.

He continued scaling the endless stairs, finding Lady nudging at Sansa's closed bedchamber door on the level above Arya. Up close, he could see she had chewed through the leash that normally kept her tethered. She began whining loudly at Jon's approach and when he tried to pull her away, she snapped at his fingers and growled low as a warning.

"What's the matter?" he asked, as if expecting an answer. "You want to see Sansa? She's asleep, but I suppose she'll understand."

She'd have to, he thought to himself. He couldn't leave an agitated wolf stalking the corridors of the Tower. Not when she was even being aggressive toward him. So, he eased open Sansa's door, thinking to just explain to her what was wrong with Lady. Only, Sansa wasn't there.

Her bed was empty, but neatly made as if she hadn't slept there at all that night. A single blue rose had been placed on the pillow, where her head should be resting. Confused, at first, he turned a circle and looked behind the door, as if she might be playing a joke on him and just hiding. Then he dropped to his knees and looked under the bed. Her dragon egg was under there, as if it had rolled away from where it was usually kept in the hearth. But there was no sign of Sansa. Increasingly panicked, he wrenched open the closet door and, for a second, he thought he found her in there. But when he reached to pull her out, it was just a mannequin swathed in the new dress she had been making. All her other clothes were still neatly arranged on a rail, nothing seemed to be missing – except Sansa herself.

Angry and restless, Lady stalked the room in wide circles with her teeth bared and her fur bristling. Jon didn't try to stop her. He exited the room, glancing back and noticing the grill in the chamber wall knocked out of place. Stay calm, he urged himself as he began running up the rest of the stairs, just stay calm. Sansa can't have gone far.
There had been a mistake. Of course, there had to have been a mistake. Eddard recalled, quite clearly, where he had seen Sansa last. He and Catelyn had been talking in the common hall, and she and Arya had come in at midnight, to kiss them goodnight. She had gone straight to her room and straight to bed. Jory had confirmed it, he was on duty and he saw her enter her room. Eddard himself had seen how tired Sansa was. Tired and happy. She would have gone to bed and straight to sleep. But now she was gone and he knew there had to be a mistake.

Standing in the middle of Sansa's empty room, he turned a circle much as Jon had not a half-hour before. In the tower, beyond the door, all hell seemed to be breaking loose. The Stark household guard were shouting at each other, Sansa's name was echoing down the stairwells, somewhere above him Catelyn screamed and Lady howled. From where he stood, in a daze, the noises seemed to be coming from a long way away, as if reaching him through a tunnel.

By now, a pale morning light was filtering through the net curtains. So Eddard checked under the bed and found the dragon egg. She kept that on the hearth, hoping it would hatch. It ought not to have been there. He checked the closet and thought he found her, but it was only a mannequin. Having also made that mistake, Jon had told him about the damn mannequin, so he didn't even know why he was so disappointed that it wasn't her. Eddard tore the dresses off the rack, finding the closet bereft of life.

He turned to the rose still lying on the pillow, its sickly-sweet smell now perfuming the air. Some gallant might have given her that, for all they knew. And she might have put it there herself, not realising the implications. It was the sort of sweet, romantic thing Sansa would do. Everyone knew that.

"Jeyne!" he called out in a moment of dawning revelation. He wasn't even addressing anyone in particular. "She would have gone to Jeyne's."

Maybe Sansa couldn't sleep, got lonely, and sought the companionship of her friend. He all but fled his daughter's bedroom, looking for Jory or one of the other household guards. But they were all still tearing up the tower. But Jon was there, kneeling in front of Jeyne Poole herself who was sitting in a chair and rushing through an explanation of the last time she had seen Sansa. His hopes were dashed as swiftly as they were raised.

"It was at the feast," she was saying, wide-eyed with fear. "You brought us back to the Tower when it was nearly midnight. I reached my rooms on the third floor, where we said goodnight and made plans to meet up again in the morning. She was going to say goodnight to Lord and Lady Stark."

"You planned to meet in the morning?" Jon asked.

"Aye," Jeyne confirmed. "We were to break our fast together, as we usually do."

Jon thanked her and turned away, stopping only when he saw Eddard watching.

"Did you hear that?" he asked. "They made plans. Sansa hasn't just wandered off, father."

"What about Arya?" he asked. Lost in the commotion and confusion, his youngest daughter had almost slipped his mind.

"I'm here," a small voice said from behind him. "What's going on? Where's Sansa? Everyone's looking for her."
Arya, still in her nightclothes, was standing barefoot at the top of her landing. She shrank back as a guard pushed past her and into her room. Realising that something serious had happened, she came running to Eddard, startled.

"Have you seen your sister?" he asked, catching her in his arms.

"Only when we said goodnight," she replied. "She should still be in her room."

From there, everything seemed to pass in a blur. The tower was searched within the hour, then it spread outward to the cellars and vaults beneath. He hadn't even realised Lyanna and Robert had been roused from their beds before they both came rushing up the stairs. Both looked as if they'd been hastily dressed, their clothes slightly dishevelled and his sister's hair still in its net. A candle guttered in her hands as she took the steps two at a time.

"Gods, Ned, we just heard," said Lyanna. "Is there any sign of her?"

"We're organising a search of the rest of the castle," said Robert. "Ser Barristan's the man in charge. Jaime Lannister's been sent out with orders to lock the city gates. If there's no sign of her within an hour, we're ordering the ports to be closed."

Now it was getting real. Now things were turning serious. Eddard felt his stomach fold in on itself, a sickening feeling he always got while watching some terrible event unfold before his very eyes.

"There's really no need," he stammered, backing away. "She'll be found. She has to be. She has to be here somewhere."

"Of course she will," Lyanna replied, handing her candle to Robert. She then took his hands in her own. "Ned, this is just a precaution. We don't believe anything terrible has happened."

"But you think it might have," he said, breathlessly. His heart was hammering now. "Lya, she'll be found. She's here somewhere. She can't have gone far."

He just wished someone would finally come clean and admit this was all one big joke. But every face he looked into was pale and drawn and deadly serious. No one was laughing.

"Eddard, brother," said Lyanna. "We'll find her, I promise. Like I said, we're just taking precautions."

Outside, the bells began to ring. A clangour so loud it shattered the early morning, rousing the sleepers and calling the goldcloaks to arms. Those warning bells hadn't been heard since the sack, fourteen years before. Before Ned could even compose his thoughts, Jory Cassel found him.

"That's the full Tower searched, my lord," he said. "From the Common Hall to the Dragonvault, there's no sign of her."

"Jory, go to Maegor's where Ser Barristan is organising a search of the whole castle," said Robert. "He'll need all the help he can get."

Jory left, and Eddard was grateful to Robert for having the presence of mind to get rid of him. He was the household guard. Why hadn't he seen Sansa leaving her rooms? Ned wanted to tear strips off them all, even if he came to regret it later on.

"Ned, come on, back to the common hall," said Lya, motioning for Robert to help steer him in the right direction. "We can plan properly from there."
"Your sister's right," Robert concurred. "For once, listen to her."

But Catelyn had appeared. Still in her nightdress, she was wearing only a robe over it, cinched at the waist. Like Ned, she went barrelling right into Sansa's room as if she suspected it was all a bad joke. She cried out again, as anguished as a dying animal. Shaking off his sister and brother by law, Ned rushed to her side, finding her collapsed on the floor and shaking.

"Why, Ned?" she gasped, grasping him tight. "Who would anyone do such a thing? Why?"

And therein lay Eddard's own difficulties in understanding. Sansa was a good girl. She always had been. A lady from the age of three, she used her courtesies the same way tourney knights used swords: to engage and disarm. In that respect, she had been a reigning champion for nigh on ten years running. Who would steal an innocent away?

"The Lannisters," he murmured, blood running cold. "This has the stink of the Lannisters all over it."

Time passed, as it always did, but news was slow in catching up. Lyanna paced the common hall of the Tower, then returned to Maegor's once the search was complete and proceeded to pace her own rooms. Ser Loras Tyrell had been heading up the search of the Maidenvault and throne room and he reported his own lack of news at about noon. Nothing.

Meanwhile, Robert had carried out his threat to close the ports. King's Landing was in lockdown. The Goldcloaks were searching the whole city, going door to door. A handsome reward was now on offer from the King's own coffers which had seen a procession of young, pale skinned red-heads being paraded through the throne room on the off-chance they were Sansa Stark. Ser Jaime gave her a rundown on how that was going. So far, one was clearly a woman in her twenties, another was actually a boy and the rest looked nothing like Sansa except for the red hair. Still, it was worth a try and farce continued apace.

As for the ships, they were being searched from their deepest cargo holds to the tops of their masts. Still there was nothing. Another couple of red-haired girls had been brought for inspection, but they were all Braavosi girls here for trading cloth and salted fish. Making the search more complicated, the tourney attendees were still packed in the city and trying to get home now that it was all over. But none were allowed to leave and none were permitted to enter while the search was in progress. If this went on for too long, there would be rioting in the streets.

Lyanna had never felt so useless before.

"Your grace," said Jaime, still hovering in her doorway.

Lyanna turned to meet his gaze. "Yes?"

Jaime hesitated, clearly reluctant to say what he wanted to say. "After recent events, the feeling between our houses and what befell your niece's direwolf … I hope you know my House had nothing to do with Lady Sansa's disappearance."

"Has anything been said?" she asked, her eyes narrowing.

"Not that I've heard, but I can imagine-"

"Jaime, all I want is to find my niece, I have no time for apportioning blame at this moment," she cut in, rather more curtly than she intended. "You're dismissed."

Once he was gone, she resumed pacing the floor while Margaery looked on. The poor girl had tidied
her chambers twice already, refolded the linen a few times just to look busy and organised the polishing of the silverware. Occasionally, she made brave efforts at starting conversation, but it always petered out into silence again. As it usually did at difficult times. Heavy silence, followed by the terrible clamour of everyone all talking at once.

"How is Jon?" she asked, at length. "I know how much he loves his sisters."

"He's been given dreamwine and sent to bed," she answered. "He should be fast asleep by now."

She hoped he was. He was exhausted from the melee and the after-party to celebrate his win, when he found Sansa's rooms empty. Then, despite his exhaustion, he had organised the early search of the Tower of the Hand. He wanted to do more, until Lord Stark convinced him to rest, much to Lyanna's relief. Had he gone on any longer, he would have made himself sick.

"Your grace, forgive my asking, but what's with the rose?" asked Margaery, nervously as if she were overstepping a boundary. "Why is it significant?"

Lyanna raised a pallid smile and motioned for her to sit at the table. When she did, Lyanna poured them both a glass of wine and joined her.

"For many years, House Stark has supported and often fought alongside the brothers of the Night's Watch," she began. "Well, many years ago, there was a King Beyond the Wall known as Bael the Bard. The Lord Stark of the day, one of our many Brandons, called Bael a coward. To prove he was no coward, Bael thought it would be a jolly jape to sneak into Winterfell using the name Sygerrik of Skagos. Sygerrik means 'deception' in the Old Tongue. Anyway, once inside the halls of Winterfell, Bael sang until midnight and old Brandon was so taken with his talents, he asked Bael to name his own reward. To which, Bael replied that all he wanted was the most beautiful flower in all of Winterfell. At the time, the blue winter roses were just beginning to bloom, so Lord Brandon plucked one of them and gave it to Bael.

Come the morn, however, Lord Brandon awoke to find his daughter missing and only a single blue rose had been placed in her bed. The Night's Watch searched beyond the wall for them, but they were never found. Time passed, until Brandon was old and frail, and the Stark line was teetering on the brink of extinction. Out of the blue, the girl was back in her room, suckling a babe at her breast. It turns out, she hadn't left Winterfell at all. She had been down in the crypts all that time."

The story concluded and Margaery was silent as she digested it. "I've never heard that story before."

"It's not all that common in the North, either. We know it, but the Starks mislike it. No noble House wants to admit they have wildling blood in their veins. And the story ends when the baby grows up to become Lord of Winterfell, and meets his father in battle at the Frozen Ford. Bael chose to die, rather than hurt his own son."

"But the girl never left Winterfell," said Margaery. "If whoever took Sansa is replicating the story, then she's somewhere in the vaults."

Lyanna laughed drily. "They're not replicating the story. They're taunting us. Someone left a blue rose on my pillow when we were in Winterfell, which makes me wonder if the person who did that is the same person who took Sansa. But I have only speculation and no proof." She fell silent as contemplation took over. "Many years ago, another man gave me a laurel of blue winter roses after a tourney… but that was a very long time ago, and that man is no longer here."

Margaery's expression softened as she set down her glass. "I think I can guess of whom you speak, your grace."
"It's a trap," said Lyanna, heedless of what her hand maid had just said. "Sansa is being used to lure us into a trap. I can feel it. It's just like the last time."

Only, that was an abduction that never actually happened. Lyanna had the presence of mind to leave that thought unspoken. But she couldn't escape the parallels. The tourney had ended, the roses given out … the girl stolen. Only this time, the girl was far too well behaved to have gone of her own free will. Sansa would never even dream of it.

"A trap, your grace?" asked Margaery, seeking clarity. "Do you think it might be the Targaryens? Viserys Targaryen would be about Rhaegar's age now, wouldn't he?"

"No, they're in exile and last seen traversing the Dothraki Sea," she said. "They're penniless. They just wouldn't have the means. Although, I have been told Viserys is as mad as his father. And Sansa's dragon egg was left behind. Anyone acting on Targaryen orders would have known to take it."

"That's true," Margaery concurred. "And no one's tried to take the two you're looking after?"

"No, I saw them still in the chest just this morning," she said. "The truth is, someone could have done this thinking to make it look like the Targaryens. It's the sort of madcap scheme Lysa Arryn would cook up, given her recent behaviour. But why Sansa? That's her niece. No, we're being lured into a trap. Whoever did this, it's not whoever we think it is. I can just feel that this is something no one's seen coming."

Margaery was thoughtful again, sipping her wine and frowning at it in turn. "Only someone who knows the castle well could have taken Sansa, though. They didn't use the windows, they're too high off the ground. She's on the sixth floor, isn't she? They couldn't have taken her through the door, because Lord Stark's household guard patrol the Tower of the Hand all night. So, how did they even get her out of the room?"

In all the confusion, Lyanna hadn't even considered that. "If Sansa was snatched as soon as she walked through the door, then it would have been six hours later that Jon found the room empty. Six hours! If she isn't somewhere in this castle, she could be miles away."

"But there were hundreds of people all over castle at midnight, your grace," Margaery pointed out. "The feast was still in full swing in the throne room, with the hedge knights feasting outside. Someone must have seen something."

In frustration, she sighed and ran her hands through her hair. "Seven hells, Margaery, it's like the girl's just vanished into thin air!"

Still groggy from the dreamwine, Jon inched open Sansa's chamber door and found it just the same. Someone had put the dragon egg back in the hearth, but the fire hadn't been lit. There was no hope of her hatching tonight, he thought to himself. The rose was still in the bed, wilting now so that the edges of the petals were turning black. The smell was sweeter and more cloying as decay set in.

Before reaching the metal grid in the wall, he turned to look back at Arya in the doorway. Ser Barristan was with her now, so she would be safe. Besides, if anyone tried to snatch Arya, he knew she would spit in their face and claw out their eyes. Whoever did this knew well which of the Stark girls to go for. To help, she brought over a chair so he would have a leg up.

"Sansa said she heard rats in the walls," said Arya. "I bet there weren't rats at all."

Ser Barristan entered the room along with her, casting a wary look around. "And there are supposed
to be secret passages running through the whole castle. Maegor the Cruel put them there."

"And then he killed all the workmen who built them," Arya continued the story. "You might find their bones, Jon. If Sansa's trapped in there, she won't like being around all them bones."

"Thanks, Arya," he stated. "A way to calm the nerves, that is."

"Don't worry, if you're not back in an hour we'll call for help, won't we?" said Ser Barristan, looking down at Arya.

"I'll go in after him!" she said, firmly. Then she reached for a bag she'd brought with her and stretched up to her tiptoes to hand it to Jon. "If you find Sansa in there, give her this. There's a bottle of water in case she's thirsty and some lemon cakes, because she won't have eaten anything. They're her favourite."

Jon took the bag but couldn't bring himself to admit Sansa was the last person he expected to find in there. He just couldn't. He couldn't even bring himself to try and temper Arya's expectations. And it hurt him to know he was only going to disappoint her.

"I'll do my best, little sister." He couldn't reach to muss up her hair.

The grill covering the vent came away easily and he passed it down to Ser Barristan. Then he saw the real entrance. It was a false wall, an overhanging oak panel that covered a great secret entrance into the wall itself. It was bolted shut from inside, but all Jon had to do was reach in through the hole disguised as a vent and work the bolt downwards. Ser Barristan wasn't quick enough to catch the falling panel and it hit the floor with a crack, splitting the wood.

Arya squealed when she saw the secret entrance. Even Ser Barristan, who had lived most of his life at the Red Keep looked shocked. But Jon could see it wasn't the sort of thing anyone would notice unless they knew what they were looking for.

"Wait here," he said. "I'm going to see where it leads."

He pulled himself up into the hidden tunnel, forgetting Arya's snacks. Although it was much larger than he thought it would be, it was still only a crawl space and nowhere near large enough for him to stand up in. So he belly crawled for what felt like miles, until he reached a sharp drop off, where the floor ended. Once his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he could see metal rungs built into the interior of the wall. He climbed carefully, suspecting he was ascending to his own chambers. A sinking feeling hit the pit of his belly as it dawned on him that each and every room in the Tower of the Hand had these secret tunnels leading into them and that they were all disguised as air vents.

He found another crawl space and followed it, until he reached another metal grid, the same as the one he pulled out of Sansa's room. It came as no surprise when he found himself looking into his own bedchamber. Ghost was in his room, standing up against the wall and glaring out of the window. He could see everything, from the bed to the chamber pot and the behind the screen where he sometimes bathed.

Another climb up a metal rung ladder, another crawlspace. It was his father's bedroom. He could see Lady Stark asleep in bed, a Maester was nearby, talking in low tones about dosages of dreamwine and how much it was safe to give her. He moved on, to where the crawlspace split as it followed the separate rooms used by the Hand of the King. Eventually, after much crawling and grazed elbows, he found his father sitting in his solar. He was sobbing, Jon realised. After a second, Lord Stark got to his feet and wrapped his arms around Lady. The poor wolf had been inconsolable.
"Father!" Jon hissed.

Eddard gasped in fright, looking all around him but not upwards.

"Father, in the wall vent!"

Pale with shock, Eddard looked up and swore as he pulled off the grill. Just like Sansa's it came away with minimal resistance. Jon was able to crawl out and let himself drop to the floor after a little careful manoeuvring. If someone did this a lot, they could get around much faster than him and much more smoothly.

"Seven hells, where did you come from?" asked Eddard, still pale.

"Sansa's room," he said, brushing the dirt and dust from his clothes. "They're all connected. Each room. I could see and hear everything in there."

Eddard hopped up on to his desk and stuck his head into the crawlspace, looking around. He swore again, white in the face as he recalled all the times they discussed their secrets in these rooms, in front of those hidden rat tunnels.

"So that's how they got past the guards," he murmured. "That's how they snatched Sansa?"

Jon nodded. "I don't know where the tunnel leads at ground level, though. I only came upwards, to see where they led."

"Rats, indeed," said Lord Stark, looking up into the darkness of the hidden tunnel. "Gods, I'll see every damn one of them sealed before I'm done."

"I want to see if I can work out how they got her out of the castle," said Jon. "I'll come back up the conventional way and report back."

Before letting him go, Eddard lay a hand on Jon's shoulder. "Just you be careful, all right? Bring this with you."

He handed Jon a dagger with a dragonbone hilt and a Valyrian steel blade. A pretty object, indeed. But it would come in useful if he ran into any rats during his climb.

Once on his way, Jon inched himself out of the crawlspace and on to the ladder again. He thought about what he was doing for a moment. This ladder ran the length of the Tower itself, and he was currently at the top of it. In the darkness, just below him, he became aware of a drop of several hundred feet and it made his stomach heave.

Carefully, rung by rung, he made his way downwards. His hands were sweating, his skin blistered and raw where it was rubbing against ancient iron. And it seemed to last forever. After what felt an age, he reached the bottom and almost fainted with relief. But it was another crawlspace. Once more on his hands and knees, Jon crawled another endless mile. On and on, until he figured this tunnel was taking him out beyond the castle walls.

When light finally appeared, he picked up his pace and crawled as fast as he could. Emerging, eventually, into a cool, dusky evening overlooking a sea inlet. Hot, sore and still sweating profusely, Jon had to take a moment to gather himself. That ladder went way below the Tower of the Hand, even below the Dragonvault itself. Then the tunnel at the bottom had brought him clean out of the castle. He looked back, to where the red curtain walls loomed over him several hundred feet away.

Ahead of him was a path leading down to a small inlet. Just the sea and no beach to be seen. As soon
as he had his breath back, Jon followed the path and descended some steps that led down the steep, stony cliff face. He went as far as he could, until he reached a small harbour where a little row boat could dock. But there was nothing there now and all he could hear was the crash of the waves and the swells of the iron-grey seas below.

This must have been it. This must have been where Sansa was stolen away without anyone seeing a thing. She must have been forced, at knife point, down that ladder. It made him sick to think how terrified she must have been. How alone, how vulnerable she was. It had scared the wits out of him, and he had done all this out of his own free will. One small mercy was that he hadn't found her broken body down there. She hadn't fallen off that ladder. There was no blood, so she must have made it.

It was on the way back that he found a strip of pale grey silk snagged on some wire. Pale grey, trimmed with white. The colours of House Stark. He stopped and unpicked it, realising it had been wound around the wire deliberately. Had Sansa had the wherewithal to place it there, while her abductors weren't looking, hoping someone would find it? It was her favour, that was meant to be given to Prince Trystane, only he didn't compete so she kept it.

Whatever else it was, it was confirmation that Sansa was gone. By now, she would be long gone and could be on her way to anywhere in the known world. Jon drew a deep breath, gathered what was left of his energy, and ran all the way back to the castle and straight up to his father's rooms. He found Arya and Ser Barristan there, too. Despite the dreamwine, Catelyn had also awoken and was now stalking the rooms like a caged lion. She stopped abruptly when Jon entered and he explained everything, showing them the scrap of silk he found tangled on the rusted wire fence.

Lord Stark was silent for a long time as he wound the silk favour between his fingers. The colour had drained from his face.

"Vayon," he said, addressing his steward. "Send a raven to Robb right away and instruct him to call our banners. They are to gather at Winterfell and await further instruction."

Catelyn gasped sharply, holding Arya tight. Even Arya was silent now, watching through wide-eyes as her world began to tip itself upside down.

Jon felt his skin crawl with gooseflesh. "Are we to go to war?"

Lord Stark was cautious but resolute. "We are to prepare for war. If they return Sansa to us unharmed, we stand our army down. If they hurt her, we will meet them on the field of battle and tear their armies asunder. Understood?"

It was really quite simple.

Lyanna couldn't sleep so, when the visitor came hammering on her door at past midnight, she did not mind. Anything to distract her from worrying herself sick over Sansa. A worrying that had only increased tenfold since she heard of Jon's long crawl through the guts of the Tower of the Hand. She was half-tempted to burn the Tower to the ground and be done with it, now she knew of how the rats were infiltrating every room.

However, the sight of the messenger was hardly reassuring. He was wet from the rain that had begun to fall and spattered with mud. The golden cloak was soaked.

"Your grace," he panted, gasping each word between laboured breaths. "The body was found at Pisswater Bend-"
"Who?" she cut in, feeling her knees go weak.

"Forgive me, your grace, it's not your niece," he blurted out, realising what he had done.

All the same, Lyanna had to fight the urge to smack him round the head. "Then who?"

"Lord Joffrey of House Lannister, your grace," he said. "Murdered, he was murdered. His throat cut, a knife thrust through his heart."

Lyanna's thoughts flew to Lady Cersei. Joffrey was a shit and there was no use pretending otherwise. But he was Cersei's son. Her firstborn. She staggered backwards, searching for the seat she had just vacated.

"And the culprits? Are they apprehended?"

"Gone, your grace," he said. "All we found was the body."

The implications dawned quickly. If the Lannisters were being blamed for Sansa's disappearance; Joffrey's murder would be blamed on House Stark. Somewhere close by, a trap was slowly closing.
Jon paused on the landing, watching Sansa's closed bedroom door rattle on its hinges as if someone were trying to get out. But it was only the wind blowing through the open window. It caught his eye as soon as he let himself in. Otherwise, the bed was still made and untouched, the rose continued to wilt on the pillow and the net curtain swelled on the breeze, the sheer fabric illuminated by the moonlight slanting into the room. If not for that, the room would have been in full darkness.

He shivered against the cold. A cold made worse by the very absence of life inside the room. Earlier, it looked like Sansa had stepped out for a moment and would be back any minute. Now it felt abandoned. The smell of soot from the fire had gone, underscoring his sister's continued absence. It hadn't been lit, since no one expected her return any time soon. He dropped to his knees and looked under the bed, where the dragon egg lay forgotten.

Once he had retrieved it, he knelt on the Myrish rug in front of the dead fire and held it cupped in both hands. It was as cold as ice. So cold, it almost burned. He took off his own coat and wrapped the egg up in, before returning to his own rooms with Ghost back at his heels.

By their very nature, the Silent Sisters were an ominous presence. They materialised after battles and vied with the carrion crows for access to the dead. They tended the mortally wounded and watched over them as they drew their last breath. Their natural place was kneeling beside deathbeds throughout the land. Always silent and ever present, these servants of the Stranger were never exactly welcome amongst polite society.

Now Lyanna watched them in the cold dawn light filtering through the windows, as they dressed the corpse of a thirteen-year-old boy. And that was all Joffrey was at that moment. A dead child. Yes, he'd always struck her as an objectionable shit. Many thirteen-year-old Lords in waiting were objectionable shits, in her wide experience of them. Whatever he was, whatever had happened, death had now transformed Joffrey Lannister into a corpse like other.

The wound at the boy's throat had been closed, giving his neck a peculiar red smile. The stab wounds in his chest had been hidden beneath a gold brocade doublet. The sisters had done their work well and she and Eddard thanked them for it as they passed.

"Well, there's no denying it now, brother," she said, her eyes slowly travelling the length of the boy's body. "It's him."

"No," he concurred. "It's our response to it that matters and bringing him here was a good start."

Lyanna shifted her gaze from the body to the great Sept of Baelor. The early morning light shone through the seven-pointed star, falling on the corpse and bathing it in the first rays of dawn.

"It won't be enough for Cersei, of course," she admitted. "But anymore and it will look like we're acting out of a guilty conscience." Lyanna paused, framing her next words carefully. "The thing is, Ned, I don't suppose it could have been one of our household-"

"Of course, it wasn't," he curtly answered. "I would never sanction the killing of a child. You of all people should know that."

"That's not what I mean, and well you know it," she said, sharply. "Anything could have happened. Young retainers and squires often are rash and hot-headed. What if a fight broke out between one of
them and Joffrey, and things got out of hand? Your orders and your wishes would have gone out of
the window the instant things turned ugly."

A brawl after a few drinks, a few hasty words spoken in anger after the abduction of Lady Sansa.
Accusations had been flying, Lyanna heard it herself, and they had been flying mostly at the
Lannisters. The gods knew that Joffrey was rash and foolish enough to rise to such bait. Added to
that, the boy's body was found in Pisswater Bend, where most of the taverns and inns were located.
Throwing drink into the mix, the situation would have been incendiary. It was something she
couldn't rule out and, by the look on Ned's face, neither could he.

"If it was one of mine," he said. "I'll have their heads."

"See that you do," she advised. "And deliver said heads to Cersei on a golden platter."

Ned paled, his jaw clenched tight. He clearly hadn't slept since Sansa's abduction and now this. A
murder that would be laid at the doorstep of House Stark. Well, Lyanna surmised, staring at the
corpse wouldn't make it live again. So, she placed on hand on the front of her brother's tunic, politely
drawing him away from the body.

"Come. We should go before the Lannisters get here. The High Septon will stay with the body."

Eddard replied with a barely perceptible nod of the head. But they were a fraction of a second too
late. As they turned, the doors of the sept opened, revealing Cersei Lannister clad in black. A fine,
sheer veil shrouded her face, but the golden curls were visible beneath it. Even the flash of her
emerald eyes, glittering with tears the veil didn't quite disguise.

Without hesitation, Lyanna approached the grieving mother and put one hand on her arm. "Our
condolences, Lady-"

"Why are you here?" Cersei's voice was brittle, her body tensing beneath the Queen's touch.

It was a valid question.

"We were alerted to the murder," Lyanna explained, hurriedly. "The Hand of the King and I, we
needed to be sure of the victim's identity."

"Well, now you know."

"Now we know," Eddard concurred, monotone.

Cersei made it sound as they'd come here for something to gossip about later on. In no mood to
correct her, Lyanna moved on with Ned in tow. Outside the sept, they made their way through the
silent Lannister guard that had escorted Cersei. They lowered their heads as the Queen passed, but
that was a token gesture. Had Ned been alone, Lyanna couldn't help but feel he'd have been spat at.
The tension was palpable.

Back at the Red Keep, they went their separate ways. Jon and Arya would be up soon, so Ned went
to break his fast with them. Meanwhile, Lyanna returned to Maegor's, where Robert still slept and
Varys lurked in her outer chamber. She beckoned to him to follow her inside.

"Well, anything?" she asked without preamble.

"Terrible business, your grace," he said, sliding his hands up his dagged sleeves. This one never
showed his hand. "Alas, I have nothing-"
"Varys, you're our spymaster, yet it was my fourteen-year-old nephew who discovered the means by which my niece was taken from her rooms," she cut in. "It's your job, is it not, to know about these plots before they even happen. You used to be quite good at it, if Harrenhal was anything to go by."

He looked puzzled. "Harrenhal, your grace?"

"The slightest whiff of a conspiracy against the Mad King and you had your little birds all over that place," she sharply reminded him. "And I suspect you well know what I'm referring to. Yet, the most heinous of acts against one of this realm's most eligible ladies quite eludes you."

Varys breathed deeply, arranging his face into a mask of understanding. "Plots against the Mad King were easily detected, your grace. Frankly, he was so awful that every man and his dog was trying to unseat him. Lady Sansa, on the other hand … who could ever have imagined anyone wanting to hurt such an innocent?"

Smooth, Lyanna thought to herself. She had to give him that. The fact of the matter was that he was right.

"Even your dear husband knew Aerys had to go," he continued, looking her dead in the eye. Something about the way he said it, the emphasis on 'dear husband', she deeply misliked.

"My dear husband's rebellion speaks for itself," she replied, tonelessly. "He wouldn't have done it had he not realised Aerys was running the realm into the ground. Now, returning to my niece…"

"Of course, let the past stay in the past, I say," he said. "I hear Lord Baelish set sail for the Eyrie on the same night Lady Sansa was snatched away. His mission at the Eyrie is most mysterious—"

"He went on orders of Sansa's own mother," she cut in, suspecting he well knew the truth of that too. "And Lysa is Sansa's aunt. She would not harm her. All she has to do is summon Sansa to the Eyrie and Catelyn would be happy to agree."

"Then, of course, there is the Lannisters. Sansa spurned Joffrey on several occasions," he continued. "I saw them together during the Hand's Tourney, where the lady was enjoying a puppet show depicting the Blackfire Rebellions. Joffrey threatened her and I had to intervene myself, to ensure Sansa's escape."

"But it wasn't Joffrey, was it?" she retorted. "He's lying dead on a slab in the Sept of Baelor."

Varys made a face, as if someone had accidentally cocked up a recipe or dropped something valuable. "Oh yes, that. Well, it could have been one of his henchmen who took the girl. That creature with the burned face, perhaps. He does Joffrey's bidding. Gregor Clegane's brother, too. You know as well as I what a deeply unpleasant man Gregor is. I doubt the brother is much different."

She knew the man Varys meant. Sandor Clegane was hard to miss, with his twisted features and heavy scarring. However, she was far from convinced. It felt too much like pointing to the ugly one in a story and saying 'he did it' on the basis of looks alone.

"Speaking of the murder, I don't suppose you have anything on that either?" she asked.

"Reports suggest a drunken brawl, your grace," he said. "But it's early yet. I must speak with my contacts to see if they know more."

"Be quick about it," she urged. "And that will be all for now."
He inclined his head in a show of deference. "Before I do leave you, his grace wanted to make it known to you that he's convening a special meeting of the Small Council. Lady Lannister and her brother have been invited and you will be expected, too."

Once he was gone, she let herself into her own chambers where her dog was asleep on her bed. At least someone was happy. Margaery was awake too. A breakfast tray had been left out, the bacon eaten already. She looked again at the sleeping dog and put two and two together. Not all mysteries were headache inducing.

Unable to rest, she left her chambers and found Jaime Lannister guarding her door. Seemingly back in the King's favour after the attack on Lady, she was still surprised to find him there and not in the Sept of Baelor.

"Joffrey's body has been taken to the Great Sept," she informed him, foregoing the usual condolences.

"I know."

His face remained impassive.

"I thought you might like to go."

"Whatever for?"

"Because he was your … nephew," she answered. "A much beloved nephew, if I hear it right."

"You shouldn't listen to all you hear."

Lyanna sighed heavily. "Seven hells, Jaime, I'm not judging you. We all love our nephews so go and be with yours."

Still he hesitated, turning to look at her properly for a moment. Just then, there was a charge of understanding between them in which nothing more needed to be said.

"I'll send for Ser Meryn to guard your door, your grace."

"Aren't I the lucky one."

Before departing, Ser Jaime looked back at her. "Thank you, your grace," he said, at length.

She nodded, waving him away. It's nothing, she thought to herself. It really was nothing.

Tension was high in the council chamber. Jon could hear angry voices emanating from within, where he stood waiting in the outer-chamber. Over them all, the King bellowed for order, but it sounded like no one was listening. Least of all Cersei Lannister, who was still all but accusing Lyanna of murder. He heard his father strike back angrily, accusing the Lannisters of trying to kill Sansa's wolf. He had to admit, if it wasn't them then the timing of that incident was most unfortunate for the Lannisters.

While he pretended he wasn't listening, he looked out of the window and tried to distract himself with the boats now sailing freely out of Blackwater Bay. The busy port had been in lockdown while every ship was searched. But Petyr Baelish had managed to get away before the closure. Something that hadn't escaped Jon's attention.

Just as he mulled over that salient point, the noise rose sharply and he could suddenly hear every
sound within the council chamber. Someone had opened the doors, but they closed again as the escapee came walking into the outer-chamber. Or rather, waddling. Tyrion Lannister's legs were uneven, giving him quite an unusual gait. Again, Jon tried not to notice. Only, it was out of propriety rather than not wanting to be an eavesdropper.

The two of them looked at each other for a moment, as if neither expected the other to be there. Jon supposed he ought not to be talking to the man. But right then, at that moment, it was the two of them alone in an ante-chamber looked over by two stony-faced Kingsguard. For now, he really didn't see the harm in it. He might even get something useful from the man.

"Sounds like it's getting heated in there," said Jon.

"Heated," the dwarf repeated. "That's one word for it."

He closed the gap between them and sat beside Jon in the window seat, overlooking the Blackwater.

"I hear you've called your banners," said Jon. "Is it true?"

"I haven't called anyone," Tyrion corrected him. "My father has called our banners, though. His heir was murdered, here in King's Landing. I'm sure you can understand that whoever committed this act, it will be taken as an act of war against our House."

"And I'm sure you can understand House Stark feels the same about the abduction of Lady Sansa," he replied.

"Naturally."

There was an air of finality in the dwarf's reply. An almost tacit understanding that, soon, there would be an open war and they would both be on different sides of it.

"I don't think the Lannisters took Sansa," he said.

"And I don't think you killed Joffrey," said Tyrion.

"Me?" Jon's heart palpitated at the accusation. "You mean, me personally."

"My sister noticed you were out of the castle at roughly the same time Joffrey was killed," Tyrion explained quite matter of fact. "In her eyes, that's as good a conviction anyone needs right now. But I'm sure she'll calm down soon enough and find a way to blame me."

"I thought she was blaming Lyanna?"

"Oh no. She's accusing your aunt of arranging the death of Gregor Clegane. You understand, as well, that his death in the tourney now looks highly suspicious. And Gregor is one of House Lannister's sworn bannermen."

The thing that made it chilling is that it wasn't too far off the truth. Lyanna had brought Clegane here on the understanding that Oberyn Martell could have a shot at justice for Elia. No one could have foreseen Joffrey's murder, which only made it look even more suspect. Lest his silence betray the truth of the matter, Jon said the first thing that came into his head.

"I didn't realise he had died. I saw what happened, and Clegane walked away from Oberyn's attack. Then he was being treated by the Maesters. Maybe he had a medical condition?"

"Cersei might be borderline insane, but she's not stupid. She recalls the Queen asking her if Clegane
would be taking part in the tourney – as if making sure he'd be there, at the Viper's disposal." Tyrion paused while he regarded Jon casually through his mismatched eyes. "Don't get me wrong, Lord Stark, if I'd had my way, Gregor Clegane would have died by the inch in a public parade witnessed by all who have suffered at his hands. You know, I suppose, about Elia and the children."

Jon nodded. "Of course. Everyone knows."

"Indeed. Everyone knows about poor, tragic Elia and the babes torn from her breast. Fewer people know about the Mountain's parents, or his wives, or his brother, or his sister who also died in very suspicious circumstances. On his lands, it's said that even the dogs fear to enter Clegane's halls. The world is safer, without him in it.

The point I'm getting at, Lord Stark, is that nothing happens in isolation. Everything is in context. Now Gregor's death is being seen in the context of Joffrey's murder. Which is being seen in the context of Sansa's abduction, which was seen in the context of an attack on her beloved pet wolf. All these events are being linked together on the basis of nothing more than proximity in time – such as your own being out of the castle. Proximity in time is one thing, evidence is something completely different.

Now House Stark has called their banners. House Lannister has felt obliged to answer the challenge and also called their banners. On the basis of what? On events being tenuously linked together. At a time when cool heads are most needed, they're in there completely losing theirs."

He gestured toward the now closed door of the council chamber. It wasn't a proper meeting of the Small Council. Half the people in there weren't on the Small Council, like Cersei and Tyrion. But Robert had herded them altogether to discuss recent events. Or rather, shout the odds at each other in a bid to make themselves heard over the sound of rising tension.

"So, what are you saying, Lord Tyrion?" asked Jon. "That we should sit by while Sansa is out there somewhere, being held against her will. We should just sit and wait, and do nothing to help her. That's out of the question."

Tyrion sighed impatiently. "Sam Tarly told me you were clever! Well, let me put it this way: what would your father do if Balon Greyjoy took up arms against the King?"

Puzzled by the seemingly unrelated question, Jon frowned. But it dawned on him then, and it made his skin crawl. "Balon's son is a hostage at Winterfell. Father would have to execute him to stay Balon's hand."

"Precisely," Tyrion replied. "Whoever has Sansa is using her as a hostage. Why else steal away a highborn eldest daughter of one of the most powerful men in the realm? Whoever has her, needs her."

"But who? And what for?" Jon asked, growing desperate in the face of some uncomfortable scenarios. "Lysa Arryn has been spreading lies about my aunt and some others-"

"Some others include the Lannisters," Tyrion pointed out. "And Stannis Baratheon. Olenna Tyrell mentioned she heard from Lysa that Stannis was provoking trouble with her son, Lord Mace. Old enemies, you see. It's as if someone wants us all to be at each other's throats."

"But why would Lysa want war?" Jon thought he was getting the situation sussed, but then it all stopped making sense again. "Lysa is Sansa's aunt. She would not go to war against her own sister."

Tyrion laughed. "You clearly don't know Lysa Arryn. Or Petyr Baelish."
Something else occurred to Jon then. "Sansa has been taken alive, but Joffrey is dead. Assuming the same person is responsible for both, why didn't they take Joffrey?"

"Ah, now we get there," said Tyrion. "They want the Starks crippled, it seems. But they want the Lannisters free to fight. I'll be honest, I don't know why they did that. Maybe they realised what an insufferable shit Joff was and realised he wasn't worth the trouble."

"So, it could be a distraction," Jon posited. "The Starks and the Lannisters are slugging it out, with the crown and other great houses stuck in the middle. While that's happening, Lysa makes some move with Sansa as her hostage."

"Possibly," Tyrion concurred. "With Petyr Baelish pulling her strings, anything could happen. Cersei cannot stand him, but I don't know him all that well. Varys, however, informs me he quite the entertaining plaything. And it's not like Varys to underestimate someone."

"But, Petyr left the night Sansa vanished, I saw him following her," he recalled. "What if he's taken her somewhere else, not the Eyrie. Somewhere farther away."

There was a natural break in their conversation, during which Jon could hear the muffled accusations still flying in the council chamber. Seconds later, the doors flew open again and Renly Baratheon came striding out with Loras Tyrell on his heels. Renly slowed at the sight of Jon and Tyrion, his eyes narrowed at both of them.

"I am to return to Storm's End," he declared. "King's orders. I am to call our banners. It seems we shall meet again on the battlefield, Lord Lannister."

Tyrion snorted derisively. "You won't be seeing me on any battlefield."

But the other two had already gone, leaving them alone again. They were all making ready for war, but no one even knew who they were fighting. Not yet. And let alone the reasons why. The day before, he would have been the first with his sword in his hands. A day made a big difference.

Cersei Lannister was out next. She didn't speak a word to her brother, but Tyrion made ready to follow her anyway. Before he left, he turned to Jon one final time. "Our families are at war. But you and I are not. I trust we can speak again."

Jon nodded. "Yes, why not?"

With a filial nod, Tyrion make a good show of running after his sister. But Jon wasn't alone for long before Lyanna, his father and King Robert appeared. The Queen was pale, but King Robert was in a towering anger and bellowing at his father as if he was ten miles away. "Tywin's been picking a war with us for the last thirteen years and by gods, if that's what he wants that's what he'll damn well get…"

Lyanna gestured for him to follow. Her face pale and drawn. She had the look of a woman with a slowly tightening noose around her neck. Jon shared the sentiment.

The galley rocked with the motion of the iron grey seas, making Sansa's stomach heave again. Before she could stop herself, a bitter and foul fluid hit the back of her throat and she was sick into a chamber pot beneath her bunk. She had cried so much she had no more tears left. But the sickness just kept on coming. Sickness, and the chilling, eviscerating fear that rendered her mute and left her shaking in her little cabin.

The last clear memory she had, she'd closed her chamber door only for a man to appear from behind.
He clapped a hand over her mouth to muffle any scream. Then she felt the sharp blade digging into her throat and a warm trickle of blood leaking down her throat. Everything after that was a whirlwind of fear and confusion, a blur of movement. She was pulled through a hole in her wall, down a long iron rung ladder that left her hands bleeding and blistered. After that, a small rowboat. The same two men rowed her to a large galley, where she was blindfolded and gagged before being hoisted aboard the larger ship.

All her screams were choked inside her as she was marched, still gagged and blindfolded, into a cabin. Three days later, she still hadn't left it. But she knew the two men had gone already. She heard them rowing away as soon as she was onboard the galley. After that, she'd had nothing to do except abandon herself to fear, grief and tears. And seasickness.

Even though she was on a ship in the middle of the sea, she searched for a way to escape – it occupied her mind, if nothing else. One man checked on her, bringing food and water. Occasionally, he paused by the door, looking back at her as if he wished to speak and then thought better of it. Not wanting to anger her captor, she held her own silence. If she spoke at all, she asked only where they were taking her and for what purpose. All her questions were met with silence. She willed herself to be calm and work things out when they got to where they were going. Even though the voyage had lasted days, they couldn't keep aimlessly sailing forever. They had to be going somewhere. They had to dock eventually.

On that one front, she had been right. The motion of the ship steadied, smoothing out as they neared land. With no window in her cabin, she couldn't see what that land looked like, but she could hear the sailors above shouting to each other. Coarse commands to lower sails and drop anchor. Sansa couldn't decide whether she ought to be more afraid now or relieved that the voyage to hell was over.

The knock at her cabin door made her gasp. But it was only her silent captor. As always, they looked at each other in silence for a moment, as if daring each other to speak. And, on this occasion, he did.

"Lady Sansa," he said, apologetically. "My Lady, we've arrived."

"Arrived where?" she asked, her voice hoarse and weak. "What for? What do you want from me?"

The man hesitated and she thought he was about to walk away again. Instead, he checked over his shoulder and then came to sit beside her on the bunk. He frowned, bringing out the crow's feet around his pale blue eyes.

"I don't think this will rank as my finest hour," he said, sadly. "But, I hope one day you will understand."

Sansa hesitated, still studying the man's profile. He can't have been that much older than her father, no more than his middling forties. Something suggested he was not as old as he looked, however.

"Will I still be alive to understand?"

"Oh, yes," he replied, turning to look her in the eye. "No one wants to hurt you. Don't be afraid."

"It is hard for a person to not be afraid when they're stolen from their families in the middle of the night," she pointed out. "And without so much as an explanation … it leaves a lot to the imagination, ser."

"Yes, I can imagine," he answered. "And I wanted to talk to you sooner, only I am not so very good at talking with young, gently-born ladies."

That much was evident. From what she could tell, he was Westerosi. But he wore no house sigil or
colours. His beard was red peppered with grey, his hair was grey as well but had a strange bluish tinge to it. It looked like it had been dyed at some point.

"Ser, I am no good for working on your ships," she pointed out. "I have no idea of how to navigate seas, or mend rigging or pull an oar-"

"That's not why you're here, my lady," he cut in. "Your role is far more important than that. More than you can understand, for now."

Sansa continued as if he had said nothing. "My father is one of the most powerful lords in the realm. By now, he will know I am missing and he will call his banners. All hell will break loose, people will die. Please, let me go before anything terrible happens. Please."

"I can't do that," he replied, sorrowfully. "Had it been up to me, I would never have dishonoured myself in this way-"

"Then save what's left of your honour and command the captain to bring me home," she cut in, more bravely than she felt.

"I have my orders," he stammered.

Sansa paused, formulating an idea of how to end this farce. Something that would provide the man with an escape route. "If you sail me home, you can just leave me on that small harbour. When I return to the castle, I will tell my father I went away of my own free will. I won't mention you, or your ship. The fault will be all mine and we will never hear from each other again."

He was looking her in the eye again, his expression suddenly resolute. "We will see each other again, my lady. In the wars to come. And if I let you go now, you will be on the wrong side of those wars."

"What do you mean?" she asked, her skin beginning to crawl. "Do you mean to start a war? What else have you done?"

Even if she couldn't escape, she knew she had to get a message to her father or Jon, or even Robb still in Winterfell. She tried to stay calm and if she panicked too much now her head would be in too much of a whirl. Stay calm and figure it out, she urged herself, make sense of it all first. But the thought of herself being used as a hostage in some terrible war, like poor Theon was used to cripple Balon, was almost too much for her.

"I cannot answer your questions, but I can introduce you to someone important. Someone who will soon be returning to his homeland and reclaiming what is his by right," the man continued. "The one who will cast down the usurper and the usurper's traitorous whore. If it please you, may I present-"

As he spoke, a second figure appeared in the doorway. A boy of about Robb and Jon's age, perhaps a little older. His hair was blue, making him appear ridiculous. He looked at Sansa and she heard the breath hitch in his throat. He met her gaze and swept a gallant bow to her as the man continued: "may I present Prince Aegon, of House Targaryen."
Bad Company

How many days had it been? Jon found himself wondering, as time seemed to blend, the days merged and he soon lost track. Four, maybe five, days since Sansa was taken and still no one knew anything. No one saw anything. No one even heard anything. Sometimes, he questioned whether she had been taken at all, as it seemed more and more likely she simply dematerialised and vanished in a puff of smoke.

Ser Barristan was spending whole days cooped up in meetings of the small council, discussing the rising tensions between two of the realms largest noble houses. A demand on the old knight's time that saw Jon deprived of his valuable training sessions and cast into a listless torpor of inactivity. Doing nothing overwhelmed him. Worse, he was doing nothing in plain sight of Catelyn Stark under whose eyes his inactivity seemed to magnify.

But this is still a bad idea, he told himself as he let himself into Maegor's Holdfast. A bad idea it may have been, but it was better than doing nothing. While Stannis Baratheon had returned to King's Landing to take up his seat on the Small Council, Lady Melisandre's function was less defined. Had she demanded a place on the council, or even just a formal role at court, both Robert and Lyanna would have laughed her all the way back to Asshai. Therefore, much like himself, she was one of the Red Keep's loose ends, left blowing in the wind.

Yet he remembered what Sansa said to him, that she had brought Lady back from the dead. He couldn't deny what he saw with his own two eyes: Lady was dying, until the priestess did something and then the wolf was as good as new. He didn't particularly wish to knock on the Baratheon door, but he did anyway. He stated his business to the guard on duty, who showed him inside where he was greeted by Lady Shireen, who asked the same questions about Sansa everyone else who saw him asked: Any news? Any clues? After the no to both, the Priestess appeared and didn't bother to ask.

"You're here about your sister," she said. A statement, not a question. "Come."

She led him out of the back, leaving Shireen in the care of the Florent guards that Stannis had brought with him. Up a flight of back stairs and into the Queen's ballroom. Not much of a one for balls and ballroom events, Lyanna neglected the place. It was wide and open, their footsteps echoing on the oak floorboards as they made their way inside. The shutters were closed, blocking most of the light and the air was thick with dust. It felt almost derelict, lending the place a strange kind of decaying beauty.

"Shall I open the windows?" he asked.

But a light flared in the middle of the room, flames rising and taking hold. He didn't see her strike a flint, but there the fire was.

"No need," she assured him.

"No," he concurred. "How did you do that?"

"I didn't," she answered. "R'hllor did."

A brazier had been moved to the middle of the room, one she was clearly using on a regular basis. The metal work frame was all blackened from heat and soot, now being made darker against the orange flames lapping through the lattice work. He had to admit, it was a hypnotic dance the flames
"When you look into the flames, will you see Sansa?" he asked, walking a slow circle around the brazier.

She looked back at him, her features up-lit in orange and red, the ruby pulsing at her throat. The look on her face suggested she was about to disappoint him. "It doesn't work like that. The Lord of Light doesn't give easy answers, only signs that the reader must interpret."

He had set out from the Tower of the Hand knowing this was a longshot. Like consulting soothsayers, or clairvoyants or listening to fairground woodwitches who swore they could foretell the future. He had come to Melisandre with the same scepticism with which he would approach those charlatans. Somehow, he still had a feeling of being let down.

"When you look in there," he said, gesturing to the lapping flames. "How do you know it's not like children looking at the sky and seeing faces in the cloud formations? How do you know its not just an illusion?"

Before answering, Melisandre reached up the dagged sleeve of her gown and withdrew a vial of powder, which she upended into the flames. Jon flinched from the hiss and crackle of the burning substance that made the flames grow whiter, more incandescent. Watching his reaction, the priestess seemed almost amused.

"Again, it's not like that," she said. "Come and see for yourself." She beckoned him over, taking him by the arm. "Look now, and tell me what you see."

Still thoroughly unconvinced, he did as she asked and looked into the heart of the flames. At first, he was aware of only the heat on his face, making his eyes scratchy and dry. It wasn't pleasant. But the powder she had burned was giving off a sharp but soothing scent. It was just enough to let him ignore the unpleasant heat and focus on the images taking shape. It was no flame formation, no face in the clouds. It was a girl with a long, flowing mane of silver hair and striking lilac eyes. She was looking into a burning brazier just as he was, a large black egg in her hands. Just for a second, her gaze met his and he felt like a voyeur.

Startled, he leapt back. "Who was that?"

Melisandre looked up at him, smiling in the knowledge that he had at least seen something. "We won't see the same things. Look again, and ask R'hllor to show you Sansa."

"What? You mean out loud-"

"In your mind will do," she cut in. "Fix her in your mind and look again."

As with before, the images flickered and wavered with the movement of the flames. It was distracting, at first, until he grew used to it. Smoke made the things he was seeing distort and ripple, but he could still make it out.

"A cloth dragon on poles," he said. "The ones you see in Mummer's acts. Black hands. Rotten, I think, like decay. They're manipulating the poles on the cloth dragon-"

"I've seen that, too," she said, almost to herself rather than Jon. "Anything else?"

Jon let the images form of their own volition, narrating them to the priestess as they flickered into life before being snuffed out by the next. A fallen stag collapsed on the ground, blood leaking from its throat. A golden rose was bound in chains, left wilting in the dark. A dying wolf howled in fury,
raging against the onset of death. Jon's heartbeat raced in alarm as dragons exploded from stone prisons, their leathern wings beating at the billowing smoke. Then the girl with the silver hair and lilac eyes was back, the now familiar face soothing him back into a state of placidity.

"That's enough," he said, stepping away from the flames. "It's intriguing, I'll grant you. But that stuff had little and less to do with Sansa."

"How do you know?" she asked. "She could be anywhere, with anyone."

Jon didn't need the painful reminder. "Those things I saw… they aren't even connected to each other, never mind my sister."

"Sometimes, the visions can only be understood in retrospect," she explained. "It's only over time that you learn to read them and interpret R'hllor's will before it comes to be."

"Right," he answered, not really considering what she'd said. "Well, I don't have time to become a disciple of R'hllor. Sansa needs me now. She needed me a week ago, when she was taken."

"I only wanted you to see how it works. Otherwise you wouldn't have believed me. You would have left here thinking I was making faces in the clouds," she pointed out. "And that would have been wasting both our time."

Suddenly abashed, Jon piped down. "Forgive me. Our situation grows desperate. Families fighting and chaos threatening at every turn…"

He had feeling she already understood and let himself trail off.

"I will consult the fires properly overnight," she assured him.

"Overnight. You mean, it takes that long?" If that was the case, he wondered what he'd just seen and why.

"The longer the better," she replied. "Tell me about the dragons you saw hatching."

There was something about her tone, the way she looked at him now, that suggested she was a lot more interested than she was letting on.

Jon shrugged. "One second they were stone, the next they were living creatures. I didn't see how they hatched or who did it. But that girl with the silver hair, I don't know who she is."

He could guess, but he wasn't going to guess in front of Melisandre. At least, not until he grew to know her better and he'd figured out if she was friend or foe.

"To see what you need to see," she explained. "You need to concentrate on what you need to see. Otherwise, you'll see only fragments of a myriad sights the Lord of Light thinks you need to see. The girl you saw, she's relevant to you. You'll meet her one day and it will all become clear."

"Is she definitely alive, then?"

"You wouldn't see her if she was dead."

"Is that why I didn't see Sansa? Because she's already dead-"

"I did not mean to imply that," the priestess cut in. Her tone was patient, like she knew she was, in essence, teaching a cat to dance. "You came to me as a last resort, did you not? You've exhausted your options."
"Perhaps," he replied. "You have to admit, from where I'm standing all this looks unconventional. I've never seen such things before."

Melisandre smiled. "I'll grant you that, my lord."

"Why did you come here?" he asked, finding a seat in one of Lyanna's fancy ballroom chairs. "Pardon me if I am being too familiar, but I'm curious. Why Westeros? They worship the seven here, and the old gods in the North. Both will think you a heretic."

"Will they be still calling me a heretic even when it is me and my god who defeats the Great Other, the enemy of all mankind?"

Jon couldn't help but laugh. "Probably. Besides, I didn't realise the Great Other was in Westeros. It's not Lord Stannis, is it?"

"Now you are mocking me," Melisandre gently chided him. "I came in search of the Prince that was Promised, the visions led me to Stannis."

"Interesting choice," he said.

"It's not a choice, Lord Stark, it is destiny," she said, curtly. "I didn't see Stannis in the fires, only Dragonstone. Inside Dragonstone, I found only Stannis."

Jon looked over at her again, where she continued to consult the fires. Briefly, he wondered what she was seeing. "I think R'hllor is playing tricks on you."

Rather than making her snippy, she smiled and stifled a laugh. "On that we agree, Lord Stark."

"I mean it," said Jon. "Did R'hllor tell you about the regime change? It was Rhaegar Targaryen, Prince of Dragonstone, who uncovered the Prince that was Promised prophecy. It was nought to do with Stannis Baratheon, my lady."

The smile froze on her face, her expression hardening. At first, Jon thought she might be getting prickly, believing him to be teasing her again. But when she spoke, she sounded distant but intense, like she was genuinely realising something for the first time.

"Rhaegar Targaryen," she said, stepping closer to Jon. "He is a relative of the last king?"

"Was," Jon corrected her. "You didn't know, did you? Fourteen years ago, there was a war. Robert overthrew the Targaryens and gave Dragonstone to his brother-"

"Of course, I know that," she cut in. "If Rhaegar had lived, who would be in Dragonstone now."

Jon realised it would be himself, Aegon and Rhaenys. A thought that still made him a little sad. "Rhaegar would be King by now, so his eldest living son would be living at Dragonstone. Aegon. If Aegon is the Prince you're looking for, you're out of luck: he's dead, too. They're all dead. So forget them. I'm sure Stannis is the next best thing."

He got up to leave, ready to make his excuses before the conversation could make him feel even more uncomfortable. But she was thinking aloud, now. At least, that's how it seemed.

"The Lord of Light showed me Dragonstone," she was saying, quietly. "Was he showing me the place the Prince was supposed to be?"

The knock on the door took them both by surprise. Jon's heart almost leapt out of his throat. Then the
fire swayed on the gust of air as the double doors were pushed open, Ser Barristan Selmy giving Melisandre the most suspicious look. See, Jon thought to himself, he thinks she's a heretic.

Finally, the old knight's eyes fell on him. "I've been searching for you everywhere. Come now."

"But I-

"Come on!" he snapped.

Giving Melisandre an apologetic shrug, he ran out after Ser Barristan. After the gloom indoors, the broad afternoon sunlight made him wince.

"Ser Barristan, what's wrong? Have I displeased you?"

Ser Barristan paused, looking back at him and smiling crookedly. "Nothing like it. You just looked in need of an immediate rescue."

"She was quite interesting, to tell it true," he said. "Strange. But interesting."

They were exiting via the front stairs, negating the need to leave through Stannis' apartments. But, once they left Maegor's, they didn't approach the training yard, as Jon thought they would. They headed toward the White Sword Tower, where all the Kingsguard had their lodgings. Ser Barristan motioned for him to follow inside, where he was led up the endless steps that left him dizzy and breathless.

Jon had only been up here once before, when he first got back from Dragonstone. Only vaguely aware of where everything was, he let Barristan lead him into the Lord Commander's study.

"Sit," he commanded. "And close the door behind you."

Jon did as asked. It was a wide and spacious room, all white-washed to reflect the sunlight. But it was sparsely furnished, with plenty of hanging baskets out over the terrace. A pleasant place and quiet with it, giving it an advantage over the Tower of the Hand.

"Your mother wants me guarding you morning, noon and night," said Ser Barristan. "I told her you won't like it, but you can imagine how she reacted to that. What with your sister and all."

"She knows I can look after myself," he stated, irritably. "I have no need of an armoured nursemaid, Ser Barristan."

"Precisely," he agreed, to Jon's relief. "But I have a suggestion. One that might appease your poor mother, as well as reduce the sting of humiliation for you. Squire for me. You'll have to move into the antechamber, in the rooms below mine. You'll have to groom my horse, see to my armour and swords, clean my mail shirts and a myriad other menial tasks-"

"Yes!" Jon cut in without a second's thought. "Yes, I'll do it. When can I start?"

"As soon as you have your father's permission."

A minor problem, Jon thought. Without so much as a by-your-leave, he was up off his arse and back down the stairs in search of his father.
seemingly favourite daughter. An enquiry about the ownership of a herd of cows grazing common land in the Reach from Lord Redwyne to his wife. A clarification of hunting rights in the Wolfswood from Lord Glover to Lady Dustin … Ned paused there. He didn't know Varys had northerners in his pay.

But first, the knock.

"Enter."

"Lady Arya, my lord."

"Show her in, Jory."

But she was already in, peering out from behind the other man's legs. The sight of her brought a rare smile to his face. She came over to him after Jory closed the door behind her, bringing with her a grey, roughspun sack embroidered with the royal coat of arms. It looked like the winner's purse she had gotten for running at rings.

Ned reached out to her and pulled her onto his lap. "What have you got there?"

"Gold," she said. "That I won."

He had guessed correctly, it seemed. "Do you want me to look after it for you?"

"No, it's to get Sansa back," she answered. "Jon said, she won't get hurt because whoever's got her will be looking for a ransom. To pay a ransom you need gold. I have gold."

She dropped the bag on his desk, just as Eddard wrapped his arms tight around her. For a moment, he was speechless. "Oh, sweet child. No, you keep your prize money. The crown will pay the ransom and have no fear of it."

"But if you have more gold, the sooner Sansa will be released," she reasoned.

"That's not how it works, I'm afraid," he said, gently. She was looking at the world through her child's eyes, rationalising it all with her child's logic. "I'm afraid the captors set the price themselves and there's bound to be … other conditions. We cannot make an opening offer, as if Sansa is an object we wish to purchase. I know it leaves us helpless, but that's how it is."

Arya sagged in dismay, crestfallen and pale. "But that's not fair."

It made his heart ache to know he had no answers to give her. More speculation would only confuse her, encouragement would only bring false hope. For all they knew, Sansa was already dead, or dying, or about to be killed. Every and all possibilities worked together to keep him sick with worry and wide awake of a night. Nor was it like other problems, healed by time and patience. The longer this went on, the worse it got.

And, that evening after supper, it seemed to get a little worse again.

"There's something Sansa knows," said Jon. He eased himself into the chair opposite Eddard's desk as carefully as if it might jump up and bite him on the arse at any second.

Eddard felt the cold shadow of dread close over him once more. "Knows?" he repeated.

"She knows, father. She knows about me," Jon continued. "She overheard you and Lyanna talking about it. It was why she was so quiet when we first got here. Don't you remember? I didn't realise
she knew until we left for Dragonstone and she couldn't keep it in any longer."

Ned buried his face in his hands, sighing heavily. "And you didn't think to mention this until now?"

Jon looked down at his lap. "No."

"Does the Queen know?"

"No."

"Well, I will inform her," he said, rising to his feet. "And you're taking your new position as Ser Barristan's squire, are you not?"

"As soon as I get my things to the White Sword Tower," answered Jon.

"You better get a move on, then," Eddard informed him. "If you remember anything else, do inform me right away."

Angry with himself for being so lax, angry with Lyanna for opening her mouth, angry with Jon for not saying anything. He was mostly angry with himself and himself alone. He got up and went to the door, turning his back on Jon's apologies and explanations.

"My Lady, the men who took you also brought this." Lord Connington's hands shook as he proffered one of Sansa's dresses. "I think he just grabbed the first one that came to hand. I-I don't know if it's one you particularly like."

"It's fine," she assured him. "Thank you."

Her courtesies seemed to upset him, as if he'd rather she raked his eyes out and screamed bloody murder. However, she had already resolved that, not matter what they did to her, she would not give them the satisfaction of seeing her tears or her fear. She would conduct herself as she always had: with courtesy and dignity as befitting a lady of her rank.

He left her to dress in privacy. It was a pale blue silk dress, trimmed with cloth of gold, that she had made with the help of her mother. It reminded her of home, of Winterfell and endless hours spent embroidering by the fire and watching her creation take shape, while she dreamed of making her court debut. When she lifted the fabric to her nose, she believed she could still smell the Northern summer snows and the piney scent of the logs burning in the hearths. With all her heart, she wished she was back there now, dreaming of what life was like at court and not stuck on ship that had dropped anchor off some foreign shore called Pentos.

She donned the dress as best she could, but it was hopeless. She needed someone to lace her up at the back. Now free to leave her cabin, she held the bodice in place to cover herself and tried to get Lord Connington's attention. When he realised her predicament, he went to get help. To Sansa's immense relief, it was a woman. A septa, no less.

"Septa Lemore," she introduced herself while lacing the dress. "Are you Eddard's daughter?"

Sansa hesitated, as if it might be a trick question. "Yes."

"Silly question really, given Ben joined the Watch and Bran got himself killed by the mad king," she continued. "And Lyanna's proved to be no great matriarch. That leaves Ned."

Sansa didn't know whether she ought to feel affronted with this total stranger addressing her family
in such familiar terms. But, more than anything, she was curious. "Do you know them?"

"Oh, not really," answered Septa Lemore. "A friend of a friend knew them, shall we say. Your father's a good man who insists on keeping bad company. And I think I'll leave it at that."

Her dress laced and in place, Sansa followed the Septa back on deck. Under different circumstances, Pentos would have been exciting and beautiful. The great harbour was full of ships bound for all over the known world. Braavos was just north of here, Westeros was just across the Narrow Sea. She even saw the Blackbird with its black sails, bound for the Night's Watch. Other ships she saw were Lysene and Myrish. Hitherto places she had only seen in ink on a map. It was almost enough to kindle a sense of adventure inside her.

"Why have we come here?" she asked the septa. "Is this where Aegon lives?"

"Oh no, child," she laughed. "Aegon has no home but Westeros. He's lived his whole life on the run, fleeing from place to place."

"Whatever for?" she asked. "Everyone thinks he's dead. It's not like anyone's looking for him."

"There's always a risk of discovery, which is why we call him Young Griff," said the Septa. "Anyway, we're here so you can stay with Magister Ilyrio for a week or so. Just while we get everything ready."

"Who is he?"

"A fat cheesemonger," she laughed. "Don't worry about him, child. He keeps his dead wife's hands on a cushion in his bedchamber. Dead, blackened and rotten things they are. But, the odd eccentricity aside, he's a sound fellow. On Serra's hands, I swear he'll treat you well!"

With that highly disturbing image in Sansa's head, Septa Lemore went her own way down the deck of the galley. Sansa went the other way, where she could continue to look out over the Pentos harbour. High up a hill, a manse was partially concealed by high walls. Bright white, it stuck out like a swollen thumb against the greenery of the surrounding hills.

The boy who would be king was close by, coiling a rope around the railing of the gunwale. She watched him for a second, taking a long look at his face. While it was true Jon took after the Starks, he must have had some features in common with his real half-brother. But it was impossible to tell from a distance. To remedy that, she marched up to him and said the first thing that came into her head.

"So, you're sailing back to Westeros to reclaim your throne."

He stopped what he was doing and looked at her. "Of course."

His eyes weren't lilac. They were dark blue. Or was that just because of his silly blue hair? Sansa found herself squinting at him, quite unashamedly. "What? Just you, Lord Connington and a Septa. You're going to take on the armies of the seven kingdoms?"

"And you," he pointed out. "Lord Stark wouldn't dare raise his banners against me if I have you. Same goes for Hoster Tully and your aunt Lysa in the Vale. Her husband's dead now, so she better tow the line."

Sansa thought it over in her head for a second. "All right then. You, Lord Connington, the Septa and me: we're all going to defeat the Reach, the Westerlands, the Storm Lands and the Dornish… Oh, I suppose you think the Dornish will come to your aid."
"I know they will. And the Tyrells, too."

"I am betrothed to Prince Trystane," she pointed out, curtly. "And the Tyrells are rising at Robert's court, now. I know Lady Margaery."

Aegon frowned, distracted himself with his rope again and muttered something under his breath. He was tall, for his age. Thin as well. His build was similar to Jon's, but that was as far as it went.

"I have the Golden Company as well, you know," he said. "We're not stupid. They're sailing to Westeros with us, and the usurper will get a pleasant shock when we land. Ten thousand men all on Ilyrio's coin."

"Ten thousand sellswords," she remarked, the corner of her mouth twitching into a smile.

"Whose word is gold."

"Yes, I know their words and what they're supposedly worth. I'll tell you what else I know. They were established by the great bastard, Bittersteel, to seat a Blackfyre on the throne-"

"What are you saying?" he cut in, dark blue eyes narrowing.

"I'm telling you the history of the Golden Company," she said. "Nothing more. But I tell you something else: I am a girl of not yet twelve, educated in the womanly arts of embroidery, dancing, dressmaking and high harp. If I make that connection, so will everyone else."

Aegon sighed heavily, looking out over the gunwale of the ship as if deciding the best way to throw her overboard. But Sansa was past caring. Her courtesies had made her forget her fear and now she was masking her anger. Anger at this silly boy being used as an excuse to tear her from her family for the sake of a war she wanted no part in.

"The Blackfyres are all dead," he huffed, indignantly.

"An unfortunate disposition they share with the Targaryens," she responded. "Every single person in Westeros thinks Prince Aegon died with Princess Elia and his sister. No one has ever disputed it. Do you think all those people are going to believe your story without question? They are not fools."

"They'll have no choice," he insisted. "I'll be on the iron throne-"

"And who will keep you there?" she cut in. "I know little and less of politics, but I know you need the support of the Lords Paramount if you're to keep your throne. It might have been different, if you had dragons. Any man would bend the knee rather than be burned to death."

"You'd know all about that," Aegon interjected. "Your grandfather knelt to mine and you will kneel to me."

Sansa calmed, feeling almost sorry for the boy. "He knelt to the dragons, my lord. As did the whole realm. They all knelt to the dragons."

"There's dragon eggs under Dragonstone," he said, growing ever more defensive. "Everyone knows that. And no one will dispute my claim once I am king."

There were dragon eggs under Dragonstone, she inwardly corrected him. "But first you must prove you are king. You can't do that without proof. And if you think the Lords of Westeros will take the word of a cheesemonger, you're naïve."
"And Lord Varys?" he snapped. "What about him? He did the swap himself."

Varys, she thought, so that was who was behind the whole farce. She remembered when they met in the Dragonvault and he told her about a Lord waiting to come to court. If this was truly who he meant, she wished him well for he would need all the luck he could get.

Even if he got the iron throne, he would never rest easy on it. No one would ever stop questioning who he really was. The Lords may play along for a while. The smallfolk would be happy so long as the harvest comes in, winter is mild and the summers are long. But the slightest upset, the first piece of unpopular legislation he introduces, all the old questions would come up again and again, until he's cast out of the realm with nothing but his small clothes and a tub of blue hair dye.

Sansa wished she could articulate that. She wished she had it in her to tell them the Targaryen – Martell alliance was nullified along with Elia's marriage. But she pitied the boy too much for that. He was too blind to see.
A Change of Plan

Margaery approached the window, the ghost of her reflection distorted by the rippled mullion. But this was not an opportunity for self-appraisal. She plucked a fat, red grape from a vine at her side and bit into flesh as she looked down into the yard below; toward the young man grooming a restive destrier. Showing his aunt's knack of horsemanship, Jon rubbed the space between its eyes, slow and calm. In a world of his own, he didn't seem to notice her even when he did look toward Maegor's Holdfast and his work continued, uninterrupted. All the same, she studied him carefully.

They had been reasonably well acquainted for over a month now. Perhaps two. Yet, Margaery couldn't honestly say she knew him. He was always kind and attentive; once breaching the barrier of his shyness, he knew how to carry a conversation and could even raise a laugh or two. However, there was more to him. She could sense it. A dark side? Possibly. A hidden side? Definitely.

Often, when they spoke, she felt the parts of his personality he revealed to her were diversions or distractions from what he really wanted to show. And, like all hidden things, the magnetic pull of him drew her in, a moth dancing around a flame.

"Do you know much about Lord Stark's son?" She glanced over her shoulder to where her Grandmother read beside the fire.

Lady Olenna raised her eyes from the well-thumbed page. "I cannot imagine what there is to him that's worth knowing. Fourteen of his fifteen years were spent as a bastard growing up in the armpit of nowhere."

With that, Olenna returned to her book. Likewise, Margaery returned her own attention to the scene in the yard below. Jon was still there, brushing out the horse's mane.

"I think you're overly dismissive of him," she opined. "I think there's a lot more to him we're yet to learn."

"Ah, yes. But will it be worth knowing? He's a boy, Margaery. A boy like all the other boys running around court and eking out a name for themselves. The only difference between that one is that he actually shows a little promise." Olenna was quiet for a moment, the only sound was that of her book closing. "Like just about everyone else at court, I currently find the sister far more interesting."

Sansa, like Jon, seemed to conduct herself behind an invisible wall. Her wall was of courtesy and manners, behind which the real person was carefully concealed.

"Who do you suppose has her?" she asked.

"I couldn't even hazard a guess, which makes the problem all the more interesting," Olenna replied.

Jon was leading the horse to water now, one pale hand tugging at the bridle.

"Although we cannot say who has Sansa, I think there's a few we can rule out," she said, plucking another grape from the vine. "The Lannisters, for one."

Olenna chuckled. "And the Tyrells."

"I thought that'd go without saying. But what about the Martells? That conveniently timed marriage contract between Sansa and Prince Trystane could have been nothing more than a ruse to throw the Stark's off the scent. Although, why anyone would make an alliance only to break it is quite beyond
Olenna's laugh was brittle. "Oh, Margaery! For all we know, the Stark girl could have gone running off into the night with some pretty young lordling that caught her eye. I spoke to her, you know. She's got a head full of nonsense when it comes to knights and chivalry and silly stories."

"But Sansa wouldn't do that," she protested. "She's a child, for one. And she wouldn't just leave her family knowing it could come to blows. And it looks to me like it is all about to come to blows. Sansa wouldn't let that happen."

"Would she not? It certainly never troubled her aunt's conscience."

Margaery frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, don't listen to me-"

"No really, I'm curious," Margaery insisted. "The similarities between Sansa and Lyanna's cases did strike me – and Jon is acutely aware of it as well. Both were young maids newly betrothed to powerful lords, both had been attending tourneys and both were taken seemingly in the blink of an eye. The first time ended badly enough, now this is set to do the same. From what you said, about it not troubling Lyanna's conscience, it implies there was something more to the situation."

Olenna was quiet for a moment, her eyes narrowed and holding Margaery's gaze unflinchingly. "It doesn't do to rake up the past, so I'd thank you to not speak of this to anyone beyond this room. But you can't rape the willing, dear. Remember that, the next time you hear of the evil Prince Rhaegar from King Robert's men."

That was interesting, she thought. However, she was completely unconvinced that Sansa had also echoed her aunt by running away with someone of her own free will, sure in the knowledge her family would provide her with a convenient cover story upon her disgraced return. No, something was afoot. She could sense it in the vibrations of the air, she could feel the soft tremors underfoot. Conspiracy percolated, bubbling under the surface, its fumes making the court dizzy and bewildered. She knew she would have to keep a clear head if they were to navigate the storm ahead.

Returning to the window, she glanced out once more. Jon was emerging from the shadowed stables. This time, he saw her. Their eyes met across the broad distance and he sketched a bow by way of distant greeting. A gesture she returned with a curtsey he could not even properly see.

"I think I'm going to go down there and tell him all about Petyr Baelish," she said. "I think he needs to know."

"If he goes running to his aunt, it might cost you your place," Olenna cautioned. "Not that that's a bad thing, of course. I always hated the Red Keep."

Her mind was made up. Her course was set.

The magister was as wide as he was tall; barrel chested but with teats the size of Sansa's head sagging to his swollen navel. Through the open collar of his shirt, she could see coarse hair growing in tufts. Enough to stuff a mattress with, she thought to herself. Had the situation not been so dire, she would have laughed at the man. Especially his silly, forked beard that had been dyed a garish yellow, the prongs reaching past his collarbone. He looked like a walrus.

But, the house... 'house' was the wrong word. The Magister's home made the Red Keep look like a smallfolk's wattle and daub shack. Inside, it was all veined marble and shining porphyry over which
her every second step slipped it was so smooth. Inside, ornate pillars were propped by statues of
cherubs and sprites. The gardens were ringed with stone colonnades, like the crumbling ruins of an
ancient empire. The rooms inside were wide and spacious; beautifully decorated with items and
crafts from all over the known world. He showed her the Myrish lace hanging in the windows, the
Lysene rugs adorning the polished oak floors and the Westerosi tapestries hanging on the walls.
Bucolic scenes for the most, but others showed scenes from history and legend, even the Doom of
Valyria.

The rooms he had given her were last occupied by Daenerys Targaryen, but Ilyrio had not been the
one to tell her that. A servant, a Lyseni girl purchased from a pillow house, had been the source and
Sansa had promised to keep her secret. And she would, for she could not escape the sickening
feeling the magister came to the girl at night. The thought of those rough fat hands on the girl's thighs
was enough to make anyone pity the hardest of whores.

"And that's it," the magister stated, sweeping a beringed hand around the final room. "My humble
abode."

He had showed her the rooms as if they were the hidden wonders of the known world. In a way,
they were. However, she hadn't seen the blackened and shrivelled hands Septa Lemore had warned
her about. She couldn't say she was disappointed.

"It's extraordinary, magister," she said, truthfully. "Is this where Prince Aegon grew up?"

"Oh, no. No. The Prince grew up on the run, fleeing from place to place. He knows what it is to be
hunted."

He escorted her back to the gardens, in the shade of the colonnades. The gardens were beautiful and
well maintained.

"No one in Westeros knows he exists," she pointed out. "Apart from Varys, of course, and he's not
talking. Aegon could walk the length of the walls around King's Landing, and none would look
twice at him."

The Magister laughed. "Then our plan has worked."

"Am I to stay here?" she asked. "Forgive my questioning, magister. But no one's telling me anything.
No one's telling me what's next." Still in hope of being ransomed, she paused and added: "If I could
write to my father, explaining everything, he would give you money."

Having just seen the palace this man called home, the words seemed futile in her own head. This was
not a man in need of something as trivial as money. The look he gave her confirmed it.

"You will stay here while the final plans are being made," he explained. "But you will return to
Westeros with the prince, as soon as they're ready."

It was a relief to know she was going back to Westeros, even if they didn't free her as soon as they
docked. She would be home, and there would more chances of escape on home territory. Ships were
out of the question and she didn't know one end of Pentos from the other.

"How is your wolf?"

"Lady?" Sansa looked up at the Magister questioningly. "My brother and sister will look after her."

"How did she survive?" he said, returning her look.
"A friend helped her," she answered, leaving it at that. "My father blamed the Lannisters for that. But it wasn't, was it?"

His thin lips twitched into a smile, lifting one prong of his beard.

"But why?" she asked. "Lady hadn't hurt you, or Aegon…"

"Because we knew your father would blame the Lannisters," he explained. "Oh, don't get me wrong: we knew taking the wolf out of the picture would make you more vulnerable."

So, a double-whammy, she realised. Ferment a little disharmony between two major houses while simultaneously softening the real target: Sansa herself.

"And my aunt, Lysa Arryn, have you been working with her?" she asked.

The magister laughed. "Never met her before in my life. Although, I have it on good authority she's causing troubles of her own … which is all for the best, as far as I'm concerned. Divide and conquer, I think are the words."

"You've done all this on purpose!" she half-cried, stepping in front of the magister as if afraid he might run off. "You think if the Houses of Westeros are too busy fighting each other, they won't notice Aegon slipping into the Red Keep. They will. Surely they will, then they will set aside whatever divides them and unite around the common need to throw your prince back into the sea."

Ilyrio was laughing again. She was glad he was laughing and not growing angry at her arguments. But it was clear he thought she was clutching at straws. When he composed himself, he continued:

"This wasn't meant to happen. At least, not yet. We were setting everything up, drawing the lines so to speak. There was never any love between the Starks and the Lannisters, so we didn't need to do much there and your wolf's attack on the Lannister boy helped considerably. It was Varys, who suggested to Lady Cersei that she might want to ensure the wolves were kept outside and Varys who organised the rest. It looked like Cersei was to blame for it all. Then the Master of Coin was sniffing around you, so suspicion is now naturally falling on him and he is allied to Lady Arryn. Now all that bad blood is swirling around, brewing up into a heady mix."

"So what went wrong?" she asked.

"The Martells," he answered. "Or rather, Prince Oberyn. You see, he doesn't know about us. He knows nothing of Aegon. However, Prince Doran is another matter."

Sansa's heart sank. "Prince Aegon really is betrothed to Princess Arianne? The Martells really will be joining with the Golden Company when Aegon lands in Westeros?"

He smiled ruefully. "When Oberyn began forging a contract of marriage between you and Prince Trystane … well, we had to act fast before the matter was beyond our control. The last thing we need is divided Martell loyalties. We were always going to need hostages to keep the Stark forces out of any war: so we took you, much sooner than we would have liked."

"If my father fights in any war, or prevents Aegon's accession in any way, you will kill me. Is that it?" She had suspected as much all along, but had hoped she would be proved wrong. "The North – including my aunt, the Queen – must bend the knee, or I will have my throat cut right in front of them."

"Don't look at it like that," he advised, gently.
"I was always a dreamer, but never – I like to think – a fool, Magister Ilyrio," she answered. "I would have the truth."

"And I see you speak truly. All the same, my advice to you is not to think like that. Fashion yourself to your new King, pray for his success. Soon, when this is all over and order has been restored, you may return to your family and pick up your marriage to Prince Trystane."

"I won't have a family, will I?"

"Of course you will," he replied, swiftly. "All who bend the knee to Aegon may return to their lands, no harm done. We are not oppressors, Lady Stark. We are not intending to wipe out all Westerosi aristocracy. Only two cannot come out of this alive."

Sansa could guess which two, but she didn't say as much. She had heard enough. But, nor had she heard of an invasion or war in which the total casualties had amounted to only two people.

"My father will fight this madness," she said, turning away. "Even if I am hanged from the ramparts of Winterfell because of it. He will do what is right for the realm; he will do his duty."

She felt no fear as she said it. She hoped it was true. No one liked to think of a world without them in it, but this is what duty was all about. Duty compelled them to action and not sit by while some bastard pretender, plucked from obscurity, subverted the justice of their realm. The North would take up arms, rather than be ruled over by a puppet dragon.

"Lord Stannis holds Dragonstone for King Robert," she continued. "And he would die before any army passes his dominion."

"Just as well we're not headed for Dragonstone then, isn't it?" the magister smiled.

Taken aback, Sansa looked back at him. The symbolism of Dragonstone, even the location being more practical, she had just assumed they were heading there. "Then where?"

"Where it will hurt King Robert the most."

"Storm's End," she murmured, more to herself than anyone else. Not only were Varys and the Magister fermenting a war north of King's Landing, they would be hundreds of miles south of the capital when they finally launched their invasion. No one expecting them, no one in the right place to even stop them when they finally came.

That night, she lay awake in bed knowing soldiers guarded her doors. She bet Daenerys Targaryen didn't have to worry about armed guards on her doors when she was here. Meanwhile, Sansa got to thinking about her. If Aegon was real, surely Varys and Ilyrio would have united him and his aunt. It seemed they feared a real dragon would root out a cuckoo in its nest in a heartbeat. Aegon would be roasted and gulped down in one graceful movement.

She closed her eyes and dreamed of Lady.

"To me, Lady!" Jon reached out and scratched the wolf's ears, letting her nip at his fingertips. For days, after Sansa's abduction, she had howled and cried for her. But with Nymeria and Ghost, she slowly adjusted and resettled. All the same, she had changed. She was nervy and more prone to snapping at passer's by. Over times, she skulked in the shadows and emitted low, ominous growls. But, for the moment, she seemed happy enough.

"How is she?"
Jon looked up at the sound of Margaery's voice, watching as she crossed the yard. The setting sun shone through her muslin skirts and he made a good show of pretending not to notice the curve of her thighs.

"More to the point, how're you?" she asked, sitting on the bench beside him.

"Well," he answered. "We're both well."

"Good, because I've come to ruin your day."

"Just when I was starting to get comfortable," he remarked. "What have you got for me?"

"Petyr Baelish."

"I thought you might have been joking me. Now I see."

In truth, it had been a long day. He began his duties as Ser Barristan's squire today. He had honed swords, cleaned mailshirts and groomed horses all before breaking his fast. Right now, he had just finished sweeping the practice yard ready to lay down fresh sand before retiring to bed. Now Petyr Baelish was coming to kick said sand in his face, it seemed.

"When he brought me to court, he suggested I put myself in the way of the King," she said, keeping her voice down. Although, they were quite alone.

Jon considered her meaning for a moment. "By 'put yourself in the king's way' I assume Baelish didn't mean you should trip him up for a laugh."

"I think he had in mind something a little more intimate than that."

"So, are you going to uphold your end of this bargain?"

"It wasn't a bargain," she replied, defensively. "I had no intention of obliging our esteemed Master of Coin."

It was good to know she would not whore herself. "You would not unseat Lyanna, which I think is what he wants. Robert loves her and she loves him."

"Why do you suppose he wants that?" she asked, turning to look at him.

Jon shrugged. "He has no liking of the Starks. My uncle almost killed him. My father mislikes him. My aunt probably doesn't even deign to notice his existence within her halls. He's been making pointed comments to me ever since I arrived."

"And if he's interfering with the King and Queen, he might be interfering in other places, too."

"You mean Sansa?" he asked. "I don't know. I wish I did, but I don't. I want it to be him, just so we can be rid of him. But Lady Stark likes him. She trusts him. And she's the last person alive who would listen to anything I have to say."

They lapsed into silence, during which Jon wondered what he should do with the information she gave him. Should he tell Lyanna? He wouldn't even know how to bring such a delicate thing. He couldn't picture himself going up to her and saying: your new lady in waiting was sent here to seduce your husband. All Kings had mistresses and Robert was no exception. There was even a bastard involved, being kept discreetly at Storm's End. But Jon could not remember the boy's name, or how old he was. He was young, though. Still a child.
"When you first came to court, did you intend to do as Petyr asked?"

"No," she assured him. "But he keeps asking me about it. What can he do if I don't? It's not like he can raise a complaint. *I only brought Lady Margaery here because I wanted to usurp the Queen... How ridiculous.*"

Despite himself, Jon laughed. "No, I don't suppose he can."

They both rose, giving way to the fading light. "Thanks for telling me. I won't tell the Queen, though. It would only cause trouble at a time when we have our fill of it already."

Margaery smiled, leaned upwards and kissed his lips. For his part, he tried not to blush and sent up a silent prayer of thanks for the cover of thickening darkness. As far as he was concerned, they parted on as good terms as they had arrived, each walking away in opposite directions. Her toward Maegor's and he toward the White Sword Tower. When he got inside, he remembered he still had her favours tied to his wrist.

The following morning, Ser Barristan roused him from his sleep as the sun barely rose above the rooftops of the city. An ungodly hour, if he thought so himself.

"Horses," the old knight said, by way of greeting. "For the Queen. All three of us are riding out."

Jon sat up, half-drugged with sleep. "Even me?"

"Especially you. Now come! Dress in black."

Jon could have kicked himself. It was the morning of Lord Joffrey's funeral and he had forgotten all about it. His new bedroom, an ante-chamber off the Lord Commander's rooms, was still alien to him and he fumbled around for where he had left his formal clothes. Black breeches, black silk shirt and a black doublet. At least, he thought wryly to himself, he wouldn't have to worry about mixing colours.

Outside, the Queen was similarly attired. Her black dress had been arranged so she could ride side-saddle to the Great Sept of Baelor.

"Aren't we taking the litter?" he asked, looking up at her.

"The funeral's not for hours," she said. "I want us three to ride out before that."

She meant it, as well. He and Ser Barristan escorted her south through the city and out into the Kingswood. The day revealed itself on their journey, fine and warm and as golden as Ser Jaime's fake gold armour. But, inside the forest, a chill crept over them in the shadows of thick trees.

"Your father spoke to me the other day," said Lyanna. "Sansa knows about you and you didn't tell us."

They had come to a halt beside a small stream running through the woods, where Jon dismounted and ignored the reproving look Ser Barristan was giving him.

"For which I have already been suitable chastised, in case you were thinking of adding to it," he said, coldly.

Lyanna slid down from her saddle and closed the gap between them, where she took him in her arms and kissed the top of his head. It was a show of affection she could never have made in public and it set his mind at ease in an instant.
"Nothing like it," she assured him further. "But she's in the hands of our enemies now. We have to assume that. If she speaks, if she's made to talk, you can imagine what they'll do with the information she might give."

"Sansa won't-"

"We can't be sure," Lyanna cut in. "She won't do it willingly, I know. But she could be … compelled…"

"You mean tortured," he said, flatly. He wished people would just say what they mean.

"To put no finer point on it."

Ser Barristan intruded gently. "Would it be wise to remove Jon from the capital?"

"I think so," said Lyanna. "If this gets back to Robert…"

Again, she left the sentence hanging. But a swell of indignation swept over Jon. "And what of you? I'm not leaving you alone to face this and we can't both run."

"You're not running," she insisted. "You're just taking a brief leave of absence and I think Ser Barristan should go with you."

"Where?"

"The Eyrie," she answered. "I want you to meet your brother on the King's Road and divert to the Vale. The Lords of the Vale have always had ties to the North, so it won't be an act of hostility. Go there, and demand answers from Lysa Arryn. Petyr Baelish is already there, but for all we know, he's the one behind all this. Or, the Lannisters could be."

Ser Barristan sighed heavily. "And if the Lannisters find out what Sansa knows, then Seven save us."

"Lysa keeps telling us the Eyrie is impregnable, so you might even be safe up there," she said. "It's just a precaution, child. Nothing more."

All the same, he felt like he was on the run. Now, it began. The great hunt.
Voices raised in anger stilled Lyanna's hand, a stump of sealing wax poised over the candleflame. No good ever came from listening in, but right now she had little choice. Robert was in full-swing, reaching deep within his chest so that his voice rolled and boomed in that special way he had. There were smallfolk tilling fields in the Riverlands setting down their tools and looking at each other in wonder: "who's that loud bastard shouting in the distance?"

Still dressed in black from the lordling's funeral service, Jon stepped closer to her with his eyes fixed on the door that separated Lyanna's rooms from Robert's. He stood to attention, one hand resting gently on her shoulder.

'That fool, that damn fool,' Robert blasted at whatever poor messenger had brought the day's merry tidings. 'Bring me the map. I said bring me the thrice-damned map. Now show me where is Bitterbridge.' A pause. 'Now show me Storm's End… Do you care to explain to me how that damn fool Renly has ended up in Bitterbridge when I specifically told him to make for Storm's End?'

The soft murmuring tones of Varys gave answer, but Lyanna couldn't make it out. Jon moved to push her hand away from the flame, but it was too late. A great dollop of molten wax dripped into the candleflame, snuffing it out entirely. Cursing softly, she began again and this time managed to affix her seal to the summons.

During Joffrey's funeral, their plan had been somewhat refined. Ser Barristan, as a member of the small council in his own right, was officially the one being sent to the Eyrie to bring Lady Lysa back to court. Jon was only going in his capacity as Ser Barristan's squire. But the main point remained the same: get Jon out of court and safely up-country, until this business with Sansa was over. If not over, then at least with more light shed on the situation.

"Where is Bitterbridge?" asked Jon. "I guess it's nowhere near Storm's End."

Lyanna considered the question for a moment. "It's not a million leagues away, but it's in the Reach not the Stormlands. If you're on the King's Road, coming down from King's Landing, to get to Storm's End you continue through the King's Wood. But Renly must have diverted and gone down the Rose Road."

"Loras Tyrell went with him," said Jon. "Perhaps they've gone to raise the Reach for King Robert?"

"Did Margaery tell you that?"

"No," Jon shook his head, a lock of his fringe falling into his eyes. She reached up and brushed it aside. "On the day of the special council, I was waiting in the king's outer chamber. Tyrion Lannister came out too, and I was talking to him when Renly burst through the doors and announced where he was going. He said Storm's End, for sure. And Ser Loras was with him."

That was curious. But, she thought, even if Renly was planning to go against his brother's – his
king's – orders he wouldn't have announced his intention out loud right there in the outer chamber. Especially not for the likes of Tyrion Lannister to hear. If he was set for Storm's End, why the diversion?

"If he's using this an excuse for a romantic retreat," she began then trailed off.

Jon took up the thread. "Has he got a girl in Bitterbridge, then? Is that it?"

She looked at him for a moment, realising he still had a certain level of innocence about him. "Not a girl, no sweeting."

"Then it's not a romance thing then, is it," he replied, looking puzzled.

"Never mind, dear." The wax seal on the summons had dried, so she picked it up and handed it to him. "Take this to Ser Barristan, then come and see me and your father before you go. We'll take some lunch together before you leave and say a proper farewell."

He opened his mouth to reply only to be cut off by another raging torrent from the king. 'Never mind that now, get the damn Queen in here. We'll see what she has to say. Lyanna! … Lyanna!'

For a moment, she and Jon looked at each other in alarm. Her heartbeat skipped, her blood running cold.

"Go," she said to Jon.

"But-"

"Go!" she cut in, getting up and nudging him firmly toward the door. "Don't stop until you reach the White Sword Tower. Ser Barristan will take care of you."

If Sansa's talked … she stilled the worst-case scenarios that now filled her head as Jon left. But as the door closed behind him, the door to Robert's chambers opened. It was Varys who put his head in her rooms, his expression apologetic.

"Your grace, if you please."

She nodded, smoothing out her skirts as she made her way to Robert's inner-sanctum. Ned was there too, although she had not heard him amidst all the commotion. Although pale and haggard from lack of sleep, he was calm. He wouldn't look calm if Robert had learned of certain secrets. As for Robert, he was anything but calm.

"I told you this would happen," he continued shouting, but not at her. Everyone was the target. "I told you all but you wouldn't listen, damn you!"

Surmising that this was no longer about Renly, she looked between each of the men in search of an explanation. Among their anxiety and their rather smug smoothness, none was forthcoming. Instead, she turned to Robert and closed the gap between them.

"Husband, what is it-"

Robert forcefully shrugged her off as she tried to take his arm, sending her stumbling backwards into Ned's arms. He caught her, glaring over her head at his old friends.

"Gods, Robert, be careful. None of this is Lyanna's fault-"

"That whore would be dead if it wasn't for your sister and her tender woman's heart," Robert
rounded on Ned, blue eyes flashing. But then he backed down, sagging away. "But it's my fault. I shouldn't have listened. I should have done for her and her inbred fool of a brother."

"I still don't know what's going on," she said, straightening herself out again. "Is it the Targaryens? What have they done?"

"That Targaryen whore is pregnant," Robert answered, voice low and brittle with suppressed fury. On the turn of a hair, he was once more towering in anger. "Do you think it's a fucking coincidence? The girl gets abducted. The Lannister shit gets himself murdered. The Targaryen whore gets pregnant? That lackwit shit, Viserys, is getting ready… he's striking from abroad and we're all sitting on our fat arses wondering what the weather's going to do next!"

Lyanna was struck dumb, but Ned stepped around her and placed himself between them.

"What if it is a coincidence? We've no proof of anything, Robert-"

"Are you blind?" Robert cut over him. "The dragon growing in that whore's rotten womb has changed everything, don't you see that? The frozen North still got you snowblind?"

Robert laughed at his own joke, impervious to the serious faces around him. She looked to Varys, his expression one of someone who'd seen it all before as if he'd read it all in a book.

"Where has this come from?" she asked the eunuch.

"A reliable source within the Dothraki host," he answered. "I believe you may already be familiar-"

"Jorah Mormont," Ned cut in, face twisted in disgust. "We're taking the word of a slaver, an exile, a fugitive from my own justice. It's like we're dancing to his tune now. I will not put my name to any pardon he thinks he might get."

"Nor I," Lyanna added. "Robert, this man has his own agenda. We know that."

"But it's true," said Varys as he stepped out of the shadows. "Daenerys is pregnant and lashing out at Ser Jorah doesn't change that. The question is: what are you prepared to do about Daenerys and the baby."

Silence fell between them, Robert mutinous while Eddard stood straight, poised for a fight. He wasn't looking so haggard now. He was waiting and everything depended on what Robert said next.

"Do what you must."

Silent and solemn, Varys bowed. The command was given, it had been understood. He looked almost pleased about it.

"I will not be party to the murder of children," said Ned.

His blood was up, his temper flaring. Lyanna gathered herself quickly.

"In practise, this changes nothing," she said, once more approaching the king. "Robert, this child means little and less. Even if it's a boy, it has no claim to the iron throne. Not even from their perspective, unless Viserys plans to abdicate his own claim. Like the child's mother, it's just a pawn – a piece in another man's game. He may grow up to lead his own Khalasaar, but the Dothraki don't cross the sea." She paused, looking to her brother. "That's what you said, my lord. The Dothraki don't cross the sea."
Eddard nodded. "And if they do, we'll be there to meet them."

"Enough!" Robert held up his hand, stilling their protests. "This ends. This ends now."

"And if, for whatever reason, this pregnancy prompted Viserys to not only kidnap my daughter but also murder Lady Cersei's son, what then?" Ned demanded. "What will killing a pregnant girl and her brother actually achieve?"

"Sansa will be killed," Lyanna put in. "Robert, please, think about what you're doing. If you're right, and this is all connected, think what you would be doing. We need to think, to stay calm-

"We need action!" Robert cut in. "Enough of this sitting around and waiting for them to make the next move. I will not be taken for a fool, not now."

Eddard's hand closed over the hand's badge pinned to his lapel, fingers closing over the angular edges. "I mean it, Robert, I will not be a party to the murder of children." He looked to Lyanna, holding her hard in his gaze. There was a challenge there. "And you? Remember what you said, Lya. Remember your promise."

"And I meant what I said," Robert stormed at him. "If I'd done the right thing all those years ago, none of this would have happened. Now, enough of this."

"Lord Stark is right," she said, placing herself in the doorway to block Robert's retreat. "We cannot do this and if you do, I'll... I cannot wear crown bought with the blood of children. I will not."

"Might I make a suggestion?" Varys stepped into the fray again. It was about bloody time. "While I fully support his grace's desire to be rid of the Targaryen prince and princess, I think a little perspective is in order. The girl is riding toward the red waste: a harsh and unforgiving terrain, especially to pregnant women who're, really, still children themselves. For now, our time might be better spent reinforcing Dragonstone. If there is an invasion coming, where else would a Targaryen think to land? By all means, be rid of the girl, but later. Once we know what all this is about."

Seeing an opportunity to buy some time, Lyanna added her voice to Varys'. "He's right, Robert. Send Stannis back immediately, reinforce the castle, repair the curtain walls and provision a garrison. At least, that way, we won't be sitting on our arses waiting to see what the weather does."

"My son rides from the North," Eddard said. "By now, he will have breached the Neck. The Lannisters are raised. I am far from convinced that all our troubles are the doings of the Targaryens, but if it is, we are not unprepared Robert."

"Might I suggest directing the Northern troops to the Riverlands?" Varys continued. "I would rather forces more loyal to the crown would keep watch over the Westerlands, and the Riverlords cannot do it alone. That way, Tywin cannot double cross us."

Lyanna was hesitant. Showing a bit of muscle along the borderlands might work with some lords. But Tywin didn't seem the sort to her. The Reynes and the Castamere's attested to that. But they were vassal houses. They were royal houses.

"And Ser Barristan's off to the Eyrie," she reminded them. "I cannot say what Lysa will do, but at least we will now have eyes in the Vale."

Robert said nothing as he looked at each of them in turn. His eyes had narrowed, his temper still bristled. One wrong move now, and his top would blow again. In the end, after what felt an age, he backed down and retreated into his furs.
"See to it," he said, at length. "Just remember, there are those in this realm who call Viserys king. No more pussy-footing. I want them arrested and brought to trial. And I want this realm fortified."

With that, he shouldered his way out of the door and into Lyanna's rooms. She watched him leaving, exhausted from the fight already. When her door opened and shut, signalling Robert's withdrawal, she sighed heavily and turned back to Ned and Varys.

"What if he's right?" she asked, looking to Ned. "What if it is the Targaryens who have organised all this chaos? What if they have got Sansa?"

"Ser Jorah said nothing-"

"She won't be there yet," Lyanna cut in. "And he would know Sansa. He was still in the North when she was born. Ned, we cannot discount this."

"And what better way to get back at me than taking my own daughter," said Eddard, running a hand through his hair. He looked exhausted and defeated again. "But what proof? There is none. Varys, have you heard anything at all? Even the hint of a rumour would be something…"

The spymaster shook his head, a sad and forlorn gesture. "With regret, my lord, it is as if the Lady just vanished. Out of curiosity, what would happen if we are unable to dissuade the king from going after the girl?"

"Any death warrant, any pardon for Mormont, that comes by me I will not sign," replied Eddard. "I will resign my post and return to Winterfell. Lyanna, what you do is up to you, but you will be just as culpable as Robert."

"I know that," she said firmly. "And I know what I said. I haven't forgotten."

"It is known that your alliance depended on Robert letting those children go unharmed," said Varys, looking from Eddard to Lyanna. "Is that still the case?"

So, this is what it had come to. She was on the spot, being asked whether she would abandon the king if Daenerys or her brother were hurt. The realm needed to be united, if Dothraki screamers would soon be convinced to hazard a sea voyage. She ran for the middle ground. "Let's see what happens, shall we?"

Neither man looked particularly pleased.

The castle looked calm enough, except for the armed guards now patrolling the grounds. Jon watched them out of the window, occasionally lifting his gaze to Maegor's Holdfast as if he might see through the walls. If Robert had somehow learned the truth, surely they would all be kicking his doors down by now? But they weren't. They continued their almost lazy strolling around the grounds, occasionally stopping someone as they passed by and speaking words he could not hear.

In the room behind him, the door opened and Ser Barristan strode in with their saddle packs slung over his shoulder. "Daenerys Targaryen is pregnant. That's what the king was raging about."

"Oh," he said, relief washing over him. "I suppose we must still go."

He had hoped Lyanna would change her mind. But this was too important. Even with the Targaryens now firmly in the picture over Sansa's abduction and Joffrey's murder, Lysa had still been acting like an odd fish. The poisoning of the Queen, the rumour mongering and, some whispered, the sudden death of her elderly – yet hale and hearty – husband. All of that still needed to
be accounted for. Her troubles formed an underlying current of strife that played in concert with the main events organised by parties unknown. Lysa had to be stopped.

"Lady Melisandre showed me something in her fires," he said. "A cloth dragon, on poles held by black hands. You don't suppose…"

His sentence trailed off, it sounded ridiculous. But since all this began, he had found himself grasping at such straws.

"Suppose what?" said Barristan. "Jon, those images: they're so vague they could mean anything. You could take what you wanted from them and twist them to suit any theory. That's how they work, these charlatans like your new friend."

"She's not my friend," he protested. "She's just been helping me, that's all. Anyway, she said she's to return to Dragonstone with Lord Stannis soon."

"Sounds about right," Barristan replied, gesturing for him to follow. "And Lord Renly might now be dragged back to court for an official beating from the king. Gods alone know what he's playing at. But, we have our orders, and we better stick to them. We're to tell your brother to patrol the border between the Riverlands and the Westerlands."

Lord Hoster was Robb's grandfather. Jon knew the old man wouldn't object at all to having his grandson's army taking up residence on his lands. If it came to a showdown between the Starks and the Lannisters, they'd have an advantage too. But, whatever else was going on, whatever else was happening, the possibility of seeing Robb again was a chink of light penetrating his ever-darkening world.

As promised, he dined with his mother in her chambers so they could say a proper farewell. His father was there, too. Lord Stark mussed up his hair and gripped him in a tight bearhug until he yelped in protest. But there was more going on. He could see it in their strained smiles and brittle laughter. They weren't saying anything, so he did not pry. Just for a minute or two, before he took his leave, he was alone with his mother.

Lyanna was still dressed in black from the funeral, having not had a chance to change since Robert called her into the fight. The perfume she wore still clung to her, made smoky by the incense burned in the great sept. Her wide grey eyes were bloodshot, too. But, perhaps, that was just an after effect of the smoke as well. He thought it prudent not to ask.

"You be good, and do as Ser Barristan tells you, yes?" she said, leaning down to kiss his cheek.

"I promise," he assured her. "And I don't think we'll be gone for so very long. All the same, I am not happy about leaving you."

"Don't worry about me, sweetling," she said, handing him a hamper. "There's some treats in there. Some sweet cheese, some biscuit and other things; some wine, for yourself and Ser Barristan. Not much but enough, I hope, to make the first few nights on the road a little more bearable."

He thanked her warmly, taking the hamper on his arm. There was no point in drawing out their goodbyes, so he turned and walked away. Out through the chambers, down the turnpike stair to where Margaery waited for him in the yard outside.

"Jon," she said, rising to her feet. "Before you go…"

They met and kissed, he almost dropped the hamper. It was a sweet kiss that ended too soon.
"Well, then," he said, still a little dazed. "I'll see you when I get back."

She walked with him back to the White Sword Tower, where Ser Barristan already had their horses ready. Pausing just beyond the threshold of the paddock, he turned to Margaery and said: "There's three dragon eggs in a case in my aunt's chambers. Should anything happen to my aunt, make sure you get them and return them to me."

She had seen them before, he was sure of it. "Of course, they'll be safe. Have no fear."

But he did have fear, if he was honest with himself. He and Ser Barristan rode out into streets still bristling with tension. The route to the Great Sept of Baelor was still lined with Lannister men who were, by now, either drunk or dead drunk. They wore the lion on their tunics, prominently so as to leave no doubt about their affiliation.

Jon recalled the service that morning. They had all been there, too. Lady Cersei, veiled in black muslin, had worn a gown so encrusted with jewels is was virtually stab-proof. Just as well, he had thought, given the current climate about the court and the city. It was also a fashion tip he half-wished he had availed himself of as he passed through the hostile crowds. Only the presence of Ghost, running at the horse's heels, kept trouble at bay.

Most saw the direwolf embroidered on his tunic and contented themselves with a little scornful sneer. Others called out obscene names and threats. Another scooped up a handful of horseshit and aimed it at Jon's head. Only he ducked and it went sailing into some poor market-keeper's stall. The gold-cloaks intervened before a proper fight could break out. At other times, when the winesinks and taverns emptied out, Stark and Lannister retainers had clashed openly in drunken brawls. Even his father seemed reluctant to punish the Northern culprits. An act not unnoticed by Lady Cersei.

"Just keep riding," Ser Barristan intoned. "Don't get drawn into it."

He no intention of it, until…

"Maybe I'll find the little Stark myself. I never could resist a redhead. I'll make a woman of her."

The drunk rubbed his crotch suggestively, an act that was met with peals of laughter, forced and loud so Jon would hear it. Another mentioned the Queen and what displays of romance he would indulge should he ever find himself naked in Lyanna's bed. Ser Barristan's appeals were lost among the rush of the blood racing to Jon's head. One second he was on his horse, the next he was in the crowd and his gauntleted hand crashed into the retainer's jaw, sending gouts of blood spattering to the cobbles. He drove the message home with an elbow that busted open the man's nose. He remembered Joffrey insulting Sansa and he knew now he should have done the same to him as he kneed the man in the groin and pushed him into a sprawl of his erstwhile colleagues, now reeling in shock. Before Jon could lunge into the crowds after him for a second round, Ser Barristan caught him by the scruff of the neck and hauled him back to his horse.

"Get back on that horse now, you damn lackwit!"

The old knight was red in the face with anger, but Jon's own temper refused to simmer down. Reluctantly, begrudgingly, he complied and followed as Ser Barristan brought his destrier to a trot until they were through the city gates and out into the open fields beyond. Only then did Ser Barristan bring them to a halt, dismounting and gesturing for him to do the same. For his part, the anger of the fight and the ignominious break up was still on him.

"You heard what they were saying about my mother and sister," he began, straight on the defensive.
"Yes!" Ser Barristan retorted. "I can tell you now, boy, your mother's been called a lot worse than that. And the other fool?... well, you gave him what he wanted: a damn fight."

"Then I'm glad to have obliged him. Perhaps, with a broken jaw, he'll think twice before picking a fight with House Stark."

"Think, boy!" Ser Barristan yelled. "What do you think he's going to do now? He's going to go running to Cersei with a story about the Queen's own nephew beating him to a pulp, he's got hundreds of witnesses to back him up and what do you think Cersei will do then? She'll go right to the Queen, if you're lucky …" he trailed off, calming himself with deep breaths. "The King and Queen are in a position where they'll have to act and you've just made things ten-fold worse all because of a drunken braggart of no account to anybody!"

"There's fights happening all the time!" he protested, vehemently.

"You're the Queen's own bloody nephew," Ser Barristan shot back at him. "There's a world of difference between two common soldiers brawling in the street and a Queen's nephew pulverising some idiot because said a few bad words about his aunt."

Ser Barristan backed away, leaving Jon to his own thoughts for a minute. Allowing him space to cool down. The man he attacked, his blood was still on Jon's gauntlets. In that moment, it all got too much. Sansa, the slow and agonising build-up to open conflict, the rumours and the counter-rumours. It all piled on top of him, he even felt himself buckling under the pressure. The anger left him with just a tired sadness. He pulled off his gauntlets and approached Barristan himself. Whatever punishment was coming, he thought he might as well get it over with. Whatever that may be, punching a Lannister henchman still felt worth it.

The moment was surreal as it played out before Sansa's eyes. Ship after ship sailed in to the bay of Pentos, each one crowded with sellswords. Our word is gold. The words ran through her head once more. Tears filled her eyes, but she willed them back. Don't cry, she chided herself, don't you dare cry. The letter had arrived that day, straight from Varys according to the Lysene girl who told her such things. The troops had been diverted. The Stark-Baratheon alliance was on a knife-edge. It ached in her heart to know things back home were going so horribly wrong. That they all still trusted the spy-master. That they were about to get the most awful shock of their lives. It made her feel nauseas before she even got back on the boat.

"At least you're going home now," Aegon said to her.

Sansa forced herself to smile pleasantly. "Yes, I'm looking forward to going home." Shame about you, she thought to herself, you'll be kicked into hell.
The last time Jon came to Castle Darry, the entire royal household had been there too. His memories of the place were dominated by cramped halls, homesickness and the ashes of his father, scattered in the scrubland out back. It was hardly a happy time. But now he was back and the castle was larger than he remembered. Then, he supposed it would seem that way with just him, Ser Barristan and Ghost. If the wolf remembered the place at all, he showed no sign of it and busied himself with sniffing at the skirtings in hope of an interesting scent.

One thing remained the same, though. The castle retained its strange atmosphere. He couldn't define the strangeness, he just felt it. While Lady Mariya saw to the stabling of their horses and the few servants arranged their rooms, Jon walked the empty entrance hall. Out of the window, he could see a sturdy stone keep, armoury and smith. Somewhere, a maester was walking from room to room. The metallic chinking of chain-links carried all down the hall. For a moment, Jon stopped to listen and it dawned on him what was strange. The place was empty.

"Where is everyone?" he asked Ser Barristan.

"I was just asking myself the same thing," the old knight replied, keeping his voice low as if he distrusted his own echo. "I know Darry's a small house, but still…"

Just as the castle seemed bigger without the royal household, their journey had been a lot quicker without it. "Maybe they weren't expecting us yet?" he theorised. "We got here rather fast."

"Your mother sent a raven days ago."

A draught was coming in from a broken window, somewhere up the stone stairwell to the first floor. Jon peered up it, but couldn't see much beyond the rusting handrail. House Darry, loyal still to House Targaryen, hadn't exactly prospered under Robert's reign and it was starting to show. Perhaps, he thought to himself, they could no longer even afford a proper household?

"Is there no Lord?" he asked. "I didn't see one when I was last here."

"Well, Mariya married Merrett Frey, if that counts. And I don't think it does." Ser Barristan laughed, his blue eyes twinkling as they did when he found something overly amusing.

Jon was curious. "What's so funny?"

"I really shouldn't- "

"But you should! And you will."

Ser Barristan composed himself, cast a quick look around to make sure they were still on their own. "Years ago, there was a band of outlaws: the Kingswood Brotherhood. Heard of them?"

Jon nodded. "Yes."

"Myself, Ser Arthur Dayne, Gerold Hightower and others, we all rode out against them. Young Merrett and Jaime Lannister were there as squires to Lord Sumner Crakehall. Anyway, Merrett gets himself captured by Wenda the White Fawn who yanked his breeches down and branded his bare arse with her own sigil – the fawn. The scar is still there to this day, or so I suspect. Still, mustn't laugh. Because he then caught a pox from a camp follower. Not long after that, he was hit over the head with a mace, so hard it left him delirious for a week. Anyway, this Darry marriage was a
fine match. But then the rebellion happened and the Darry's lost everything."

Jon almost felt sorry for the man. "I suppose Hoster Tully would be disinclined to help, since he supported Robert too."

"Exactly."

The sound of shoe heels clicking against stone drew their attention to the doors again. Moments later, Lady Mariya had returned with a girl Jon could only assume was her daughter. She was large and pink as ham. A third he had not seen brought up the rear, a skinnier version of the other girl, they had to be sisters. Both had warm brown eyes and limp blonde hair.

"I didn't mean to keep you waiting, Ser Barristan," said Lady Mariya. "These are my daughters. The glutton's Lady Walda and the other's Lady Amerei."

"Ami," Amerei corrected her mother.

Fat Walda looked faintly abashed, while Mariya gave Ami a narrow-eyed glare. "I shan't mention what else they call you, my lady." Turning to Jon and Ser Barristan, she continued: "Come, ser; my lord."

Still unused to being courteously addressed as "my lord", it took Jon a second to realise she meant him. But he followed the others into the same hall he ate in the last time he was at Castle Darry. A hall that was cavernous and empty, but for the five of them. The few serving staff brought out food and left them alone again. Food that consisted of watery stew in an earthenware bowl. At least, Jon's was watery. Greasy and unappetising, too. But he didn't complain. Sat beside Ami, they were pushed up so close together their thighs almost touched.

"I suppose you're looking for the Stark girl," said Mariya, getting straight to business. "Well, you've had a wasted journey coming here. We know nothing."

Jon turned toward Ser Barristan, who was frowning at his stew. "Actually, we're on our way to the Eyrie. We're rather hoping Lysa Arryn might be able to help."

"Now there's a woman who can start a fight in an empty room," Mariya stated, almost admiringly. "Lysa might be the girl's aunt, but I wouldn't put it past her. You know she's been servicing the Master of Coin for years, now. You know the one, the brothel keeper. Baelish."

Jon choked on his stew, prompting Ami to smack his back. Then Mariya turned to him. "Sorry, did I shock you? My sources are sound, Varys knows everything going on in that castle. And I saw Lady Stark as she passed through here on her way to the capital. A pretty little thing, I wouldn't be surprised if she's being kept busy in one of Baelish's whorehouses."

"Sounds like court gossip and open slander, to me," Ser Barristan noted, solemnly.

"Oh, Ser Barristan, you're not so naïve, are you?" she replied. "We're a Riverlands House, these waters run through our veins as much as any Tully. And I remember Lord Hoster suddenly sending that boy away. Only, I heard conflicting reports about which of Hoster's daughters Baelish had been fucking. It was either Lysa, Catelyn or both. Edmure too, I would wager."

"Catelyn would never do that!" Jon interjected. He flushed with anger, soon simmering down again. Why was he even bothering to defend a woman who would have thrown him into the sea, if she could have gotten away with it. All the same, the accusations bothered him. "Reasons for my defending her are few, my lady. But I cannot believe she would lie with her father's ward."
"He speaks truly, my lady," Ser Barristan said. "We all know of Baelish's infatuation with Catelyn Tully, all that business with Brandon Stark was proof of it. But, had she been loose with her favours toward Baelish, I daresay that business with Brandon Stark would never have happened in the first place."

Even Mariya had to cede that point. "Perhaps you're right, and perhaps that only proves his involvement with Catelyn's daughter. You've seen her, Barristan. She's the image of Catelyn, only even more beautiful. Baelish may have been dipping into Lysa to remind himself of Cat, but that little girl's a far sweeter prospect now. Cat's what, thirty-six or thirty-seven now? She's had five children, and well I know what that does to a woman's body. Then along comes Sansa Stark…"

Jon's stomach turned, he set down his spoon and wished he could as easily close his ears. But he'd seen Baelish sniffing around Sansa from the moment she first arrived at court. However, Ser Barristan diverted the subject rather than get drawn deeper into his gossip.

"Where are all your men-at-arms?" he asked. "Your castle is almost undefended. If you like, I can speak with the King—"

"There's no need," Mariya cut in. "Merrett's taken them north, to the Twins. That is all."

Once fed, they were shown to their rooms where they could rest overnight before their journey resumed come dawn. It was the same room he was given the last time he stayed at Darry. Small, stone with a feather bed that felt like heaven after days on the road, sleeping under hedges like a hedge knight. But as he lay there, Jon could not sleep. He watched the dusk settle and the stars pop out through the mullion window. All the time he worried. About Sansa, and the things Mariya had said. He worried about Lyanna, left alone with Robert and fearful the truth would burst into the open at any minute. He worried about Arya, who had been chronically overlooked ever since Sansa's disappearance. No one seemed to notice how upset she was about everything that was happening.

Then, as night fell, a knock at the door drew him from his relentless fretting. Assuming it was Ser Barristan, he rolled out of bed and donned the first pair of breeches that came to hand. His nightshirt was wrinkled, but good enough to present himself to the old knight. But when he opened the door, he found Amerei there bearing a tray of bread and cheese, with hot mead steaming from a jug.

She held it out to him. "Pardon me. You didn't eat much at supper and thought you might be hungry."

He remembered the watery, gruel-like stew he had been served while everyone else's seemed fine. But it was rude to complain, so he was eminently grateful for Ami's foresight. Opening the door properly, he stood aside to let her in.

"Thank you," he said, only now realising how hungry he actually was.

She set the tray on a rickety table, where he sat and helped himself to the bread, buttering it generously. Meanwhile, Ami lingered and watched, her hand reaching for the lacing of her bodice. He didn't notice what she was doing until it was almost too late, until the top part of her breasts were almost showing. "Anything to make my lord more comfortable—"

"What are you doing?" he spluttered, dropping the bread. "Don't. Just don't. Please."

Her gown had slipped over her shoulders, the lacing opened to reveal a sheer undershirt that exposed her small, firm breasts. Embarrassed now, she flushed in the face and tried to back away as she fumbled to lace herself back up. Jon felt absurdly guilty for shaming her.
"I didn't mean..." he continued, before stammering into silence. "I don't mean to embarrass you, my lady."

Something in Jon's head clicked into place as he recalled the supper. Ami sat so close to him their thighs touched, the looks, the watery gruel to ensure he went hungry and this convenient excuse to get into his room in the middle of the night.

"Your mother put you up to this and the shame is all hers, not yours," he said, firmly. "If it would make your life easier, please stay and eat with me. If she asks, you can tell her you seduced me, if you like."

His head was full of visions of poor Ami being beaten for not fucking information out of him. It was a well-known trick. These sweet honey traps. And he was always amazed by the number of men who walked right into them. Meanwhile, Ami recovered and she was looking at him as if seeing him for the first time. Like she'd only just noticed he was in the room. It was the look of a girl who was vanishing inside to do something she had no desire to do.

"Most men," she began, taking the chair beside his. "Most men don't even think twice."

She'd done this before, it seemed.

"Most men," he repeated. "But not this one, my lady. You're worth more than being used as free whore on the off-chance it might elicit some piece of information."

She turned red in the face, dropping her gaze away from him. "That's the sweetest thing anyone's ever said to me."

Really? He wondered, baffled. He couldn't even think what information Lady Mariya thought her daughter could get out of him. There was only one obvious one.

"You can assure your mother that no one has even mentioned the name of Darry in relation to my sister's disappearance. Ser Barristan and I, genuinely, only came here to rest overnight on our way to the Vale."

She bit her lip the same way Arya often did. "It's not that. She wanted information on the Queen and you're her nephew. She didn't say what information, just any information. Also, mother thinks the King stole something from Castle Darry when the court passed through a few months ago."

Jon frowned. "What?"

"An urn," she replied, keeping her voice low. "She said it was there when the court left on their way to the North, but it was gone after they left on the return leg of the progress."

Rhaegar's ashes, he remembered. But there was little he could say about that and feigned ignorance. However, Ami didn't dwell on the urn and seemed utterly disinterested in it.

"And she lied to you," she continued. "Our men aren't at the Twins. I don't know where they've gone, but I know they aren't at the Twins."

That was curious, he thought to himself. But it was hopeless if she didn't know where her mother's bannermen had gone. "Ami, if you find out anything at all, is there a way you can get the information to me? If not me, my aunt Lyanna-"

"No!" Ami cut in, forcefully. "Not the Queen. If you come back this way, after the Vale, I can tell you then if I find out anything new."
"Fine," he assured her. "That's fine. But is there anything else? Anything at all?"

"All that stuff she said about Lysa and Baelish, she only said it to upset you," Ami continued. "She gets all this malicious gossip from Varys and I don't know how true it is. Or she gets it from Lord Walder, and the Freys have always hated the Tullys. All the same, there's something going on. Something else. I wish I knew what it was, but I don't."

Jon noted how often Varys' name was cropping up. He had been in the background before. Ever present, but somehow unnoticed. All the while, he tried to make sense of what Ami was telling him, filling in the blanks and then forming it into some kind of conspiracy that involves the kidnapping of a twelve-year-old girl.

"Do you mean there's a lot of confusion being sowed to distract everyone at court from what's really going on?" he asked.

Ami shrugged. "I can't say. They don't really tell me anything. But if I find out, I will tell you. And I hope you get your sister back. She seemed sweet." She got up to leave having not eaten a thing, but paused in the doorway. "Oh, the urn she thinks King Robert stole."

Jon looked up. "Yes?"

"I remembered something. It was important because she wanted to give it back to the son of the person whose ashes were inside it. They would have given us a fortune for it. That's why she's so angry it was taken."

Jon's heart skipped a beat. If it was Rhaegar's ashes, then this information was strange to say the least. Unless, it wasn't Rhaegar's urn she was talking about. How many urns did they even have down there? "Can you find out whose ashes they were? Then I'll see if the King knows anything."

Ami nodded and got up to leave. Before she went, however, he had one last question: "Ami, what else do they call you?"

She laughed and blushed, remembering how her mother scolded her earlier that day. "Gatehouse Ami. I lift my portcullis for every knight that comes my way. The asses."

Poised and statuesque, Cersei Lannister was a model of elegant grief. Even now, standing so close to her, Lyanna felt clumsy and frumpy. She thought it was the way Cersei stood straight backed, swathed in blacks. Black silk skirts, samite lined bodices and sheer black muslin draped over her golden hair. The single neat braid was just touching her hips. Only her eyes betrayed real emotion. Anger, just now, as she slowly walked the length of the presence chamber. The Lannister knees bent, but only just.

Lyanna rose to greet her, dispensing with the platitudes of condolence that the other woman must have heard a hundred times and more by now. Plumping for something a little more practical, she pulled up a chair by the fire and poured two glasses of fine Arbour Gold. Cersei accepted the glass and almost smiled at it. No matter the circumstances, Cersei had never met a glass of wine she hadn't loved at first sight.

"Please sit," said the Queen, gesturing to the fireside chair. "What can I help you with?"

"Before leaving the capital, your nephew savagely beat one of my men at arms," Cersei explained. "Don't try to deny it, your grace. I've seen the man's injuries and there were scores of witnesses. I came to seek assurances that the boy will be punished for this outrageous attack."
"I would thank you for not negatively second guessing my reactions, Lady Cersei," Lyanna answered. "I am not denying the attack. However, I note how you fail to mention the provocation that led to the fight. What action have you taken against the man who threatened to rape me?"

Cersei's expression was blank. "Idle threats-"

"Where a Queen's safety is concerned, there is no such thing as an idle threat," Lyanna sharply cut in. "Had such things been said of you, or your daughter, would you not also be demanding action?"

"Yes, of course, but you were not demanding action until I arrived-"

"Because I thought we were both grown up enough to not go getting involved in silly street fights," Lyanna cut in again. "It seems I was wrong."

Cersei's grip on the stem of her wine glass tightened, her lips compressed. While she remained in this mutinous silence, Lyanna continued to press her advantage.

"And what would you have me do? Lock Jon in a stable outside so your men can shoot him through the heart with a crossbow, as some say you did to Sansa's wolf. That happened after you insisted action be taken against the wolf. Strange coincidence, is it not? Someone wrongs you, then an attempt is made on their lives."

"You know we had nothing to do with that," said Cersei. Her eyes flashed like wildfire, but her voice was cool as ice.

"My brother, the Hand of the King, is furious with me for not taking action against you over that matter," Lyanna continued. "He is furious with me for not pressing you harder on the issue of Sansa. How do you think he will react if I take severe measures – any measures – against Jon just because he hit one of your drunken retainers?"

"And what of Joffrey? Who my family think was killed by your men. Even your nephew's name is mentioned." Cersei's eyes narrowed, leaning back in her chair as she silently challenged the Queen. "He was out of the castle when Joff was murdered. No one knows where he was. Then there's the Mountain. He died, you know. No one cared because he died at the same time as Joffrey, the same time your niece was taken. But House Lannister noticed. We noticed when one of our own dies a suspicious death at the hands of our enemies."

"I'm sure you do," Lyanna replied, sipping her wine. "And I'm sure it's no coincidence that your father now has his army amassed around the borders of the Riverlands and heading south."

Lyanna paused, allowing herself a moment to calm down and gather her own thoughts. Armies were amassing everywhere. Tywin had his. Her brother had responded in like kind. The Northern army had been spotted heading down the Kingsroad, inching further south and now were about to be redirected to the Riverlands. Soon, the two armies would meet and clash. Raiding from both sides had already been reported.

While the two of them were together they were talking, while they were talking there was a chance to reach some sort of agreement. It was a longshot, but Lyanna went for it.

"I know where Jon was the night Joff was killed," she said. "He was crawling through the spaces in the walls through which Sansa was taken. It can't have been him. And it can't have been Joffrey who organised Sansa's abduction, because he never knew about those crawl spaces. No one did."

Just for a brief moment, Cersei looked like a drowning woman who'd caught a glimpse of the shore. "So, you know. You know we cannot have had anything to do with this?"
"And I think you know we had nothing to do with Joffrey's murder," she retorted. "But that's what someone else wants us to think. Don't you see that?"

Cersei downed her wine. "It wasn't me who wanted the wolves thrown out of the castle."

Lyanna looked at her, brow creasing into a frown. "I heard you-"

"Yes, I said it," Cersei cut in. "And I know what's being said. That I wanted the wolf dead to leave Sansa vulnerable so we could steal her away in the middle of the night. But if that was what I wanted, I would have kept on trying to kill the damn wolf. The truth was, I didn't care enough. Joffrey got bitten and I was angry because my child was hurt. You're not a mother. You don't know what it's like to see your children vulnerable, or hurt, or in danger."

Words like that often cut Lyanna to the bone. But she had to be stoic now, clear headed. All the same, Jon flew into her thoughts. She wondered where he was now, what he was doing, whether he was safe. Ser Barristan was with him, but as Varys kept reminding her: Ser Barristan was old now, his best years long behind him.

"You said you didn't want the wolves banished. So, who did? Why did you demand it?"

Cersei sighed. A resigned gesture. "Varys. He was there too, if you remember? He saw the whole thing and came up to us, after you had gone."

The afternoon returned to her, then. She remembered Lady sinking her teeth into Joffrey, she remembered Varys falling away. Jon turned up moments later, furious about the Mountain being invited to court for the tourney and she had followed him as he stormed back inside, trying to reason with him. All this circumstantial evidence fell into place, but none of it proved anything. Lyanna pinched the bridge of her nose, kneading the knot of tension that was building up there.

"Someone is playing our houses off against each other," she said. "And we're falling right for it."

"Who?"

Right now, Lyanna thought it could be anyone. Varys. Baelish. Some other petty lord with a chip on their shoulder and too much time on their hands. She was sick of agonising over who was doing this and it was time to change tack.

"More importantly, I think, is why. If we can work out why they're doing this, at least we'll be prepared for them, whoever they are."

"Fair enough," said Cersei. "And if someone's killed my son knowing full well House Stark would be blamed, that's as much a slight on us as it is you. Neither House will benefit from being manipulated into a war neither of us wants."

"We better not go to war, then," said Lyanna. "So, I suggest a truce. If you speak with Lord Tywin I can speak with Lord Stark and the King. If we must raise our banners, then do so. But we cannot waste time calling our banners against each other."

For a long moment, Cersei was silent. Her long fingers scratched at her chin, her bright green eyes soft and unfocused. Deep in thought, she was in no hurry to agree.

"But we need to draw them out," she said. "Whoever's doing this. They want us to be at war."

"I don't think we should be giving them what they want."
"No, of course not," replied Cersei. She sat up straight in her chair, looking intently at Lyanna. "But we can play along, at least. Let the armies come, let them meet, but there won't be any bloodshed. Because whoever is doing this, they want our armies engaged with each other. And if they want that, it's because they're deliberately distracting us from their own military manoeuvres, wouldn't you say?"

"Of course," she agreed. "Why else? And if our armies join, without clashing, it means we can turn them around at short notice and march them all at once to wherever trouble breaks out. If it breaks out."

"Precisely," said Cersei. "But if we're to double-cross the people who're double-crossing us, we need to be outwardly at war with each other. They cannot know we're secretly working together."

Lyanna set down her glass and extended her right hand. Cersei took it and shook to seal their agreement. Even if it didn't work, it was the start of the Starks and the Lannisters talking to each other again, instead of issuing threats. Space to breathe. That's what it was.

As promised, they left at dawn. Also, as promised, Ami had done a little digging about the urn. Before Jon and Ser Barristan left through the barbican of Castle Darry, Ami had come running up to him to hug him goodbye. As she did so, she slipped a piece of paper in the pocket of his jerkin. He didn't take it out again until there were at least two miles between them and the castle.

They stopped at a stream to let their horses drink, downtime he used to unfold the note and read Ami's scrawled handwriting. 'Rhaegar Targaryen,' it said. Underneath, she had added: 'His son is dead, my mother is mad."

"Ser Barristan," he said, approaching the other man. "Would my father have told the Darrys about me?"

"I doubt it," he said. "They were closer to your grandfather than your father. What makes you ask?"

Jon told him about Rhaegar's ashes, how he and Lyanna had scattered them. And about what Ami had told him, that Lady Darry had noticed the urn was gone and was now accusing King Robert of desecrating Rhaegar's mortal remains. The urn had been down there so long, so forgotten under all the debris, he was amazed Lady Darry even noticed they were missing.

"She was keeping Rhaegar's ashes to present to his son," said Jon. "Which means she didn't hear the news about Aegon, or she knows about me."

Ser Barristan took the note from him and read it himself. His expression was unreadable, closed. "I don't know," he said, at length. "But I dislike this. I dislike this a lot."

Jon could only agree.

Jon Cannington's voice was low and urgent as the meeting progressed: "The Starks and Lannisters are merging at the Riverlands. Varys informs us that, should they meet, they'll be far too busy killing each other to notice us. All for the better. If they wipe each other out, it can only be good for us. Meanwhile, with news of Daenerys' pregnancy, Robert is threatening to have her killed again. If he does that, it will break the Stark Baratheon alliance. Which means the Starks may not raise their swords against us, even if we let the girl go."

Listening outside the door, the breath caught in Sansa's throat. But the second voice, Rolly Duckfield of the Golden Company, was more cautious.
"No. We keep the girl to keep the Queen's men in line- "

"But if the alliance breaks, Lyanna won't be queen- "

"It's too late, Jon. We keep the girl as surety. All the same, we can sacrifice Daenerys if it means the Starks will abandon the Baratheons."

"Good," said Aegon. "She's a threat to me. And her brother. They will try to challenge me, once I am king."

"Daenerys was meant to be dead already," Jon Connington pointed out. "That fat eunuch makes all these plans, forgetting the pieces of the game he plays have minds of their own. Even Viserys hasn't annoyed Drogo enough to get himself killed yet."

"Give it time," Duckfield cautioned again. "Ilyrio informs me that Viserys pushes his luck more and more, each passing day. It's only a matter of time before Drogo snaps and removes him from the board for us."

Sansa had only the vaguest of ideas of who Viserys was, less so of Khal Drogo. But she knew she would pray for them tonight, for the gods old and new to grant them both endless patience and good fortune. Meanwhile, their ships had docked in Dorne and Varys had sent his little birds to bring them all the latest news from court and beyond.

"Lady Darry has sent us Targaryen banners; she's kept them hidden all these years," said Jon Connington, sounded pleased. "She would have sent Prince Rhaegar's ashes, but they've gone amiss. It seems they vanished after King Robert's Court imposed itself on her during the Northern progress, some time back."

This declaration was met with a murmur of intense disapproval. However, Aegon was unfazed. "I need men. What use are ashes?"

"Now, your grace, that's your lord father- "

"Don't be hard on the boy, Jon. He's right and he need not worry. The Darrys will come out for us, leading an attack from the north while we advance from the south. As soon as the Stormlands are in our possession, we'll have Robert on his knees."

Robert would never get on his knees for these people, Sansa screamed in her head. Never, never, never. Lyanna would never desert him. Her father would never do it. All the same, tears of frustration welled in her eyes as Duckfield continued:

"Well, in the mean, Varys must continue to remind Lyanna of the promise she made. Anything happens to Daenerys or Viserys, she is to leave Robert and return North with her brother."

Someone laughed. "Apparently, according to Varys, even Ned Stark is doing a good job of reminding his sister of the vow she made."

No! Sansa almost cried out.

"Lyanna is prevaricating, though. I fear she loves being Queen more than she ever worried for the exiles. Anyway, let us reach Storm's End before that fool, Renly, has a chance to call the banners. We must catch them at unawares. Jon, do you think the rest of House Connington will follow you?"

"It's worth a try, but they think me dead," he replied, glumly. "Either way, I am still their rightful lord. They are dutybound to follow me."
"And what of Barristan Selmy?" Aegon asked. "Varys said he would bring Barristan the Bold over to my side. Yet, there's no sign of him. And the Stark girl insists he is close with her brother."

"It's true," the unidentified man said. "Barristan is inordinately fond of that boy. Small wonder, he's a military genius, by all accounts. Instead, Varys convinced Lord Stark to convince the Queen to send them both on a wild goose chase up the Eyrie, so neither will be around when we land in the Stormlands. This Lysa woman's done a damn good job of accidentally implicating herself in all of this. Bloody remarkable, when you consider she's the girl's aunt."

He was met with laughter, during which Sansa tiptoed back to her own cabin. She would not abandon herself to tears, though. She did what she always did when she needed cheering up and remembered the look on Aegon's face when he realised Ilyrio Mopatis had gifted Daenerys Targaryen three dragon eggs and left not even one for him.

But it was no good. Everything felt hopeless. A feeling expounded when she looked through the porthole and saw beautiful Dorne and remembered how sweet Trystane had been to her. Had they been in on this all along? Most said no, but she hurt all the same to think it could be possible. *Such a fool, she thought, such a stupid fool I was.*
"I have something to show you." Aegon sounded exultant. "Don't look so worried. It's a treat for you, a reward for doing such a good job with my new cloak."

Sansa wasn't worried, she was just utterly disinterested. However, she did lift her gaze to take in the cloak. It had been one of the Targaryen banners sent down by Lady Mariya Darry, but Sansa had been given a needle and thread and set to work. Now it hung from his shoulders, the red three-headed dragon proudly on display. She had tried to pull and Arya and sent a few of the stitches off their mark. But all it had done was make the neck of the third dragon look a little distorted when she hoped it would end up looking like it was kissing its own arse.

As she looked, Aegon gave an obliging whirl. Under the cloak, he wore a mail shirt and gleaming breastplate. The sword at his hip almost touched his ankle. "Come on. I want to show you and I'm leaving soon."

They had docked in the Stormlands; the entire fleet of the Golden Company was being rushed to shore. If she strained her ears, she thought she could hear the distant tolling of warning bells, ringing out the urgency of the oncoming threat. Too nervous to argue, Sansa followed him on deck.

The sight that greeted her stole her breath away. Hundreds of small rowing boats were descending on the shoreline, thousands of armed men already landing on the beaches. Smoke was already rising in the distant sky, undoubtedly some poor smallfolk's farm going up in flames. Aegon hurried her along before she could stand and dwell too long.

Back below deck on the ship, he led her to his room where a large chest was positioned close to his berth. It was the same one she'd seen the night before, being hauled onto their ship from the one Rolly Duckfield used. He was the leader of the Golden Company, she knew. Meanwhile, Aegon unlocked the chest and raised the lid, holding it open like a magician about to conjure a rabbit.

"Go on. Look."

It was a sword. Sansa could feel it beneath red velvet wrappings. It was a banner, she realised. Deep red embossed with a black dragon — the sigil of House Blackfyre. She peeled the velvet back to find the longsword inside, its old leather and oak scabbard embossed with the sigil of House Targaryen. She drew the blade, revealing ancient and beautiful Valyrian steel. The breath hitched in her throat.

"Is this… is this- " she stammered, wide-eyed.

Aegon snatched the blade from her hands. "Blackfyre."

He drew the blade and tossed the scabbard on his bunk, flourishing the sword to her throat and laughing loudly as she gasped and fell back. She almost tripped over as the point of the steel nearly grazed her neck. She knew little and less about swords, but she knew Valyrian steel kept its edge regardless of its age. And she knew her father and brothers would never have pulled a stunt like that even if it was just a stupid, blunted tourney sword in their hands.

"Put that down!" she scolded. "Bittersteel brought Blackfyre with him when he founded the Golden Company. You having it proves nothing so stop playing with it. It's not a toy."

And it's not yours, she added in her head. Just for a moment, as Aegon stood there admiring the blade, he disappeared from Sansa's view. Instead, she saw Jon standing there with that sword in his hands and that cloak hanging from his shoulders.
"You're no fun, wolf girl." Aegon was back.

"And you're no dragon."

The blow hit her jaw, sending her reeling backwards. It came so quick she didn't even cry out in alarm and the bitter tang of blood was tasted on her tongue. She wouldn't cry now, either. The decision was made in an instant to deny him the satisfaction of seeing her cry. He glared at her, hoping she'd cry. When she did not, he sheathed the sword and locked it back in the chest before storming off in anger.

Only when he was gone did Sansa leave the berth. Her jaw burned and her lip was bleeding. But before she left, she made a note of where that sword was being kept. Aegon took the keys, and their ship was anchored miles from the shore. Guards had been posted on the deck to watch over her, so theft and escape with a precious sword in hand was not an option. Still, she had learned to live in hope and there might yet be a way.

Back on deck, the guards watched her in impassive silence. Aegon was already being lowered down in a rowing boat, ready to lead his men. Jon Connington was furious that the young pretender insisted on leading the assault, but Sansa was glad. More chance of Renly killing him. And Robb and Jon would be on their way soon. She had to believe that. But then she remembered where Jon had been sent and the tears welled in her eyes.

They had come at a bad time. That much was obvious as Lysa Arryn stumbled into the Eyrie's throne room dishevelled and flushed in the face, grinning over her shoulder to where Petyr Baelish lurked on the side-lines. Jon looked over at him, noting how he smiled back but that that smile still did not reach his eyes. Even Lysa's smile died a sudden death when she turned her face to Jon and Ser Barristan. The only resemblance she shared with Catelyn was the auburn hair and blue eyes. Even so, while Catelyn's were a vibrant blue, Lysa's were small and sharp and regarding the newcomers with deep suspicion.

"My sister sent you- "

"The King sent me," Ser Barristan cut in. "He wonders why you are not at court."

"Since my husband died I have no place at court," she answered, sharply. "My place is here at the Eyrie, with my son."

"You have a duty to your king," Barristan reminded her. "If he summons you, you must come or have good reason."

"Is my sickly son not reason enough?" she countered.

Watching the exchange, Jon felt the urgent need to simply agree with her and get out of the Eyrie as fast as possible. Ever since receiving Ami's letter, he couldn't shake the feeling they were wasting their precious time in entirely the wrong part of the realm.

"I have seen the boy, my lords," Petyr spoke from the side lines. "He is unwell, too fragile to make the descent, never mind the journey to King's Landing. Would the King separate a mother from her sick child?"

The appeal to Ser Barristan's frustrated paternal side seemed to work, softening the old knight's stance. But, before he could say anything, Petyr pressed on:

"Now that Lady Sansa has been abducted, I am certain the King has far more pressing matters to
occupy his time with than a worried mother. But your journey has not been wasted, gentlemen. As it happens, I am returning to court myself on the morrow. My ship sails from Gulltown and you're more than welcome to join me."

Jon looked to Ser Barristan, inwardly praying he'd just agree and they could get back to King's Landing and re-join the search for Sansa properly.

"I can pass this on to his grace," he replied, at length. "But don't-"

"Very good," Lysa cut over him, irritable now she thought the matter was as good as resolved. "Is that the bastard?"

Her question was met with a moment of stunned silence, all the while Lysa looked hard at Jon. She was as blunt as her sister, he had to give her that.

"I asked a question, Ser Barristan. Is that Eddard Stark's bastard?"

"Jon has been legitimised-"

"I want to talk to him," Lysa cut in again. "Alone."

The few servants in the hall shuffled out, but Ser Barristan and Petyr remained. She looked sharply between them both from her weirwood perch high above the audience chamber. "By 'alone' I mean 'alone, by myself'."

The smirk died from Petyr's face, while Barristan and Jon exchanged a worried look. The wind rattled against the infamous moon door and Jon had images of Catelyn's sister going where she had always feared to tread and just shoving him out of it for her. All the same, he nodded his assent and Ser Barristan reluctantly left alongside Baelish. He hoped they would use the time to finalise their travel plans.

Once they were alone, Lysa rose from her seat up on the dais and closed the gap between them. She took the steps carefully, the hems of her skirts lifted delicately over her ankles. Up close, he could see she didn't much resemble Lady Stark at all. She was plump where Catelyn was slender, her hair was a dull pale orange where Catelyn's was a burnished auburn. Her skin was pale, and she had the look of a younger plainer sister who was sick to death of being compared to her older sister.

"She hates you, you know," said Lysa, leading him to a seat in an alcove. "My sister, that is."

"I had noticed." Jon settled into the upholstered seat and glanced out of the window, overlooking the glorious mountain range below them.

Lysa's demeanour had changed. The sharpness had gone, like a mask slipping from her face. Her smile was more natural, her mannerisms less jerky and smoother.

"She would have left you to the wolves," Lysa continued. "She wrote to me and said as much. Here, let me show you."

He averted his gaze as she reached into her bodice and withdrew a letter she'd stashed down there. But when she handed the letter over, he saw the grey seal engraved with the direwolf stamp. Catelyn's hand was familiar, too. Careful not to tear the aging parchment, he unfolded it and began reading. He squinted, wondering whether he simply couldn't read Catelyn's handwriting for a moment. But it wasn't that. This wasn't the common tongue.

"My lady," he said, holding it up for her to see. "I can't read this."
Lysa stifled a girlish giggle. "Of course you can't. That's our language that we invented."

*Then why the fuck are you showing it to me?"* Oh," he flatly replied.

"But you can see it, can't you," she said, taking the letter back from him. "It's all in there."

"Yes, I can well imagine," he assured her, laughing uncomfortably.

Abruptly, Lysa was terse and impatient again. "You don't need to imagine anything, I showed you. I showed the letter and what she said."

That letter could have said anything and this was madness. Wishing for this meeting to simply end, he blurted out what he hoped was conciliatory platitudes: "Yes, Lady Arryn, I saw it and I saw what Catelyn said, even if I didn't quite understand it. But she's always been that way and there's nothing I can do. I'm sorry that your sister doesn't like me, I didn't mean to make her life difficult and I don't mean to offend you by offending her. If this is all there is, I must get back to Ser Barristan."

Always changing, Lysa calmed again and Jon began to hope she would let him go. However, there was more. "And she's so perfect. Everyone thinks that, don't they? My father thought it. I bet your father thinks it. But you and me, we know the truth, don't we? We know what she's really like."

There was an icy-calmness in her tone that froze Jon to the core. The way she looked at him, unflinching in her conviction. Everything about this situation screamed at him to back off, to get away as far as he could. But it was only him and her, alone in the audience chamber in a castle stuck up a very high mountain.

"While Lady Catelyn was never kind to me, nor was she ever cruel my lady," he said. "To be fair to her-"

"You have no reason to be fair to her, my lord," she cut in. "Just think of everything she's ever done to you, and everything she's ever wanted to do to you – you'd be dead a hundred times in a hundred ways had it not been for your father. And it's not just you, it's me as well that she's done it to. Catelyn's like that, a selfish bitch who thinks of no one but herself-"

"Yes, but what can I do?" he blurted out.

Lysa grabbed his hand, her eyes searching his own and shining. "But there is, I have a –"

The doors to the hall burst open, the noise resounding off the high stone walls. Ser Barristan stood there, breathless and wide-eyed. "Jon, an urgent message!"

Just for the briefest of moments, Jon was torn between staying to find out what it was Lysa had and his desire to leave her to her madness. Opting for the latter, he got up and made hasty apologies as he all but fled the room. To his dismay, Lysa was making ready to follow.

Ser Barristan had the foresight to shut the weirwood doors. "Not so urgent, it's from Gatehouse Ami but we thought you might need rescuing."

"Ah, Gatehouse Ami, lifting her portcullis for every passing knight," Baelish smirked, stroking his goatee beard. His eyes met Jon's. "And squires, no doubt."

Jon chose to ignore the insinuation and turned his attention to the letter. *Forget Lysa, get back to the city now. It's Aegon and he's got your sister.* Feeling like he'd been smacked in the face, he looked dumbly to Ser Barristan as he read the letter aloud.
"But Aegon's dead." Petyr and Ser Barristan spoke in unison. It was strange to see even Petyr Baelish looking shocked.

Lysa burst through the doors, straight to Petyr's side.

"Ser Barristan, you saw the prince's body," said Petyr. "They say he was a pulp."

"I didn't see him, I was wounded in the Riverlands," he pointed out.

A shadow of doubt crossed Petyr's face.

" Didn't you see him?" Jon asked, looking to the Master of Coin.

"Long before my time at court. Lysa, did Jon Arryn see what happened to Prince Aegon?"

Lysa looked like she didn't know who Prince Aegon was. "You mean the dragon child? No, he was outside the city. What does it matter? He's dead as dead can be."

The silence thickened with each of them looking at the other. Petyr broke the spell by hurriedly steering Lysa away so they could whisper urgently in each other's ears. Jon was aware of them, but he was fixed only on the letter.

"We've got to go, Ser Barristan. We've got to go right now."

"I'm inclined to agree. Come on, we begin the descent now."

Jon found his cloak where he'd left it, Ser Barristan was already saying his farewells to Lysa Arryn. But Baelish interjected: "Wait until morning and I can sail you both home. You'll be back in the city within the day."

Seemingly swept up in a sudden change of heart, Lysa declared: "And I'm coming with you."

Petyr smiled approvingly and Jon misliked it all. But there was no time. A belief ser Barristan shared. "It's your ship Petyr, sail it home today, as soon as we get there. By order of the king."

"This one was Sansa's?" Catelyn cradled the egg in her hands as she spoke to Lyanna. She turned it over in her hands, admiring the orange glow and the veined black swirls. "It is exquisite."

The box was open on Lyanna's table, the other two eggs still nestled inside in a cushion of black velvet. The white and green alongside the gold and silver, the latter gifted to her. Lyanna picked it up and trailed her finger down the cold, stone shell. Close by, Margaery hovered by the cabinet they were kept in, making a sudden movement toward the other two women.

"Varys-"

But it was too late. The Eunuch was in the private chamber and standing at Catelyn's shoulder with the orange egg reflected in his colourless eyes. For a man so large, it never ceased to amaze Lyanna how he could move so fast, so silently.

"Aren't they beautiful," he opined. Stepping around Catelyn, he stroked the white and green. "How rare, how valuable they are. Where did they come from?"

"They were found below the Black Cells," said Lyanna, replacing Sansa's egg and snapping the box closed. "A freak discovery, to be sure, but Robert and I have decided to keep them for the sake of their value."
Even after the box was locked, Varys continued gazing at it in wonder. "If I may suggest, a vault in the Iron Bank would be most safe."

"They're quite all right in our private vaults," Lyanna assured him while simultaneously noting to have them hastily removed to somewhere secret. At least until Jon returned. "Have you any news for us?"

"Concerning Lady Sansa, none I'm afraid," he replied, his tone airy as if about to burst into song. "However, I hear the Stark and Lannister forces have finally met in the Riverlands."

"Are they fighting?" Catelyn cut in. "My son is leading them, you must know something."

"Not yet, but it's only a matter of time," he replied, meeting Lyanna's gaze for a second. His own expression was unreadable. "There's been reports of raiding and growing tensions along the Goldroad, where Northmen have been forcing their way onto Tywin's lands. It might also interest your grace to know that Viserys Targaryen met an unfortunate accident on the way through Vaes Dothrak."

Lyanna was impressed by the way Varys tacked on the real news to the end of the false rumours Cersei had fed him. All the same, it shocked her.

"What kind of an accident?"

"One that's left him mortally challenged, your grace."

By the time he was gone, and Catelyn had returned to Ned, Lyanna was left alone with Margaery and her thoughts. News of Viserys' death troubled her greatly and she couldn't sit down. Instead, she paced the room and chewed on her lower-lip, a bad habit from childhood that always returned to her in times of strife. All the time, a small thought played at the back of her mind: did Robert do this?

She tried to tell herself she was being silly, that there hadn't even been enough time since Robert learned of the trouble with Daenerys to act on his rage. But as the sun set and the castle grew quieter, she heard the running footsteps outside her door. Margaery looked up from her needlework, frowning at the intrusion. Lyanna's heart felt like it had stopped.

"Who was that?"

The question punctuated by the slamming of a door.

"No one should be able to get in here."

Lyanna wrenched open the door that led to the gallery connecting her rooms to Robert's. Armed with a three-inch letter opener, Margaery padded softly to the Queen's side, peering out from behind her. Meryn Trant was on duty, but he rarely passed through the King's private rooms. The gallery was deserted.

"There on the floor," said Margaery, pointing the letter opener at a sheet of folded parchment. "I'll get Ser Jaime."

Leaning out of the doorway, Lyanna glanced left and right before calling out to anyone who may be lurking. While they were at the back door, Jaime Lannister appeared through the front looking worried.

"I think they've gone," she said.
"All the same, your grace," he replied, drawing level with her. He drew his sword and they entered the gallery together.

Finding themselves completely alone, Lyanna scooped up the parchment and found the royal seal already broken. By the light of a flickering torch, she read the warrant of death for Daenerys of House Targaryen affixed with Robert's seal. Her stomach turned as she looked it over again.

"Is this a duplicate?" she asked, looking to Jaime as if he'd know. "If this is a duplicate the order's already been dispatched."

Feeling sick, her head reeled as Jaime replied with words she could not hear. Robert had broken his word. Ser Barristan had not been around to argue against him. Even Eddard would not have been there when the order was signed. She fell back, hitting the wall behind her. All things considered, the order felt sneaky and duplicitous, and that made everything all the worse. "My brother," she murmured. "I need to see my brother."

Dazed and disoriented, Sansa found herself on the headlands overlooking Shipbreaker Bay, breathing in the air thick with salt, blood and smoke. All around her, fires still burned and the ground with littered with fresh corpses. Varys, it seemed had done his job well. Renly and his small force of men had been diverted to Bitterbridge and were still making their way to Storm's End when the Golden Company launched their lightning attack.

Prisoners were being rounded up, ready for ransom if their families were rich enough to buy them back. Others would be used to keep their families in line, just as Sansa was being used. Others, those of little to no importance, had been slaughtered where they stood. Their corpses were strewn across the headlands like flotsam from the region's many storms. Respite came in the form of Septa Lemore, who moved among the dead to dispense their final blessings.

Numb, freezing and soaked from wading ashore from a rowboat not two hours before, Sansa shivered and watched as the prisoner was brought before her. Renly Baratheon was bound with his hands behind his back, forced to kneel before her and had his head wrenched up by the hair. Exulting in his triumph, Aegon came to stand beside her.

"This is the usurper's brother, isn't it?"

Renly had no choice but to look up at them. Sansa met his gaze, desperately wishing she could somehow reassure him or give him hope.

"No," she lied. "You've made a mistake. I know not who this man is."

"That's Renly," someone else said. "It's him. Get him to yield, we don't have time for silly games."

Her lie might have been an abysmal failure, but Renly smiled at her all the same. A sad, haunting smile. Aegon kicked her for lying.

"All you're good for is beating defenceless girls," Renly snapped, angry in the face of ruin. "Yes, I'm Renly. Come and take me, but leave that child be you hopeless fucking coward!"

Aegon went to launch himself at the prisoner, but Jon Connington caught him and yanked him back into line. Meanwhile, a circle of men had formed wide around them, all baited and waiting for blood.

"Yield the castle to us and we will treat you right-"

"I will not yield," Renly cut in from his kneeling place. "You'll have to kill me and even then, the
castle will not yield."

"Have it your way." Jon Connington shrugged. "Bring out the first prisoner."

Septa Lemore had come to stand by Sansa's side as the circle broke and another captive was dragged before Renly. The two men were knelt facing each, so close Sansa thought they could almost kiss. She didn't know who the other man was, he no longer wore the livery of his House but it was clear Renly knew him.

"Yield."

The new prisoner gave a barely perceptible shake of the head.

Renly's jaw set firm. "I will not yield."

Rolly Duckfield moved into the circle, holding up a flaming torch. He nodded to a man standing directly behind the new prisoner. Sansa saw him move, the flash of the blade in his hand. All too late, Renly realised too and struggled against his bindings. But it was over in half a heartbeat. The prisoner's throat was cut deep to the bone, his corpse kicked off the edge of the cliff. The sound of the corpse hitting the rocks below was drowned out by Renly's furious protests. The blood of the murdered prisoner had sprayed over his tunic.

*He's being so brave,* she thought, helplessly. Feeling lightheaded, only Septa Lemore holding her hand kept her tethered to consciousness. The second prisoner brought before Renly went the same way as the first, but the young prince was struggling to remain composed. For surely he was thinking the same thing Sansa was: that they cannot possibly kill every man there, one by one, in hope of breaking his spirit?

*Hold on,* she inwardly pleaded with him, *hold on…*

"I will not yield!" the words were forced out through gritted teeth. "Kill me and not them you dogs, you swine!"

But he was breaking. As each man was brought before him and forced to kneel, Renly looked him in the eye and didn't even blink. It was all he could do to give them strength, to let them die with a shred of dignity. Sansa remembered her father once telling Robb: look a man in the eye if he is to die for you. Her admiration for Renly soared.

The fourth went out with a shout of open defiance: "Long live King Robert!"

But once he was despatched, Renly was almost broken and Duckfield stepped into the circle once more.

"Enough of this. Enough." Any relief felt was short-lived. "Bring out my lord's lady love."

"They cannot kill a woman."

Sansa's cry of protest was drowned out by Renly's shouting, he reared up and fought harder than ever against his bindings. But the Golden Company were down on him fast, pinning him to the ground and holding his head still by the hair. The circle broke and it was not a woman now forced to kneel before the Lord of Storm's End. It was Ser Loras Tyrell, bound and pinned in place by two much larger men. Renly stilled at the sight of him, a tear drop shining in the torchlight as it crept down his bloodied face.

"Don't you yield!" Loras hissed, teeth clenched. "Don't you dare yield!"
The knife was already at Loras' throat, the blade cutting into the flesh and drawing blood. Just as the sellsword was about to cut in for the kill, Renly broke.

"I yield!" It broke the spell, saving Loras' life. For good measure, he repeated it again: "I yield."

Taking no chances, Renly was still bound and overpowered as he was forced to lead the invaders inside the walls of Storm's End. They had no chance of storming this castle, not with its legendarily thick walls built by Bran the Builder himself. It was only ever going to be taken if the Lord himself yielded. And he yielded.

In a trance of despair and horror at what she'd just witnessed, Sansa followed the sorry procession inside, unable to think straight. The staff and the Maester were summoned, even the low servants who cleaned the rooms and tended the kitchens. They wept openly as they saw their master, whom they had known and loved since his birth, dragged before them so bound. With a sword at ser Loras' back, Renly formally yielded.

His voice cracked with exhaustion and emotion as he called out the solemn declaration: "I yield Storm's End to Aegon of the House Targaryen, rightful King of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men. Rightful Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and protector of the realm. Do not oppose him and you all shall live."

Jon Connington nodded some small act of respect to Renly Baratheon, but immediately made his way inside the castle. Loras was left beside Renly, until the prince was pulled away and a block dropped on the ground at his feet. A grim-faced sellsword drew his longsword.

"Kneel, my lord," Rolly Duckfield commanded.

"No!" Loras yelled, lashing at those close to him. "He yielded. He fucking yielded."

Another circle formed in anticipation of the final act of this mummer's farce. With no defiance left to show, Renly opted instead for dignity. He knelt in the mud, steadying himself with his hands still tied behind his back. For the first time, Sansa realised he was young. So very young.

"You can't do this!" Loras cried out, sounding like a wounded animal. He was held back, pinned in place again. "He yielded!"

Something came over Sansa as she pressed her hands firm against Loras' chest. She did not understand all this business of them being lovers, she'd never heard of such a thing. But she understood, in that moment, that they did love each other. She squeezed Loras' arm as tight as she could.

"Peace, my lord," she pleaded. "Do not let his last sight of you be like this."

Loras calmed and the yard fell eerily silent. Lemore offered a silent blessing and Sansa stood straight-backed and stoic as Renly unfastened his collar and laid his head on the block, neck exposed to the sword. This time, Sansa kept watching, not even blinking as she stayed with Renly until the very end. Until the sword fell, taking his head in one clean stroke.
The crowned stag went up in smoke. Yellow silk banners blackened and shrivelled in the flames, soon followed by a crowned direwolf the invaders had found inside the common hall, a relic from one of Queen Lyanna's many visits to her husband's land. In their places, the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen now fluttered from the flagpoles on every turret and tower in Storm's End. Robert and Lyanna's lover's knots were hacked off the walls and ceilings, similarly fed to the flames in the yard. Numb from shock, Sansa watched their entwined initials char and blacken.

Renly's body was already gone, but she didn't see who had taken him. She hoped it was Loras, who would bury him some place special to him. But all thoughts of Renly were pushed aside as a young boy with black hair and bright blue eyes was led from the keep and into the yard. He was only about eight or nine. Too young, perhaps, to understand what was happening.

Aegon leaned down close to speak with him. "And what's your name?"

"Edric."

"Edric what?"

The boy was hesitant, wary. "Storm."

"Robert's bastard," someone else supplied. "He's kept here, out of the Queen's sight."

"Does Lyanna know about him?" Aegon asked.

"I sincerely doubt it. Mind you, even Robert's probably forgotten him by now."

Aegon smiled. "It's time he was reminded. Well, Edric Storm, you're our prisoner now. Let's hope your father hasn't entirely forsaken you."

That night, as the chaos reached a crescendo, Sansa lay sleepless in the turret she and the other prisoners had been taken to. She was sharing her room with Edric Storm, but the boy had curled up tight and wept bitterly for his murdered uncle. When she tried to comfort him, he pushed her away. Deciding he needed space, she removed herself as far as she could, to the other side of the room. Pushing the room's only table under a window, she climbed up so she could take a look outside. Darkness had fallen and all she could hear was a storm rolling in and blowing up all around Durran's Point. Already, several of the Golden Company had returned to their ships and were moving into a defensive formation out in Shipbreaker Bay – she could see small lights on their decks. At least, that's what she thought they were probably doing. She knew nothing of battles or defences, an ignorance that only added to her sense of helplessness. They didn't teach that sort of thing to girls. All the same, Arya would have known. Arya probably would have known how to get out of this mess and now she missed her sister more than ever.

A key turning in the lock startled her so much she almost fell off the table. She jumped off quick
enough so that her gaolers wouldn't catch her looking out and righted herself just in time for the man to step inside the room. The table was where she left it, but she could only hope he wouldn't notice.

He was a bald man, with a full red beard and weathered face. At the sound of his entrance, Edric stopped crying and lifted his head from his arms.

"Ser Cortnay!" He fell on the man, wrapping his skinny arms around his waist. "I thought they killed you like they did Uncle Renly."

While Ser Cortnay returned the child's hug, he kept his wary eyes on Sansa. "Who are you, girl? You came in with them, I saw you with the Septa. Tell me true."

Oh gods, she thought, he thinks I'm one of them. "I am Sansa, of House Stark. They took me from the Red Keep in the middle of the night."

The man visibly sagged with relief. Even the boy smiled at her now, and she suspected he too had feared she was an enemy, only brought to this room to watch over him.

"I should have guessed when they said they wanted a lock of your hair," said Ser Cortnay, who extricated himself from Edric and kissed Sansa's hand. Not caring about her hair anymore, she let him get on with cutting off a thick lock. "I am Ser Cortnay Penrose, Castellan of Storm's End. Your father and brothers are scouring the realm in search of you-"

"What news of my family, my lord?" Sansa couldn't help but cut in, twirling her shorn lock. "Are they well? Have you seen them?"

He shook his head. "I've received ravens beyond counting from Lord Eddard, but know he hasn't given up the search. Your mother has arrived in King's Landing, and your brother has amassed his bannermen. That is all I know." He paused, drawing both Edric and Sansa together. "Now, I need you both to listen: I have bent the knee to Prince Aegon and sworn fealty. I must play along if I am to help you. Soon, the King's forces will fall on this castle but for now we're alone. I will do my best to keep you safe until I find a way to get you out."

"And what of Ser Loras?" asked Sansa. "Renly only yielded because they were going to kill him. He would never have done it, otherwise."

"I know, child," Ser Cortnay assured her. "Ser Loras is a turn above you and I'm on my way to see him now. Before I go, what can you tell me about this Aegon? Who is he? Where has he come from?"

"I don't know who he is," Sansa replied. "He's backed by a man in Pentos, whose name is Ilyrio Mopatis. I met him. He's so rich he bought the Golden Company and said he could do it thrice more without even noticing. Varys, the spymaster at the Red Keep, is his ally. They're working together to start a war and put Aegon on the throne."

Ser Cortnay smiled, squeezing her hand for reassurance. "Only a man with no balls could dream up this craven plan. What's the story with Aegon's survival?"

"Varys paid a pauper with too many children for their youngest baby, then swapped that baby with Prince Aegon," she explained.

"And the pauper was slain in Aegon's place," Ser Cortnay concluded. "Do they have proof?"

"None. And it's not true. He's not a real prince."
"I'm sure you're right, my lady. But there's no time to worry about that now. Once he's defeated and his forces swept away, then we'll worry about who he really is."

With that, he left them alone again and had to relock the door lest anyone grow suspicious of him. But, come the morning, she was let out again. Edric was discharged to the care of the Maester while Sansa broke her fast with Septa Lemore in the common hall. Other prisoners, the highborn fighting men, weren't quite so lucky. Considered too dangerous to be wandering the castle, Aegon had had them shut away in the dungeons.

Up on the dais, he occupied the lord's seat where Renly would have sat as he presided over the affairs of Storm's End. How quickly Aegon made himself at home. Every time she glanced up at him, she noticed he was watching her back. His dark blue eyes narrowed, always trained on her as if she were providing some great entertainment.

"He's washed his hair," said Septa Lemore. "Hadn't you noticed?"

And so he had. The blue dye hadn't come out completely, but the blonde that lay beneath was showing through. It was just blonde; not silver that the Targaryens were famed for. But then, Sansa had never seen a Targaryen with proper Valyrian looks before. Jon took after Lyanna, with dark brown hair and grey eyes so he proved to be no great frame of reference.

"It doesn't look silver to me," she said, keeping her voice low. "But, is silver and blonde basically the same?"

"Oh, no," the septa answered. "No, Prince Rhaegar had a very specific look."

Not for the first time, Sansa found herself wondering about the Septa. When they first met, she made it quite clear she knew Sansa's father. Now she revealed that she had known Prince Rhaegar too. Whatever was going on, there was more to her than met the eye. Although suddenly burning up with questions, she held back until they were out of the hall and walking the castle ramparts.

The storm of the night before had died out as quickly as it started, leaving the air fresh but breezy. The fires had gone out, the blood was being washed from the cobbles in the forecourt and the only sign of trouble was the thousands of armed sellswords swarming around the outer walls. Trenches were being dug already, presumably in preparation for a siege. In the training yards, where once Robert and his brothers would have practised side by side, Aegon was now taking up arms against a member of the Golden Company. Jon Connington was looking on, shouting out instructions to his young lord. Sansa dearly hoped the pretender would be beaten into the dirt.

However, her mind was back on the Septa. "Who are you?"

Lemore paused, watching Aegon's sparring from between two merlons. "Me? I'm just a Septa."

"How long have you been with Aegon?"

"Not for long, only a few months really," Lemore answered. "To tell it true, I'd known about it for some time. I was serving a septrie in southern Dorne, where the old Griff, Jon Connington, tracked me down and told me about the baby swap. At the time, I believed the Griff had drunk himself to death after being exiled by the Mad King. Him just being there was enough of a surprise for one day. When he told me about Aegon, I gave him my thoughts. My thoughts were that Varys and Mopatis were playing him for a fool. He returned to the Shy Maid and I returned to the sept. Until about three or four months ago."

Sansa just assumed curiosity got the better of her. "So, what made you change your mind?"
Lemore paused, her eyes trained on the spot where Aegon was taking on three challengers at once. Despite Sansa's earlier assumptions, he was a formidable fighter and easily secured victory over a fourth contender.

"Word reached me that your lord father was bringing Jon Snow to court," she replied, at length.

"Jon's a Stark," Sansa corrected her.

Lemore met her gaze, fixing her with an uncomfortably searching look. Out in the light of day, for the first time, Sansa noticed the Septa's eyes could almost be described as purple.

"What I mean is, my father had him legitimised," she hastily added.

The searching look didn't waver. "Of course, my mistake. Jon's a Stark."

With that, she turned back to the sparring session where Aegon was still overpowering all comers. He parried and lunged expertly, to the delight of Lord Connington.

"But, why would Jon coming to court make you change your mind about serving Aegon?" she asked, frowning as she thought of some innocuous reason behind Jon's presence in King's Landing. "He's only learning administration from our father so he can help Robb in the future. He's not staying there forever. Why, he might even join the Night's Watch one day."

Lemore turned back to her, raising a smile caught somewhere between amusement and pity. It was the sort of look Old Nan used to give the Stark children before saying: "Oh, you sweet summer child..." But, Sansa was just fine with that. She didn't want the Septa getting a whisper of the truth until she knew what she was all about. And, right now, Lemore was an enigma wrapped in a mystery.

"The past is a very strange place, my lady," Lemore eventually said. "You're twelve, if you're a day, and things that happened before you were born... well, I'm going to leave that there. But what I will say is this: I think your aunt has other plans for your brother. Administration of a very different sort. If that is to come to pass, we need to know who that boy down there really is."

"Are you-" Sansa cut herself off, but realised she'd already done the damage. "Are you helping us?"

Lemore was silent again. Down in the yard, Aegon was savagely but effectively taking on a new opponent. He seemed tireless, where Septa Lemore suddenly looked a lot older.

"I like to think so, although I have singularly failed in my mission to find out the truth. Your father may have shattered my heart once, but I bear him no ill will. Nor you, so stay with me and together we'll find our way back home."

A cheer rose from the yard below, Aegon's victory in the sparring yard heralded with cries of triumph. Relieved, Sansa turned to watch and faked a smile as fake as Aegon himself.

Waves crashed over the gunwale of the ship. But was it the rough seas rocking the boat or Lysa's screaming orgasms? Jon couldn't tell, but he sought sanctuary along with Ser Barristan, up on deck at the prow of the rolling ship. Out of earshot of their erstwhile travelling companions, Jon struggled across the deck, only to be damn near swept out to sea on a huge wave. Soaked and freezing as he was, it was preferable to being in the company of Petyr Baelish and his ardent lover. Ser Barristan, it seemed was of the same mind.

"How long now until we reach dry land?" Jon asked, raising his voice to be heard over the crashing seas.
The boat listed and pitched to the side, almost throwing off both of them. Only clinging to the mast saved them, but one of the sails had been torn free by high winds. It was now flapping its way across the Narrow Sea toward Braavos. Some suicidally brave deckhand would have to shimmy up the mast to replace it before long.

"It could be weeks if this weather doesn't let up," the old knight answered. "You need to get below decks, else you'll be feeding the fish before evenfall."

Another wave washed over them, spurring the oarsmen to heave all their strength into every stroke, just to keep the ship on course. Jon could taste the salt on his lips, the sea water made his eyes sting.

"I can't," Jon protested. "Whoever that is pretending to be Aegon, what's the chances they've landed on Dragonstone? It's the natural choice and I want to see if all is well on the island."

"Even if they have, we won't be able to engage them, Jon. We're only one ship. We circle the bay wide, stay out of range and keep a straight course for Blackwater Bay."

There was no use arguing. The Old Knight was right, as usual. But the enforced inactivity of being cooped up on a boat, even in a raging storm, was killing him. Aegon was out there. He had Sansa. And even if Ami was wrong, the not knowing was crushing him all the same. Just to do something other than idle around waiting to be blasted into the mouth of the Blackwater, Jon volunteered his services to the crew. Amidst the storm, he was pulling on rigging, helping raise new sails to replace the torn one and even took up an oar himself, allowing one man to get some rest.

Eventually, they rounded Crackclaw Point before the storm died away. They were heading toward Dragonstone where all looked … normal. The banners of House Baratheon still flew from the towers and turrets, all was quiet on the shoreline where fishermen were at their work now the seas had calmed. Only two ships were making a hasty getaway from the castle and they hoisted sails bearing Lord Stannis' personal sigil.

"Ami could have been mistaken or misled, Jon," Ser Barristan said as they cut across the bay. There was no need for circling now. "All the same, Stannis' ships seem in a hurry to get back as well."

He wasn't wrong. The speedy cogs had already pulled well ahead of their own galley.

Eddard had already pulled the Hand clasp from his tunic, throwing it down on Lyanna's desk in disgust. The colour had drained from his face, his features drawn from lack of sleep. All the same, his temper had snapped and his anger shone. "I look at you, Lya and I no longer recognise you. You swore you would support me-

No longer willing to be Robert's whipping girl, Lyanna reared up. "And I have, Eddard. I have done what I can, but I don't rule Robert any more than he rules me. Surely you understand that?"

The argument between him and the King had almost come to blows and Lyanna was still shaking. The look in her brother's eyes was not helping.

"You've been talking to Cersei Lannister without telling me, you've been making excuses for Robert since the girl got pregnant and now you're brushing this off, too!"

Ned swept his hand across the top of the desk, sending a shower of papers up in the air, where they drifted back down like autumn leaves. Among them, the death warrant for Daenerys Targaryen. Before arguing back, she paused to draw a deep breath and gather herself. "You heard what Robert said. He's only done this to pacify restive councillors. It's not even signed and it will never be despatched. He promised me, Ned. It's just for show."
"And you're stupid enough to believe it," he countered.

"I am not stupid, but you are if you storm off in a rage now. What about Sansa? She could turn up at any minute and what am I to say to her if you're already on a boat back to Winterfell?"

"Sansa!" Ned laughed mirthlessly. "What has he done to help us find her? Nothing, Lya. He hasn't even offered to sit the iron throne for me while I search for her. I have to do everything and I'm sick of it. He's taken me granted and he's taken you for a fool!"

Breathless and flushed in the face from another shouting match, Ned was forced to stop. All the while, he did not take his gaze from her.

"I can help you," she said, pleading now. "Robert won't mind me sitting on the Small Council, just tell me what needs to be done and I will do it. You will be free to search for Sansa."

"But it shouldn't be this way, Lyanna. Robert is the King and he should be pulling his weight. If he lifts a hand at all, it's to sign children's death warrants and I cannot sanction that. I will not be a party to that."

She remembered, years ago, the fight Ned and Robert had had over the murdered Targaryen children. Although she had not been there, she was for the aftermath and the reconciliation. Only now it seemed worse. It was a wound festering between them, bursting at will. Looking at her brother now, she wondered whether he had ever truly forgiven Robert for what happened to Aegon and Rhaenys.

Before she could answer, Robert was back. He shouldered his way through the door, still in a towering rage of his own.

"Are you still here, damn you? Go on, get back to your frozen hell hole before I change my mind and have you arrested."

"Robert, no!" Lyanna cut in. "Stop this, both of you."

"Quiet, sister," Ned snapped at her as she tried to get between them. "Stay out of this."

"Stay out of it?" Robert rejoined. "She's spoken up for the dragons at every turn. You know, sometimes I wonder about both of you. You're always defending them, the both of you are always interfering with any attempt to deal with them. What is it, Lyanna? Prince Rhaegar still got his claws in you-"

"Enough!" Ned cut in. "I will not have you speak of my sister like that, not after she has endured."

"I'll speak to my wife however I damn well like-"

"But is she your wife still?" Ned cut in again. He was so close to Robert their noses were almost touching, yet they still felt the need to yell at each other. "I think it's time to let her decide her own future."

"Ned, please," she interceded. "We need calm heads and cool nerves. Please stop this."

But the stand off continued and she was being forced into making a choice: her brother or her husband. She tried to separate them, to insert herself between them before it came to blows like it already had once before. She touched Ned's face, she was about to say his name until the doors burst open. Varys, flanked by Ser Jaime and Ser Meryn halted but did not back out, even if they had noticed the tension in the room.
"Your Grace, urgent news from Storm's End," said the Eunuch, colourless eyes falling on Robert. "The Castle is taken. You must come now."

As soon as they docked, they grabbed their horses and ran. Any luggage Lysa and Petyr might have had, they left orders to have it brought up to the castle after them. Jon dug his spurs into the horse's flanks, barely caring when he almost ploughed into a loaded cart. He jumped it instead, and barely broke his pace. Ser Barristan was level with him, neither of them talking until they made it through the gates of the Red Keep. While everything in the city seemed fine, it was clear something was amiss at court.

The place was empty. Out in the courts, where normally knights were training and Lords were mixing with friends, all was quiet and still. Until Baelish and Lysa caught up with them, they were the only two people there, along with Ghost. Seconds after their arrival, a stable hand did arrive for their horses, but he had no idea what was going on.

"We better get in," said Ser Barristan.

Even he looked worried now and that, in turn, worried Jon even more. But, as they made their way up the red stone steps, Varys appeared looking flustered and pink in the face.

"Oh, thank the gods you've returned!" he gasped, rushing up to meet them. "Hurry! Hurry all of you, to the Throne Room immediately."

"What in seven hells is happening?" Baelish asked.

But Varys was already moving on and Jon assumed he was looking for any other stragglers who ought to be present in the throne room. Without wasting any more time, he made his way there with his heart beating in his throat.

When they got there, however, it seemed they were the last to arrive. The room was packed from wall to wall, but Jon could see his father and the Queen. Robert, meanwhile, was somewhere Jon had never once seen him before: sitting on the iron throne. His girth filled the seat, his bearing made his presence felt to all assembled. All seven of the Kingsguard were lined up at the foot of the steps, the small council occupied the front row, save for Ser Barristan. Lord Stannis, Lady Shireen and the priestess were present. Every man, woman and child at court had been herded inside and the silence was such that mice could be heard breathing.

The doors opened again and a tall, lean and aging man appeared. His golden hair was receding, but his piercing green eyes were as clear as day. Over his armour, he wore the crimson cloak of House Lannister embroidered with the lion rampant in gold thread. Everyone turned to look at him.

"That's Lord Tywin," Barristan whispered in Jon's ear.

He had something heavy in his arms. So heavy, someone else was helping him carry it. The second man needed no introduction to Jon.

"And Robb, my brother," he whispered back.

Between them, they carried the large bundle horizontally between them as they walked slowly up the aisle. The silence broken only by their steady, measured footsteps. Together, they climbed the dais and laid their burden at the foot of the iron throne. Whatever it was, it smelled bad. Rot and decay, the stench percolated through the air but no one dared show signs of having noticed. Even Lyanna, Catelyn and Cersei Lannister, side by side, stood stiff and firm as sentinels. Only Margaery buckled, her hand partly covering her face. He thought it was the smell getting to her, but she might have been
crying. Beside her, her formidable Grandmother looked daggers at the room as if silently challenging them all to step outside and fight it out like men.

King Robert descended the steps and drew back the coverings of the offering. His face cold and impassive as a fresh wave of decomposition swept over the throne room. Jon's stomach folded at the sight of the decapitated body but he could not see who it was. Lyanna flinched, her hand covering her mouth as she moved to stand by her husband.

"Renly!" she gasped.

Open mouthed with shock, she stooped to touch the decapitated head. Robert leaned down also, extricating the large cloth the body had been wrapped in. Seeing what he was doing, Lyanna helped. Between them, they raised the banner high for all to see. Jon's heart sank as he took it in: the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen, emblazoned underneath were the words of his blood father's house: 'Fire and Blood.'

Robb took something from the pocket of his jerkin, a thick lock of auburn hair, and passed it to his father. Just in time, Catelyn's cry was choked back and Arya moved quick to comfort her. Eddard's face remained unchanged, hard and pale with anger.

"My Lords, we are at war," Robert finally addressed the crowd. "Fetch me my hammer."
The banner that shrouded the corpse was stiff with blood. Lyanna felt it crack under her nails and she felt so stupefied she didn't realise she still holing it up to the crowds several seconds after Robert had let go of it. Eddard was the one who gently took it from her, then steered her away from Renly's body, towards a bench at the foot of the iron throne. All the while, Robert's declaration of war had been met with a mutinous rumble of discontent. Although still dazed, she tried to read the crowds reaction. Were they discontented by the sight of the Targaryen banners? Renly's broken body? Or the fact that Robert was demanding they fight for him? It was all suddenly so hard to tell.

Her nephew approached, the sleeves of his surcoat still stained with blood and dirt. When she saw Jon at his side, she didn't know whether to be relieved or even more afraid. Tywin was up with Robert, the two men shouting over the din right into each other's ears. She could not hear what they were saying. The next clear voice she heard was Robb's.

"Lord Tywin and I travelled to King's Landing together and met four men from the Stormlands at the gates of the city. They said they were loyal to King Robert, but were too afraid to present the body of his brother in person-"

"Why?" she cut in over him. "There's only one direction for Robert's wrath: Prince Viserys."

Robb and Jon, brothers in all but blood, exchanged a worried glance.

"It's Aegon," said Robb. "They say it was Aegon and he's taken Storm's End."

"What do you mean 'Aegon'?" she retorted. "There is no Aegon, only two escaped. Aegon died. Ned! Ned, you saw him, didn't you?"

She turned in her seat to find her brother, still holding the lock of Sansa's hair. The colour had long drained from his face, leaving him grey and dazed. Where the shock had silenced him, Cersei Lannister was not so easily defeated.

"I saw him," she declared. "I was here with my father and brother. I can show you the damn spot that baby was left at Robert's feet. It was there-" she gestured to the place, now occupied by Catelyn and Arya. "Right there, the bodies were laid out side by side. Aegon, Rhaenys and Elia."

At the sound of his sister's voice, Ser Jaime had broken away from the rest of his kingsguard brothers. "We all saw it. Lord Stark, you were there as well. I remember the fight you had with the king."

The memory of those events seemed to physically jolt Eddard out of his dazed state. But whatever reply he had was abruptly cut off by an explosion of anger from the King. Everyone else fell silent as they all turned to him.

"I've killed Rhaegar Targaryen every night in my dreams. It'll give me great pleasure to kill his bastard whelp all over again."

Ned stopped what he was about to do, leaving Lyanna's side so he could calm Robert down. Only the word 'bastard' had hooked into Lyanna's mind, snagging there as she tried to think ahead. Whatever else this Aegon was, he was also a bastard and she could prove it.

"Where's Varys?" Cersei moved to Lyanna's side, her long neck craning over the assembled crowds.
That was a damn good question, she thought to herself. "He should have known about this. He's a spymaster, he should have known."

"Stay with the king," said Cersei. "I'm going to see where he is."

Everyone was crowded into the throne room, all the same Lyanna tried to stop her. But she was gone already, the scent of her perfume lingering in the air. She meant to send Jaime after her, but three sheepish servants caught her eye as they hovered over Renly's body, bewildered and wondering what they should do. He was still there, as good as forgotten at the foot of the iron throne.

"Take him to the Great Sept," she said, thinking quickly. "Don't carry him through the castle, take him through the servant's corridor, underground. Summon the Silent Sisters, they'll know what to do."

Even though the rest of the castle would be deserted, she didn't like to think of Renly being carried so openly for any prying eyes to spy. Robb had gone to join his parents and Robert, but Jon remained. He sat beside her on her bench half-way up the steps to the throne. For a long moment, in the midst of the storm breaking out all around them, she looked only at him. She wondered if he was afraid, but he did not look it as he took her hand in his own.

"At least we know now," he said. "Now we know, we can plan to kick this pretender back into the sea."

But they needed to be careful. More careful than they had ever been.

Satisfied that his mother was going to be all right, Jon left her in the company of the kingsguard and went in search of Margaery. He'd seen her earlier, when he and Ser Barristan first entered the hall, and she had seemed distressed. His passage through the crowds was made easier as the king restored order to the day's proceedings and they stopped pushing and shoving their way to the front of the throne room.

He found her with her grandmother, sat by the side where they could see the iron throne without being swallowed by the crowds. Margaery was pale, shaken. Lady Olenna on her feet, leaning on her walking stick and still looking daggers at the crowd. Before either of the Tyrell women could see him, he came to an abrupt halt. Loras had been with Renly, he remembered. They'd been together when diverted at Bitterbridge, then they travelled together to Storm's End. The look on Margaery's face made him fear the worst.

Even at the best of times, he was a man of few words. And condolences for the grief-stricken sounded hollow even when coming from the smoothest of tongues. All the same, Jon resolved to do the best he could as he finally approached the ladies. Still tongue tied, he touched Margaery's shoulder to draw her attention. At the sight of him, she sighed with relief and clinched him in a brief hug.

"Your brother," he stammered, falling silent again.

"He's alive," she replied. "But a prisoner of this … this…-"

"Pretender," Jon finished for her. "He's not real, he can't be."

"But he is a real threat," Olenna cut in, easing herself into a seat. "Whatever else he is, whether he's a dragon, or a damn donkey for all I care, he is a threat and he has our Loras locked in a dungeon."

"And if House Tyrell marches on Storm's End, he will be hanged," Margaery despairingly pointed
"House Stark cannot march on Storm's End, or Sansa will be killed. House Tully the same. The Storm Lords now have no choice but to follow Aegon or their relatives will be killed. Who is left to fight?"

"The Westerlands." Jon looked to Tywin, a man whose very presence in the chamber seemed to bring a cold chill about the place, a man who silenced other men as soon as he stepped into the room. He had felt it as soon as Ser Barristan had pointed Tywin out to him for the first time only one hour or so before. Then there was Lysa. "And the Vale. The Vale could rise against Aegon, they have no interest in Sansa beyond Lysa being her aunt."

"Lysa's refusing to leave the Eyrie.""

"She's here," Jon cut in. "She came back with Ser Barristan and I. She could call her banners. Tywin already has."

"If she calls her banners, and that remains to be seen." Olenna didn't sound optimistic. "No, everything hinges on what those Dornish vipers do. Has anyone even seen Prince Oberyn since the end of the tourney?"

Jon cast his mind back and, while certain he had seen the Prince after the tourney's end, he had no memory of when they left. There was only one small detail he could cling to: "Oberyn agreed to negotiate a marriage pact between Trystane and Sansa."

"He had no authority to go marrying off Doran's son," Olenna stated, low and ominous now. "It stinks as a sop to the Starks, a diversion from what he was really up to. He was overseas at the time of the Sack, leagues away from where he should have been, and he's never forgiven himself. Never underestimate what a grieving man who blames himself will do for revenge."

They were silent for a moment, during which time Jon glanced over at the King. Stannis was with him now, the two brothers talking in each other's ears. If there was one thing that would bring them both together, it was Renly's death and the loss of their ancestral seat. He sent up a silent prayer that it was so. A hope fortified when the kingsguard surrounded little Shireen. Should both Robert and Stannis die in the coming war, she will be their Queen.

"Are they taking her to safety?" asked Margaery.

"Wherever 'safety' is in times such as these," Olenna answered. "And you know, mine own sweetling, you will now be a prisoner also."

"What?" Jon choked, looking to the old lady. "Margaery? What for?"

However, Margaery seemed untroubled, as if she already knew. "Of course I will. Robert will not let me go in case my father suddenly chooses to remember how fond he was of Rhaegar and his family. Aegon might have Loras, but Robert has me."

"And I have your wretched father," Olenna continued. "Leave Lord Oaf to me and neither you nor Loras will be hurt."

Even as they discussed the matter, Lyanna appeared through a knot of lords gathered at the foot of the throne. Heading in their direction, he expression was pale and serious. She tried to smile as she put a hand on Margaery's arm. For a moment, Jon feared the girl would be marched off to the black cells.

"Lady Tyrell, you are to stay with me now. I hope you understand."
That wasn't so bad, Jon thought. And the barely perceptible tremble in Margaery's lip could have been relief as much as anything else. She nodded her head, causing a lock of curled brown hair to slide over her shoulder.

"You're confined to my apartments and cannot leave unless I say so and, even then, with a member of kingsguard to chaperone you," Lyanna continued. "I'm sorry, and I know your father only supported House Targaryen out of loyalty to his king and prince. But you can see the situation we're in."

"No, it's fine," Margaery assured her. "I'll gladly stand as hostage for House Tyrell."

Despite her outward courage, there was a flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. Before Lyanna could lead her away, Jon darted forward and stopped her, whispering in her ear: "No matter what Aegon does, Lyanna would never let anything happen to you."

It was small consolation, but the best he could offer her under the circumstances. But, once Margaery was gone, some Tyrell retainers came for Lady Olenna, standing guard over her. At a loose end, Jon sought out Ser Barristan, but he was in a heated discussion with his Kingsguard brothers and the Small Council, flitting anxiously between the two. When Jon passed him by, the old knight only had time to stop and say: "Wait for the dust to settle and we will talk properly."

In the end, he needed air to clear his head and found himself slipping out of a side door and into an empty yard. At least, it first appeared to be empty. A couple of dark-skinned, ragged-clothed children were skulking in the shadows, watching him through large, dark gimlet eyes. One had a knife, but he assumed they'd snuck into the castle from Flea Bottom. Even the infants of Flea Bottom never went anywhere unarmed. All the same, he thought to find a goldcloak from the curtain walls and get them to deal with it. But, in the blink of an eye, the children had vanished.

He thought to try and follow them, but the door behind him opened again and he found himself in the company of Melisandre of Asshai.

"Do you remember what you saw in the flames?" she asked, dispensing with regular greetings.

It was before he left for the Vale and he remembered it well. "You warned me it often only makes sense in hindsight. Well, I saw a cloth dragon, the likes only mummer's use."

A smile turned the corners of her lips. "A mummer's dragon, indeed." She paused, coming to a rest beside him and leaning against the low stone wall, as he was. "You said you saw people manipulating the poles of the dragon and other people underneath. Did they have features?"

"I cannot remember," he answered. "I only remember the girl with silver hair and lilac eyes. If I saw her walking down the street in a hundred years, I think I'd still recognise her instantly."

Melisandre did not exult in being proved right. In fact, Jon still barely knew what to make of her powers and what the flames showed him. Whether it was R'hllor, or whether he'd made lucky faces in the clouds, the visions now seemed very precise. He had seen the fake dragon, manipulated by others. One thing he could not deny: his curiosity had been piqued.

"My lady, can I try again?"

"Stannis and I are leaving for Dragonstone," she explained. "But you and I will meet again soon. You'll be welcome to read the flames then."

Despite his curiosity, Jon wasn't too disappointed. He was surprised to hear Stannis was going straight back home, however. As if she had read his thoughts, Melisandre explained: "I already have
a plan to take back Storm's End, Lord Stark. But Stannis can't do it without me."

While he couldn't fault her religious prowess, he was yet to be convinced of her skill in battle. However, he did not question it. "And Shireen?"

"You'll approve," Melisandre replied. "She's travelling to Winterfell, where your family will protect her and keep her safe. Arya is your sister, no? She is going too."

Making a mental note to seek Arya out before she left, Jon nodded. It made sense. Before returning inside thinking to seek out Sam, Jon hesitated a moment. "There's some very strange children loitering out here, my lady. Mind how you go with them."

It was nightfall by the time they left the throne room. Lyanna and Robert, side by side, emerged from the great double doors and into the open courtyard between the Tower of the Hand and Maegor's Holdfast. Breathing the open air again cleared her head, washing away the smell of rot that had cloyed her nostrils in that packed out hall.

"We mobilise in the next two days, your grace," Eddard was saying. "If we march fast, we can reach the Stormlands within five days. When we reach Storm's End, we first try to negotiate."

She could tell Robert wasn't keen on the idea. But with several major armies already knocked out of any possible armed conflict, they had no choice. Talks had to come first. Nor was she especially keen for Robert to join the fray. His infamous hammer still existed, but he was not as young as he had been and his girth belied the passage of time.

As they climbed the stairs to their apartments in Maegor's, she kept Margaery close by. "We both need to pack our strongboxes tonight; we must be ready to set out. Just the bare essentials, but the King and I need our crowns – remind the people who their real monarch is."

"I'll be coming too?"

"Yes, I think so," she answered, to the other girl's obvious relief. "While there, we might catch sight of Loras and Sansa. It will be better than wondering if they're all right."

The kingsguard were still trailing behind them, but Meryn and Oakheart were stationed at the foot of the stairwell. Barristan was stationed outside the King's apartments, leaving Jaime to guard Lyanna.

"Have you seen Cersei?" she asked him as they reached her apartments. "She left to find Varys, but that was hours ago."

Jaime shrugged. "I saw her leave, she's probably in her own apartments. The Maidenvault, I think."

She opened the door and found herself in a scene of devastation. In the audience room, the cloth of state had been torn down from above her chair. Her house words had been altered. The word 'winter' had been daubed over in red paint, replaced with 'revenge'. *Revenge is coming,* she read to herself. *How original.* Beside her, Jaime drew his sword and Margaery turned a circle, taking it all in in silent disbelief.

In her private apartments, the hangings around her bed had been slashed and torn. Her clothes strewn about the floor. The drawers had been emptied, her jewels stolen. Rings, bracelets and necklaces, gifts from Robert of an inestimable value all gone.

"Who was supposed to be guarding my door?" she demanded. "Where are the damn goldcloaks?"
Goldcloaks had been brought in so the Kingsguard could be present for the emergency meeting in the throne room. Now, they were nowhere to be seen. She would find them, and she would have their heads lining the outer walls before dawn. Then her blood ran cold as she pushed through her chambers, deeper inside to where the vaults stored the ceremonial jewels and crowns, worn by all the kings and queens of the Seven Kingdoms. Jaime followed her, swearing audibly under his breath. The blade of his sword glimmered dully in the fading daylight.

They found the vaults open and almost empty. "The crown. They've taken the crown."

"What is this?"

Margaery stooped to pick up two other crowns, both smaller and made from fine wrought gold. They'd been tossed on the floor in the thief's haste to get away. They were topped with a stag and direwolf, head to head.

"No, they were made especially for Robert and I," she explained, her voice hollow. "It's the proper coronation crown they've stolen."

Through her bewilderment, Lyanna tried to reason with herself: If it's for Aegon, they won't want anything with either hers' or Robert's sigils on them. It had to be for Aegon, she reasoned, otherwise none of this made sense. None of it made sense, anyway.

"Who had access to all this?" Jaime demanded, addressing no one in particular.

"Robert, me, the castellan," she answered. "Someone must have stolen the keys, but how?"

"The dragon eggs," said Margaery. "Where are the dragon eggs?"

"I moved them," she answered, feeling like she'd been dropped in freezing waters. "I moved them from my safe, into mine and Robert's vault."

She peered through the open door, into the empty, cavernous vault. Anger began setting in. A cold fury that she vented by slamming the thick metal door, causing a sonorous crash to echo through the gallery.

Days passed, during which Sansa was able to find her way down into the dungeons of Storm's End. The Castellan, Ser Cortnay Penrose helped her, sneaking her down backstairs and servant's corridors. They found Ser Loras, slumped in his cell in a miasma of grief. She brought food and water for all the prisoners, but nowhere near enough to fill them up. Then she was able to check up on Edric Storm, but the Maester was more than taking care of him.

Septa Lemore continued her enigmatic presence, freely moving throughout the castle. Often, she and Sansa shared a room, for her own spiritual comfort according to Aegon. Meanwhile, they prepared to take more of the realm. Jon Connington had already predicted that Stannis would be sent with a fleet from Dragonstone, but the Golden Company had hired more sailors to form a naval blockade in Shipbreaker Bay, keeping Stannis out but ensuring their supplies and reinforcements still made it through.

Sansa could see them from the window of the chamber she slept in. Ships beyond counting all bobbing in the storm-tossed seas. She tried to remember what her father had told her of the last siege, when the Tyrells tried to surround Storm's End. Beyond a Knight of Onions, who she suspected Lord Stark had invented just to make the children laugh, she didn't remember much. That night, when she slept, she dreamed of shadows taking life, onions raining from the skies and fire. A fire so huge, so bright, so hot, she exulted at the power of it; it gave her life. Then she was Lady, howling...
so loud at the full moon she made the stars bleed.

She awoke with a start, just before dawn. Maester Luwin once told her that night was at its darkest, in the hour before the dawn. She found herself climbing out of the straw bed, onto the table pushed up to the window and looking out over Shipbreaker Bay. She thought to see the boats, and their little lights bobbing on the open sea. But all she saw was the bright red star burning in the night sky. It looked like it was bleeding.

When morning came, they were shepherded into the sept of Storm's End. A large, and cavernous place, big enough to seat a hundred by Sansa's reckoning. But this seemed to be no ordinary sermon. Aegon was the first person she saw, robed head to toe in cloth of gold. Next, her stomach folded as Varys cast off an ugly old hooded cloak.

Meanwhile, Aegon was seated up on the dais beneath a cloth of state. His arms rested lightly on the arms of his chair, the high seat normally occupied by the septon, dressed all in cloth of gold. He was watching the arrivals, impassive and almost unseeing. Edric Storm came to stand beside Sansa. Even prisoners, like Ser Loras Tyrell, had been brought from their cells to witness whatever was happening. Outside, through the stained-glass window, she could see the red star still blazing.

"My lords … and ladies," just for a second, Varys' eyes rested on Sansa. "What greater auspices of signs could we wish for to herald this most solemn of ceremonies, than that red comet blazing from the heavens above us?"

The opening comment was met with a cheer from the crowds. But Aegon remained silent and stoic, as if deaf to the crowds assembled around him. Sansa was still perplexed. Where had they got the cloth of state from? That was kept in the privy chambers of the rightful king and queen. Then the doors to the hall opened again and everyone turned to see the newcomer.

Sansa didn't recognise him at first. She'd only seen him twice before. But the huge crystal crown he wore gave him away. The High Septon of King's Landing. He looked terrified, openly trembling as he processed down the aisle with a red velvet cushion in his hands. On the cushion was a large gold crown, studded with gems of all sizes. The crown, she thought to herself. The real, proper crown and not just those little circlets the king and queen wore to look impressive.

She watched, in a daze, as the mummer's coronation swung into motion. Aegon was anointed with sacred oils, incense burned and the light shone from the High Septon's crown. At the peak of the ceremony, the crown was lifted high for all to see:

"I name you Aegon, of the House Targaryen, the sixth of his name. King of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men. Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm."

The crown sat on his head, the gold shining white in the morning light. After that, the farce was done and the realm had its new "king". But, there was more. Varys had lost the dirty clothes and was once more resplendent in rich silks of vibrant colour. He approached Aegon on bended knee, holding out a large wooden box.

"And finally," he said. "A coronation gift for our new king."

Sansa's stomach tied itself in a knot as she recognised the highly polished weirwood box. Oh, no, she thought to herself, oh no, you don't! But he had. The three large dragon eggs shone in the box and, finally, the edifice of Aegon's passivity broke. He grinned, leaned forward so quick the crown fell from his head in his eagerness to touch the dragon eggs. It hit the floor with a dull thump.
A small river flowed through the godswood, which Ned used to wash the blood of Ice's blade. For a moment, the water ran red and the blade was clean again. Still not content, he produced an oil cloth and wiped the length of the Valyrian steel blade, as he had done a thousand times before back in Winterfell.

Four of the guards they found asleep at their posts. They said they were drugged, but Robert wasn't having it. Eddard passed the sentence and swung the blade. Next came the guards on the gates leading to the city. Two had been found dead already, with half a hundred stab wounds. Three more swore they hadn't seen a thing. Definitely not a fat eunuch making off with millions of gold pieces worth of crown jewels. Ned was inclined to believe them, but Robert disagreed. Revenge had been dished up to Tywin Lannister, next. His only daughter, Cersei, had been knifed through the heart and left outside the Maidenvault where she had been staying. All had happened while they were arguing inside the throne room. Tywin Lannister executed the drunken guards himself and Ned's assistance was not required.

That was some days ago now, and this was just the remnants of the unfortunate goldcloaks who were meant to be guarding Lyanna and Robert's rooms. For the king had also been thoroughly ransacked. Long after the last traces of blood had been rinsed from Ice, Ned kept going with the oil cloth. Until a soft voice stirred him from his troubled thoughts.

"Are you all right?" Lyanna appeared from between the trees, pale and willowy in a white muslin dress. "Silly question really, but you did what had to be done."

"It doesn't make it any easier," he said. "Are you ready to leave? Robert expects you at the head of the army."

Lya nodded. "Of course. I only came to get you, brother. We're setting out now. We hope to reach Storm's End within a few days."

Eddard nodded and got to his feet to sheath Ice again. If it came to battle, he would need a longsword suitable for combat. The lock of Sansa's hair, stored in his breast pocket, offered little by way of hope.

"I can prove that Aegon is illegitimate," she said, closing the gap between them. "I have all the documents. Some are left in Winterfell. I've written to your maester, instructing him to send them down."

"They're in the crypts," he remembered. "But Lya, Robert will know. He will know that Rhaegar annulled his marriage, only so he could marry you."

Lyanna nodded, her eyes brimming with tears unshed. "I realise that. But what can I do? I can't let this pretender rampage across the country. Producing those documents destroys any claim fools might think he has on this crown."

Ill at ease, Ned erred on the side of caution. "Let's see if we can't get rid of him first."

Lyanna made no reply. She moved to the water's edge and looked up at the sky, where the red comet trailed its blood-red banner. Resting against the narrow trunk of an elm tree, she continued to gaze up at it. "So, the bleeding star finally came. Fifteen years too late, but it came."

"It's just a comet."

"But so like the one Rhaegar told me to look out for, on the day that Jon was born." Her tone was distant, as if she were far away. But she soon snapped out of it and turned to face him with a new
steel in her spine. "Come on, Robert's waiting. He wants to be the one to kill Varys."
A campfire crackled in a wide pit, sweeping away the chills of the night. Lost in her own thoughts, Lyanna watched the flames lapping around a fresh batch of pine logs. The sharp scent reminded her of home. Of Winterfell, where everything smelled of pine. The pine forests, the pine logs in the hearth, the pine needles used to keep the rooms smelling fresh. Even in the darkest winters, the pine trees stayed green. The memory made her smile, but only briefly until the current situation in which she found herself once more imposed its will.

She cast her mind back to the day in the throne room, when they first found out about what was really going on. In her confusion, she had blamed Viserys even though she knew Viserys was dead. But then, she thought Aegon was dead too. Who else was supposedly dead and about to spring back into life? It was so bewildering she had trouble finding which way was up and which way down.

Beside her, Robert was drinking from a horn of ale and talking to Eddard and Catelyn about taking down the Golden Company's elephants. Ser Barristan was some distance away, talking to Robb and Jon. Much like herself, Jaime was sunk in his own little world and seemingly diminished since the death of his sister. They all seemed busy, but what she remembered felt important.

"Didn't the Golden Company recently break a contract?" she asked, addressing no one in particular.

The shock of Aegon's revelation was wearing off and she thought she might be seeing just a little more clearly now. Jaime transferred his forlorn gaze from the middle distance to her but said nothing. Robert stammered into silence. No one seemed to realise the significance of her recollection.

"You can expect little else from sellswords," Catelyn eventually said.

"The Golden Company are different," Ned informed his wife. "They've never broken a contract before, not in all their years."

"Exactly," Lyanna replied. "What could be so bloody important that they break their golden word and take up with some foundling who's spent his life bouncing around Essos?"

Ser Barristan and the boys drifted closer, edging in on the conversation. Lyanna looked up to the old knight, from where she was set beside Robert. Jaime shuffled closer to Lyanna to make room for them.

"You're the only person here who's been up against them before, Ser Barristan," said Robert. "You did make sure to cut off both of Maelys' heads, didn't you?"

Laughter rippled around the campfire, even Jaime raised a smile. "Oh, is that who Aegon really is? Maelys the Monstrous' second head finally taking on a life of its own. Where did he get the rest of his body from?"

"Stranger things have happened," Lyanna laughed. "Nothing shocks me, these days."

Ser Barristan winced at the memory. "That second head was no laughing matter. I swear, the damn thing was staring at me all through that duel. It almost put me off."

Jon just looked a little bewildered as he inserted himself between Jaime and Lyanna, settling snugly between them. The fire reflected in his dark grey eyes. "I thought the two heads bit was made up just to scare children. It worked, when we were six years old. It's working again now you're telling me it's true."
Contrary to his claims, Jon was laughing at the thought of it.

"They say, when he was still in the womb, he ate his twin brother," Lyanna explained, feeling a little more rational about the matter. "I've heard of it before, though. They say twins can sort of fuse together if the pregnancy goes wrong. But we're straying from the point here." She paused for breath and gathered her thoughts: "Aegor Rivers established the Golden Company with the sole intention of seating a Blackfyre on the iron throne. Why have they suddenly turned their cloaks and begun supporting a Targaryen? And if they broke a contract to do so, it makes even less sense."

"There's no more Blackfyres to support, is there?" said Jaime, shrugging.

"I see where you're going, sister," said Eddard. "I've no doubt Bittersteel would be spitting fire if he could see what's happening now. But maybe things have changed since both the Targaryens and the Blackfyres have been cast out on their arses."

"If that's the case, then why didn't they go to Daenerys or Viserys?" asked Robert. "Lya's right. This doesn't make sense and there's more to this pretender. Whatever happens, I want this Aegon taken alive. I want to know who he really is."

"What about his handlers?" Lyanna asked. "The story is the baby was swapped. Chances are, this Aegon's been raised from birth as Aegon Targaryen. What if he doesn't know who he really is? Or where he really came from? His handlers will. Varys will."

Robert sighed heavily, raking his hands through his hair. His frustration was palpable and understandable. "Even if Varys is behind all of this, he can't have been working alone."

Something like pity stirred in Lyanna's heart. She had done to Jon what others had done to Aegon, only in reverse in a perverse act of mirror imaging. A prince had been relegated to a bastard. In his place, a bastard had been elevated to a prince. Both boys unwittingly falling victim to cruel circumstance and losing out in a game they never asked to play.

Later that night, she found herself lying awake in bed and running through the same old scenarios and giving herself the same old justifications. She fought to separate herself from the people who had raised Aegon, telling herself she was not like them and what she had done to Jon wasn't the same as what they'd done to their prince. But often the lines between her and them blurred with just one major point of diversion: Jon had been raised to take control of his own life. Aegon had been raised to be nothing more than the vehicle for the ambitions of others. With that in mind, she couldn't help but pity him.

"Are you still awake?"

Robert's muffled voice startled her.

"Yes."

He rolled over in bed, arms circling her waist as she lay on her side facing away from him. She couldn't bring herself to roll over and face him.

"There's something you need to know," he continued. "There's someone inside Storm's End. Someone I was meant to tell you about."

"Who?" she asked. Her first thought was a mistress, but that wouldn't make sense. Unless she was a very patient mistress who didn't mind being hundreds of miles from her lover.

"Edric. He's my son."
She half-sat up and looked down at him. "What age is he?"

He didn't answer immediately, giving the impression that he didn't actually know. She knew about Mya Stone – the girl in the Vale Jon Arryn had forced him to acknowledge. She knew about the blacksmith boy in the city, fathered when Robert believed she was dead. She'd even heard rumours of another in the Riverlands, but no one offered her proof. However many bastards he really had, he hadn't paid the blindest bit of attention to any of them and Edric came as a surprise less for the fact that he existed, but more for where he was being housed.

"He's about eight or nine, I suppose."

Momentarily lost for words, she forced herself to react. "Goodness. What a pair we are."

Robert laughed, reached up and twisted a lock of her hair around his fingers. "I knew you would understand. Stannis was furious of course."

"Hence Storm's End," she murmured. "What was it to Stannis, anyway?"

"Nothing," he answered. "And you don't need to worry about it, either."

That was his signal for the end of the conversation and he turned over again, an effort to get some sleep before the journey toward Storm's End continued at dawn. She also lay back down, wondering what he would do if she just casually dropped it into conversation that she also had a secret son that she might have forgotten to mention for the last fifteen years. She doubted he would shrug his shoulders and just say: goodness, what a pair we are.

The red comet still burned over Storm's End as Sansa emerged into the courtyard of the castle. She paused to look up at it, wondering what it meant. Ever since it first appeared, people had been talking about it. Aegon, predictably, took it to mean the start of his illustrious reign. Ser Cortnay said it represented the blood of his slain master, Renly. Varys said it was a portent of great change. A soldier she struck up conversation with said it meant dragons. As for her, she didn't know what it meant. It was just a comet and the Maester said he'd seen it before.

Other than that, life was as normal as it could be at Storm's End. More Castles had been taken. Griffin's Roost and Crow's Nest among them. More ships had arrived carrying more soldiers of the Golden Company, reinforcements from the Free Cities. They'd arrived on great cogs, powered along by more oarsmen than she could count from a distance and nor was it just men on board.

At first, she thought she was seeing things. Huge grey creatures lumbering off the boats, led by groups of men all shouting and lashing their whips at the giants. They made a noise like the simultaneous blowing of a hundred trumpets, through trunks so long it was a wonder the creatures didn't trip over them.

"What's the matter?" Aegon appeared at her shoulder, grinning like a fool. "Never seen an elephant before?"

She didn't care for his gloating, but was too amazed by the creatures to let it bother her.

"Only in an illuminated story book," she said, eyes still following their progress ashore. "There was one in a menagerie at Lannisport once, but she died years ago."

His grin faded, he looked at her curiously. Sometimes, he was capable of behaving like a normal person and this seemed to induce another such moment.
"Come on then," he said, taking her by the hand. "I'll show you."

Seeing no reason not to, she followed him down from the battlements and out of the castle. Beyond the walls, the Golden Company were already camped out in huge numbers. They weren't sellswords of the usual calibre: ragged and poor, fighting for any man's cause. Many of them were wealthy, wearing great gold rings on their arms to show how many years they'd served the Company. Several of their number were second or third generation exiles and had been all but born and suckled and reared in the ranks of the Golden Company. Many wore inlaid armour and they dressed in silks and samites over the top of it. But, beneath the gold lay the bitter steel. Their weaponry was as fine as their apparel.

Together, they passed the tent occupied by the captain general. A large, cloth of gold marquee with a staff outside decorated with a ring of gilded human skulls. She couldn't take her eyes off them as she passed.

Aegon noticed her looking. "They are his predecessors. Well, they were."

"And when he dies," she began.

"His will be added," Aegon finished for her.

One of the skulls had sinister looking teeth that had been filed to a sharp point, another bore the marks of the blows that had killed him. All of them seemed to be watching her as she passed them by. However sinister the captain general's decor, she had heard Jon Connington complaining bitterly about the man. A craven and a fool were among the words used.

They scrambled down the coastal path, almost tumbling over the roots and loose stones. To any outside observers, they could have been young friends out enjoying a fine afternoon on the beach. But to Sansa, the outing still felt strange, like Aegon could flare up again at any moment and she knew she really shouldn't be there. But she wanted to see the elephants.

And she could see them now. Up close, she barely reached the knee of the one nearest to her. All he had to do was lift one leg and stamp on her and he wouldn't even notice. She'd be nought but a little stone stuck in his toes. They moved slowly and cumbersome, swaying from side to side as they did so.

"They'll be ridden into battle," Aegon informed her. "I'd like to see the Usurper try his hammer out on one of these boys."

Sansa felt herself stiffen. "But they're so slow. What use will they be against cavalry and swift horses."

A man nearby had overheard what she said. He grinned at her, showing some missing teeth and delivered a harsh lash of the whip to the hide of one of his charges. Immediately, the elephant made its displeasure known through a screeching blast of its trunk before it charged off across the beach, building steadily to a speed that alarmed her. By the time five men had brought it back under control, it had cleared the beach and felled a tree on the coastal path through sheer force of its own weight. She felt her blood run cold as she watched the scene unfold.

Back at the castle, the elephants weren't the only ones showing their displeasure. While Varys had made a simpering show of himself during Aegon's coronation, he seethed behind closed doors. Sansa could hear him plainly at table as they all supped together in the common hall.

"I did warn that we were moving too fast," he said. "It seems I was undermined."
"I hope you're not accusing me," Lord Connington cut in. "The fact is, no matter how we enacted our plan, it was always going to involve a certain level of negotiation. We cannot make the other Houses disappear. We still need to work with them and you've done a good enough job of undermining that yourself, Varys. Tell me, why was Cersei Lannister killed again? Who ordered that? When did we discuss this? Because I certainly don't recall that being part of the plan."

"It was regrettable-"

"Regrettable!" Jon shot back at the eunuch. "Those little birds of yours will need their wings clipping if we're all to sleep soundly at nights."

"They were protecting me!" Varys cut in over him. "Do you think it was easy getting the Queen's vaults opened? I had a time frame of a few hours at a time when I would have been serving our King better by maintaining my cover in the Usurper's household. We were not ready."

"My lords, please," Aegon chimed in. "I cannot have you both at each other's throats like this. Not when you both have a point. Tywin was the one who ordered the deaths of my sister and my mother, no? I think the deaths of Joffrey and Cersei have repaid that debt and, even so, I will not tolerate a Lannister to live. They are beyond redemption. The Baratheons … it goes without saying that I want them out of this realm. The rest I am prepared to work with and am fully prepared to negotiate terms of peace."

Everyone was silent for a moment and Sansa, once more, was honing her skills of pretending to be invisible and hearing nothing. All the while, she waited with bated breath for someone to say something.

"The King's army is no more than a day's march away," said Varys. "I can tell you now, they aren't coming here under peace banners. They're coming here to sweep you and the Golden Company back into the sea."

"And we will resist them," said Lord Connington. "It won't be like the last time. We'll resist, show we're not playing games, then sue for peace and show we're willing to be reasonable."

"We even have hostages to exchange," Aegon pointed out. "But, before any of that happens, I want Robert and Stannis Baratheon dead."

"It will be easier to sue for peace once the Usurper is dead," said Lord Connington. "I mean, who else could they possibly have to take his place? But Tywin, damn him. Had you not stood back and watched as those feral children knifed his daughter to death this would stand a much better chance of actually working."

"Had my little birds not protected me, my head would be rotting on the castle ramparts by now," Varys tartly pointed out.

Jon Connington allowed himself a brief smile. "What a sorry loss that would be."

That night, the sky grew darker and the comet grew brighter in the contrast. It was the only beautiful thing to be seen in the Storm Lands. Sansa left her windows open so she could look up and out, and see it burning in the sky.

"What do you think it means?" she asked Septa Lemore.

The Septa looked up from her book. "Where the heavens are concerned, people attach whatever meaning they want to the appearance of strange stars and comets."
"It's directed from north to east," Sansa observed. "Can they see it in Essos?"

"I would imagine so and, no doubt, they too will attach a myriad of self-serving portents to its appearance."

Lemore was probably right.

That night, she slept in fits and starts. More than once, she woke up back at the Red Keep. The castle was dark and almost deserted, but the smell of men was still heavy in the air. Emboldened by her own isolation, she prowled out further into the keep, up the tower steps and along the galleries above, moonlight streaked the fur on her back. A lone wolf stalking the abandoned fortress, she was fearless.

They emerged from the Kingswood close to Haystack Hall, where the royal party took up residence before the final leg of the journey. Lady Shyra Errol greeted them at the gate while her son, Lord Sebastion, organised their lodgings. Feeling himself to be at a loose end, Jon hung back and went in search of his brother. They found each by the castle walls at dusk, out in the open countryside where the wolves could be let off their restraints.

"I've been looking for you all day," Robb greeted him. "Listen, we need to talk."

He cast a furtive glance over his shoulder, as if worried they had been followed. Although the coast was clear, he still grabbed Jon's upper arm and led him further along a path and away from the castle itself. The forces that Robert had brought with him were still piling into the grounds. Men drawn up mostly from the Crownlands, with the Lannister forces farther behind them. With some luck, Lady Errol had not been intimidated by the arrival of the invaders and would continue to support her king.

"Robb, what's happening?" he asked as they continued straying from the castle. It was getting dark and he had no desire to get lost in the wilderness around Haystack Hall.

"I need to talk to you about Aegon and you," Robb explained. "Do you think here is safe?"

"Yes, it's fine," he assured his brother. "Unless corn can talk."

They had indeed come to a rest along the boundary of a cornfield. If they looked back, they could still see the distant lights of the castle, beacons along the curtain walls. It seemed precautions had already been taken and men-at-arms patrolled silently along the ramparts. He supposed there was little harm in a late evening stroll.

"Are you going to ask me what I'll do if that ass really is Aegon?"

Jon knew that sheepish silence.

"Haven't you even considered it?"

"No," he answered, firmly. He thought he should mention Melisandre's fires, but didn't think he'd understand. Instead, he built his own fire just off the Kingsroad and away from the farmer's fields they had ventured through. "He's not real. It's all too … convenient."

He struck a flint as Robb fed a little kindling to the fledgling flames. Above their heads, the red comet blazed against the night sky.

"But, if I'm wrong," he continued and found himself momentarily lost for words. "If I'm wrong, then I can't forgive a man who says he's my brother for abducting a girl who is definitely my sister."
Robb smiled at him approvingly. "So, nothing's changed between us? Not even now you know certain things."

"No," Jon replied, firmly. "Gods, Robb, do you think I'd turn my back on you, Bran, Rickon, Arya and Sansa if this mummer's dragon turns out to be real?"

"That's not what I meant. I just meant, we haven't been relegated to cousins. Poor relations."

Jon laughed aloud. "Now you're being stupid."

However, they never did get a chance to talk properly before he left Winterfell. Back then, it had all been so new even to him that explaining it to Robb would only have added to the confusion. Now, time had passed and everything felt clearer and surer, even with the arrival of Aegon.

"The Queen has written to Maester Luwin requesting certain papers hidden in our crypts," Robb continued, now looking into the fire. "I presume it's not just Uncle Brandon and our Grandfathers' bones buried down there. Perhaps, a few sensitive documents have found their way down there too."

"The annulment," he answered. "The annulment of Rhaegar and Elia's marriage. I suppose she's exposing him as a bastard in hopes it will stymie any support he might have among the likes of the Tyrells and the Darrys."

"And on these annulment papers, is there any reason given?"

Jon shrugged. "If there is, she'll have some explaining to do."

"Have you considered she might be putting you forward as a claimant?"

"She wouldn't do that. Not without talking to me first."

"Fair enough," Robb ceded. "But, if it ever comes to it, you know I would back your claim to the iron throne over anyone else's."

Jon was hesitant. "I don't think it'll come to that-"

"Who knows where this mess will end," Robb cut in. "It's a blessing that Lyanna has had no more children. It makes things that little bit less complicated."

Jon stifled a laugh. "I don't think dragons are too popular right now."

All the same, he made a note of talking to his mother and finding out what her real intentions were.

Their small fire guttered in the brisk winds, almost snuffing it out. When it flared back up again, he found himself gazing intently into the flames. He looked and looked, but no visions formed in the lapping tongues of amber and gold. He remembered Melisandre sprinkling powders into her fires, the powders she kept up her dagged sleeves. Without them, it seemed, R'hllor wasn't interested in showing him anything.

Once back at the castle, he lay awake in a makeshift bed by the hearth in the great hall. All around him, others snores and rolled in deep sleep. Haystack Hall wasn't a large castle and, besides, he had no objection to being put in with the other squires. He could look out of the window and see the comet blazing overhead, slightly distorted by the tall mullion windows.

When he did fall asleep, he dreamed of the girl with silver hair and lilac eyes. He saw her in the flames, her hair and her clothes blackening and crisping away. But her skin remained unmarked. He
awoke with a gasp at dawn as the others moved around him.

"Next stop: Bronzegate," someone declared to the hall at large.

Still half-drugged from sleep, Jon climbed out from under the blanket and remembered where he was.

"We're setting up our garrison at Bronzegate, aren't we?" he asked.

"Aye, that we are," the same person answered. "Then it's dragon stew for supper."

Jon smiled. "Looking forward to it."
A Godly Daughter

Alone in a room at Bronzegate, Lyanna took the documents and smoothed them out on the table top. Although Eddard had buried them, it seemed Maester Luwin found them again easily enough. They had been ferried right to her from Winterfell, from their home of fifteen years deep in the crypts. One was the annulment, the second a declaration by Princess Elia and the third a marriage certificate rendered null and void. By the light of a single guttering candle, Lyanna read each of them through for the first time in a long time.

When she finished reading, she leaned back in her chair and mulled it over. The Golden Company's sole purpose for existing was to seat a bastard on the throne. Would they even care about the proofs she could provide? She began to have second thoughts. But, among the lords and commons he sought to rule, it was the kiss of death to Aegon's ambitions. They would never accept him. Her thoughts moved to Robert, second guessing his reaction to the annulment and the reasons for it. She never could picture it and, when she tried in that moment, a knock at the door jolted her from her efforts.

Hurriedly, she swept the documents into the top drawer of the writing bureau. "Enter."

The candle wavered as Jon opened the door, letting in a cool draft of air from beyond. "Can we talk?"

"Of course," she replied. "Your father and the king won't be back for hours. Sit down."

They rode out in the late afternoon, ordering the troops to set alight the southern Kingswood, preventing Aegon's army from advancing further north. They would meet with the rest of Tywin's forces, approaching from the west. Out of shape or no, Robert had insisted on bringing his old hammer and going with them. Just in case.

"We haven't talked about Aegon at all." Jon slid onto the bench next to her. "Don't you think we should?"

"I would, if I knew what to say. But I can't tell you if he's real. He probably can't even tell you that himself."

She regarded him for a moment, looking for some sign that he hoped Aegon was his brother or that he was falling for the deception. As always, his expression was hard to read and his face remained solemn.

"That's right," he said, at length. "And it's sad that he's probably been lied to for his whole life. But, while he cannot prove his claims, we cannot disprove them."

"I can invalidate them." Her thoughts flew to the documents now shut away in the top drawer. "And I intend to do so."

"Where do I fit into all of this?" he asked, looking her in the eye. "Robb told me about the papers you had sent down from Winterfell. Is that what you mean when you say you'll invalidate Aegon?"

Lyanna hesitated a moment, before reaching for the drawer and retrieving the documents. There was no harm in showing him, after all. While he read them over, she got up and poured them both a glass of wine from the stores they brought with them from King's Landing. Some Dornish red, spiced and warming. He was still reading when she returned to him, but he looked up briefly and thanked her for the wine.
Even when he did finish reading, he remained silent as he ran the pad of his thumb over the seals. The dragon, the sun and spear, and the direwolf. His eyes ran over the signatures and the devastating ink spilled a year before he was even born. Words on a piece of paper that could crush ambition and cut the strings of a puppet prince.

"I'm not mentioned anywhere."

"You weren't born," she pointed out. "There's two other declarations your blood father signed before leaving for the Trident. One for the birth of a princess, just in case you were a girl. The other for a prince, but it has your birth name on it."

"Aemon Targaryen," he murmured, drawing out the syllables.

"You can discard the one for a princess," she stated. "But while they stay buried in Winterfell, you're safe. Your name, your involvement such as it is, can remain unknown. What you do with what you know is your decision. I told you that back in Winterfell."

He seemed confused, as if he thought she was going to use him to prove Aegon was fake. It struck her as strange, since that would prove precisely nothing. Unless...

"Did you think I was playing some secret game and you were the trump card hidden up my sleeve?"

"Something like that." He paled, averting his gaze. "Everyone else seems to be doing it."

"Everyone else," she emphasised. "But I was straight with you from the start. There is no masterplan, beyond keeping you safe. Now you're almost a man grown and you know what you know. What you do with that knowledge is entirely in your hands."

There was a moment of silence in which Jon seemed lost in thought. "But you're going to tell Robert that Rhaegar annulled his marriage so he could marry you and that you went along with it. Because it's all here, in the documents. Your seal is there. You gave your consent."

"There's ways around it," she assured him. "Anyone would give consent at the point of a sword, Jon."

Even as she said it, it sounded hollow. An empty assurance to pacify a worried child. And she knew she wasn't going to lie anymore. Not about that. Evidently, he wasn't convinced either.

"Robert will kill you."

Lyanna tried to smile, to relieve some of the tension building up. Again, she couldn't quite manage to make it convincing. "Robert and I go back a very long way. I don't think he would kill me."

"His pride will be shattered," said Jon. "That's as good as a mortal wound for men like him."

"This needs to be done, Jon. I can't have that pretender waltzing into this realm, taking what isn't his and tarnishing your blood father's name any more. If there is a Targaryen restoration coming, I know who I would bank my money on over him."

He smiled, but it was a fleeting smile and soon replaced with his usual solemnity. "I am afraid of what Robert will do to you."

"You and I both," she thought to herself. "Leave Robert to me." After a pause for breath, she changed the subject. "In the meantime, I have discussed something with Lord and Lady Stark. Soon, Aegon will send out peace envoys and someone will be expected to parley with him. How would you feel if
"Good," he replied. "I want to do it. I'll definitely do it, if you think me capable."

Lyanna smiled approvingly. Negotiation was a skill that would come in useful in all walks of life. Compromise, the ability to deal with one's enemies. And, the ability to work alongside those one wouldn't normally get along well with.

"Lady Stark will be accompanying you and you must work together. Do you think you can do that?"

"For Sansa's sake, anything," he replied emphatically.

It was definitely the right answer. That decree affording him the authority to negotiate was also in one of the drawers, which she retrieved and affixed both her seal and Robert's. While he was off engaging the enemy, she was acting on his behalf.

"Will I be dealing with Aegon directly?" he asked. "The ass stole my dragon eggs and your jewels."

"I expect so," she replied. "Try to get to know him. Try to get along, find out what makes him tick. Don't be hostile because of Sansa. You'll get more out of him if you get him onside."

"Yes," he agreed. "You're right, of course. It'll be hard because he's obviously an ass. We're close in age, so that should be a good start. But I'll need to consider what course to take, how to deal with him."

"And we're leaving for Storm's End in the morning," she said. "You have time to think things through."

He rose to leave, looking much more animated than when he'd arrived. But, before he could go, she touched his arm and sat him back down again. For a moment, she merely looked at him and took in his features. His face, his dark grey eyes and dark brown hair. His father's nose and mouth, his father's silent presence. Her looks, Rhaegar's temperament. Robert's fury when he finds out about the marriage. Robert will kill you, Jon's voice echoed in her head once more and a chill seized her. There wasn't much left to say.

"In the months since we've known each other," she said. "I don't recall whether I've told you that I love you very much."

A small smile played at his lips. "You didn't need to."

He let her kiss him before they parted ways. As if sensing something amiss, he paused at the door and looked back over his shoulder. He looked her up and down but found no words to say before he vanished into the outer chamber. Once he was gone, she found Ser Jaime at his post. He was still silent with grief, but he never neglected his duties. All the same, it took him a moment to realise she was even there.

"Ser Jaime," she said. "Should anything happen to me, make sure my nephew is reunited with Lord Stark as soon as possible. Will you do that?"

He looked back at her, brow creased into a frown. Clearly curious, he wasn't nosey. "Yes, your grace."

"My uncle Stannis is coming to attack the Golden Company; did you hear?" Edric sounded proud as punch as he spoke of his uncle. "He'll sink some ships, for sure. We'll be able to see the smoke from
here. What are you doing?"

They were alone in their turret chambers, where Sansa had been studying the castle floor plans all day. Each room on each level was marked out and she had drawn a red border around Aegon's chambers, where he was keeping his own battleplans, Blackfyre the sword and Jon's dragon eggs. But the chamber was guarded, day and night. Only the servants had free access. But, like all low born servants, they were never seen and never heard by the lords they attended. Cup bearers and body servants were a different matter, she knew. But the ones sweeping hearths and collecting night soil were shadows that flitted in and out during the dark and silent hours. They could be useful.

She folded the plans and turned to Edric. "Lord Stannis is a very gifted commander, I'm sure he'll do very well. But what I am doing is trying to find us a way out of here."

Edric shrugged. "But how? The Golden Company are everywhere."

That was an obstacle she couldn't find a way around. But she was spared having to provide an answer by the arrival of Septa Lemore. "The service is starting soon, Edric. It's time to get ready. Remember, he's the High Septon from King's Landing, so you must be very well presented."

Although looking less than enthusiastic, the boy did as he was told and ducked out of the room as she entered. She took the seat that he had left vacant. If only Aegon was as easy to manage.

"How did Varys even get the High Septon here?" asked Sansa, rolling up the dungeon plan.

"Drugged him with his own altar wine, apparently," Lemore sighed. "Well, we won't judge. He's not the first Septon to develop a taste for his own wine."

"Aunt Lyanna saw him in a brothel once."

"Nor is he first to do that," Lemore laughed. "Still, he draws the line at being forced out of King's Landing and coerced into crowning a pretender. He's keen to help us."

Lemore herself had paid a high price for her curiosity about Aegon. But she was free to walk out whenever she wanted, but she didn't. She stuck around, ministering to those who needed it and offering spiritual comfort as she attempted to glean whatever information she could.

"There's good news for you," she said. "Your mother and brother are being sent to parley with Aegon. They will ask to see you, as proof you're still alive. It's in Aegon's best interests to grant that wish."

Sansa's heart raced, a swarm of butterflies made its presence felt in her stomach. It would be the sweetest thing in the world to see them again. There was only one thing that tempered her soaring spirits. "But Aegon doesn't always act in his best interests."

"Varys will see that he does," Lemore assured her. "And so will I."

"Which of my brothers is it?"

"Jon. They're barely a day's ride away, coming in from Bronzegate."

Relief washed over her, but she hoped he and her mother would set aside their differences. Because this was also the endgame. As soon as the royal army met with the Golden Company, Aegon's days would be numbered. There could be no bickering now.

"I need to get the dragon eggs back," she said. "Those that Aegon has."
"They're Jon's? I wondered what they were doing at King's Landing."

"You don't understand, he needs them."

Lemore smiled the way she did when she knew more than she was letting on. "I think I do, child."

Soon, they made their way to the sept together, meeting Edric in the yard outside. Aegon was sparring, taking on several opponents at once as he honed his skills. He did not notice their passing. Meanwhile, a stone mason brought in from a nearby town was cutting perfectly rectangular blocks to replace some of the damaged ones in the curtain walls. She watched for a moment as he smoothed the edges and blew the dust away. He noticed her looking and gave her a smile. With the germ of an impossible idea forming in her head, she smiled back and went on her way.

The service inside was not particularly busy, but there were several members of the Golden Company present. And Jon Connington. He turned to meet her gaze, but quickly returned to his prayers as the High Septon lit his incense and turned to the candles. They sang hymns for Aegon and the leaders of the Golden Company as each candle was placed beneath an effigy of each of the seven in their separate niches. It was a service like any other, with readings from the Seven Pointed Star to highlight a theme underpinning the sermon. After that, the High Septon invited Lord Connington to light the candle for the Warrior. Lemore lit a candle for the Crone.

"And Lady Stark, our godly daughter, to light a candle for the Maiden."

She took the taper from his hands and approached the niche in the wall where the large beeswax candle stood at the foot of the Maiden's statue. She lit the wick, blew out the taper and brought the now lit candle back to her place in the congregation. When all candles had been lit and collected, they sang another hymn. Her candle burned, hot wax trickled down the sides to be caught in the metal holder she carried it in. It wasn't that that bothered her, it was the concealing the large iron key that had been melted into the back of it.

Once the service was done, instead of taking her candle back to the Maiden she extinguished the flame and hid it down her sleeve while no one was looking. As soon as she was gone, the High Septon would light another candle and put it under the Maiden, not that anyone would even notice it was missing if he didn't. But Lemore had it all planned out.

Back in the yard again, she could breathe freely now she had the key to the dungeon concealed safely about her person. What they were going to do with key was anyone's guess, but she had no choice but to trust Lemore and Ser Penrose. Meanwhile, she passed the stone mason who was still busy in his hastily erected workshop. Some of the blocks were triangular, for merlons. Others were round. Most were simple squares and rectangles.

"Can I help you, my lady?" the mason asked, finding her inside the workshop.

"Actually yes," she replied. "Do you have spare bits of stone you don't need?"

He grinned and pointed to a large heap of stone chips, cracked stones, bad stones, tricky stones that wouldn't carve the way he needed them to. More stone than Sansa had ever seen in one place before.

"Take your pick," he said, laughing. However, he soon turned serious. "You're on King Robert's side, aren't you? You're not one of these foreigners."

"No, I'm a Stark," she said. "All I want is three large stones. Nothing special, you don't need to do anything to them. But smooth ones would be good."

She tried to picture the look on Aegon's face when he opened the box to find three stones instead of
the dragon eggs. Although it seemed impossible, she at least wanted to try and make it happen. And with Jon coming, there had to be a way to get the real eggs back to him. Meanwhile, the stone mason was in an indulgent mood.

"If I find any, you'll be the first to know."

That night, as they dined in the common hall, Sansa took a place beside Aegon. They didn't talk personally, but she could listen in to what people told him. And Varys had appeared in their midst, smelling of rosewater and talking softly. "I have a gift for your grace, from Wisdom Hallyne of the Pyromancer's Guild. It will come in most useful for when the usurper's brother arrives from Dragonstone."

He set a jar on the table. Inside it, luminous green liquid caught the light and turned it emerald. Sansa put down her spoon and looked at it, but she couldn't put a name to it. Someone else obliged her.

"Wildfire."

"And there's plenty more of that back in King's Landing."

Whatever it did, Sansa could guess it was nothing good.

They left Bronzegate at dawn, travelling all through the day toward Storm's End. As they hoped, Lannister forces joined with their own as they journeyed from King's Landing and the Westerlands. Tywin had returned to rally even more, making sure the Golden Company were surrounded. Jon travelled with his father and Lady Stark, who still barely acknowledged him. Then Lysa joined them, sweet talking her older sister where only a month before she had been telling Jon what an awful, wicked bitch she was. Whatever was going on between them, Jon wanted little to do with it and it interested him even less.

Five miles from Storm's End, their procession came to a halt for the night. Lord Stark leaned over to his sister by law, inviting her to the King's tent for a drink. Something about his tone suggested neither Catelyn nor Jon were invited to this little get together. However, they both stepped outside the carriage and breathed in gratefully at the crisp evening air. It was good to be away from the fires raging south of the Kingswood.

"If we make peace with our adversaries, I suppose we ought to start with each other," he said.

Catelyn made no immediate reply, but she was looking at him. She held him in her hard, calculating gaze. "Are you willing?"

"I wouldn't be here if I wasn't," he replied. "I met your sister recently, at the Vale. She showed me a letter you had written long ago, but it was indecipherable to me."

A faint smile played at her lips. "We had our own language."

"Yes, quite. Lysa told me what the letter said," he continued. "Don't ever plan to have me killed again and I think we will get along a lot better than we have been thus far."

Her blue eyes narrowed. "I wanted you gone, that is true. I never once planned to have you killed. Even if I did, I wouldn't be writing to Lysa about it."

So, Lysa lied to him as she'd lied to everyone else. He couldn't help but wonder what she was covering up for. But he let the matter lie. "The point is, Lady Stark, for the sake of your daughter, I would be willing to overlook half a hundred attempts on my life. So, I suggest we forget the past and
"Think only of her."

"I couldn't agree more," she ceded and extended a hand. Without hesitation, he shook it. For Sansa's sake.

However, with all said and done, he had no desire to socialise with her. He set off toward Lyanna's tent, where he found Margaery in conversation with Robb. The camp was large, spread out over at least a square mile and now containing armies from several different points of the realm. Knights of the Vale had arrived, as well those from the Westerlands. The Crownlands had come out in force. Jon surveyed them all through a haze of smoke from hundreds of little cookfires.

Before he could reach Robb and Margaery, however, he was intercepted by an older man bearing the sigil of an onion.

"My Lord, Lady Melisandre," he began, gesturing to the red priestess now standing in the awning of a large, red tent. She raised her hand in a manner of greeting. "She invites you to her fireside for the evening."

"Yes, I'm on my way," he agreed.

There was something different about the Priestess that he couldn't quite make out from afar. But when he drew close to her, it seemed she might be pregnant. Her middle was a lot fuller than when he had last seen her, but he deigned to not notice rather than risk causing offence in case she'd just gotten fat. All the same, he was almost certain it was a baby. Stannis' he would wager, given how close the two of them were. And it had been several months since Selyse died.

"The false king will be dead soon," she declared. "All of them will be."

"How many are there?" he asked, semi-jokingly.

She didn't answer, instead she paced around her fire. On a grill over a smaller fire, fat leeches sizzled in the heat, dried blood crackling and releasing an awful smell as she turned them over. Surely, he thought to himself, she wasn't preparing them for supper. "There's more than you think."

"Aren't you with Stannis?" he asked. "I've heard he's almost ready to besiege Storm's End."

"I am needed elsewhere," she stated, rubbing the bump of her belly. "I will play my part before long. Just a few more days."

If she was pregnant, he supposed Stannis would want her out of harm's way. But this camp was not out of harm's way. The situation was strange, but he didn't dare meddle.

"You need to get those dragon eggs back," she told him. "The ones you deny having."

She met his gaze and he tried not to laugh. He had never been a great teller of lies. "I meet with Aegon in the morning. I hope to see my sister, too. But I am curious about the pretender; I'll admit that."

The leeches crisped away to nothing more than black, shrivelled skins. Melisandre's gaze remained on the brazier flame. "Only death can pay for life."

She seemed distracted, like he wasn't even really in the room with her. After sprinkling her powders into the flames, she moved in a wide circle again. Watching the flames, her brow creased as she interpreted the messages from her god.
"I ask the Lord of Light to show me the Prince that was Promised and all I see is you," she said, at length. "You and a girl with silver hair and purple eyes. I see you: first you're a man, then you're a wolf, then you're a dragon and then you're a man again. I saw the false king steal the dragon eggs, but you have something else that he can never have." She paused to draw breath and met his gaze across the flames. "The blood of the dragon."

"You're mistaken," he said limply.

"It wouldn't be the first time," she admitted. "You are to parley with him on the morrow. Are you nervous?"

"Some," he lied. He was so nervous he felt sick.

She turned away from him for a moment and returned with a small glass of blue liquid. "Take it," she said. "It will help you sleep."

Jon was reluctant. "What is it?"

He took it and sniffed at it, picking up the scent of fresh ink. Far from unpleasant, it reminded him of Winterfell when Maester Luwin was teaching him his letters. It was soothing.

"My own recipe, just take it," she urged. "You must be the one to defeat Aegon. No one else can do it. Take it and find out why."

He was about to protest but changed his mind. There wasn't much there, only a mouthful, so he downed it in one. It was disgusting at first, but the aftertaste was sweet and warmed him inside. Actually, it wasn't too bad at all. He handed back the glass and thanked her. Assuming their audience was at an end, he left her to her fires.

By the time he got outside, it had grown dark. He crept into his tent, careful not to wake Robb and lay down. It was then that his head started to spin. He closed his eyes and saw a door smashing off its hinges. A small, pale woman cowered on her bed, screaming bloody murder as she clutched a baby to her breast. The infant opened its indigo eyes and wailed as a huge man smashed its head into a wall. In panic, he tried to stand up but only fell over as his mother slid from her horse into the arms of a silver-haired prince.

Visions came quickly. Whole scenes, or flashes of pictures and people, fleeting and insubstantial. He saw Sansa stitching an open wound. He saw his father kiss a girl with black hair and purple eyes, the pair of them standing beneath a tall tower somewhere far away. The girl wept and Eddard pretended not to notice. His mother joined hands with a silver haired man as they prepared to say their vows: "from this day, to my last day", they spoke in unison, their voices fading into silence.

Next a dragon reared up from a pyre, screeching into the night. Only a baby but making a racket. Jon rolled onto his side, trying to clear his head. But all he saw was Robert's hammer smashing into Rhaegar's breastplate, the rubies dropping into the waters of the Trident. His mother caught one in her hands and wept as she lay back on a feather bed, sunlight streaming on her pregnant body. A man stood next to her with a sword as pale as milkglass said: "we need to leave."

He awoke just after dawn, reeling from a night full of broken dreams and fleeting glimpses of his own fevered imagination. On the floor, with Robb standing over him.

"You had an interesting night," he said.

He couldn't think of what to say, so uttered the first word that popped into his head. "Fuck."
Regardless, a matter of hours later he and Lady Stark were surrounded by a host waving white flags. Storm's End was in the distance, huge and dominating the shoreline. The Golden Company amassed in thousands, watching events unfold through wary eyes. Nearby, an armoured elephant tore at the foliage with its trunk. Jon had never seen the likes before in his life.

Their opposite numbers from Aegon's camp approached just as cautiously, white flags hoisted where their normal banners should be.

"That's Jon Connington," said Lady Stark, askance. "We all thought he was dead."

"And that must be Aegon," he replied. "We all thought he was dead, too."

He watched the disparate party draw nearer, waiting for the pretender to get into better view. After a few more minutes, he found himself looking at a tall, lean boy with blonde hair tinged blue. He looked back at Jon as if he was something a dog might have rolled in. He drew a deep breath and nodded for the riders to proceed.
Stalemate

Chapter Summary

Apologies, once more, for not updating stories on this site. I just fell behind again.

Silence settled over both camps as they faced each other across a small divide. Only the wind sighed over fields and through the trees, occasionally strong enough to pull at the peace banners flying all around. Jon used the moment of inactivity to carefully study the new faces lined up in front of them. Connington was nothing to him, Aegon even less. But a flicker of hot anger curled around his heart at the sight of Varys among their number. The fat eunuch had insinuated himself into every facet of the royal court, played all sides off against each other only to throw them all to the wind for the sake of a scrawny puppet.

Wondering how she was holding up, he turned to Lady Stark whom he had expected to be distraught. On the contrary, she was solemn and grim set as she faced her beloved daughter's abductors. Is that what their adversaries were expecting? Jon would have banked his last gold dragon on the idea that they were banking on it. As though she had felt his eyes boring into her, she returned his gaze and gestured for him to ride on.

When they nudged their hoses forward, Aegon and his party did likewise. Slow measured steps until they were mere feet apart. Meanwhile, the Golden Company edged back from the scene. An elephant still pulled at the undergrowth with its trunk, huge and cumbersome. Jon eyed the beast again, wondering how to take it down should it come to open battle.

"Where is my daughter?"

The question sounded almost casual, as if Catelyn had misplaced Sansa in the wrong drawer. But Jon knew her. He knew she seethed beneath that mild exterior. It was the calm before the storm.

"She's in the castle," Varys replied. "She's quite safe."

Catelyn's lips pursed in distaste at the sound of his voice, but she did not look at him. "Strange as it may seem, Varys, but I have trouble taking your word for that. Bring my daughter out to me and then we can talk."

"We cannot do that." It was the first time Aegon spoke. "She is our prisoner, you must come to her."

"Must?" Catelyn repeated, her tone cold and brittle. "You have the effrontery to snatch a defenceless girl from her family, turn up here proclaiming yourself a king and then tell me what I must do. I'll hear less of that talk until I see more of my daughter. Where is she?"

"Lady Stark, you are most welcome to return with us to Storm's End," Jon Connington intervened. "You can see her there and how she's being cared for."

"That may be so, but will we be allowed to leave again?"

Jon thought that was a pertinent question. After they'd sworn to the Stormlands forces they would be free to go unharmed in the wake of the castle's fall. Instead, their lord had been executed and their men had their throats opened. Aegon and his company had no grounds to be demanding blind faith
"You have my word-"

"Your word isn't worth dirt, Lord Connington," Catelyn interjected. "Since we've reached a stalemate on the issue of my daughter, tell me true: what do you expect House Stark to do in order to secure Sansa's safe return?"

Aegon wasted no time in setting out his demands. "Kneel to me. Swear to me as your rightful king. Fight for my cause. And Lady Sansa will be free to return home, her betrothal to Prince Trystane unaffected, her virtue intact."

Catelyn met Jon's gaze again, the look on her face asking: 'are you listening to this?' Briefly, he felt a moment of kinship with her, for the first time in their long mutual existence.

"We could take these terms back to Lord Stark," said Jon, speaking for the first time since the parley began. "But I can tell you already what the answer will be. You know it, too. We will not bend the knee to the pretender. We will not rebel against our Queen and kinswoman. You know that as well as us, so why are we wasting our time?"

He remembered his mother's instructions. To get close to Aegon, to win his trust. They were close in age, giving them a mutual bonding point. But Jon was already tired of the talks. Each of them was making demands they knew the other would never agree to and Jon was struggling to see the point. Instead, once more remembering his mother's instructions, he tried another tack.

"Bring Sansa out here and, in her stead, take me as a hostage."

All eyes were suddenly on him, but no one spoke. Even Catelyn looked thrown by his offer.

"Why would we exchange Lord Stark's eldest trueborn daughter for his bastard by-blow?"

"Legitimised by-blow," Jon corrected his namesake. He watched their faces, looking for any kind of a reaction. If they agreed, he got closer to Aegon. If they refused, he had called their bluff. After a tense pause, he continued: "Sansa is only a girl. I am a son of House Stark. Take me. You know I'm worth more than my sister."

Aegon didn't look happy. He was glaring up at Connington as if Jon's suggestion had thrown their gameboard up in the air. It was Varys who stepped in to restore equilibrium. "Catelyn would raise the Riverlands and march on our armies just to be rid of you. Your ploy will not work, Snow. Although, it was a good effort. The girl remains with us."

Craven, they didn't want to admit the faults in their plans. However, Catelyn was not yet done with them. She sat straight on her mount, looking Aegon straight in the eye.

"You know your position, and so do I. Whatever you do, you cannot win. If you keep my daughter a hostage, it is true we will not oppose you. But we won't fight for you, either. We won't help you get your throne, nor will we help you keep it. If you harm Sansa, we will call our banners and our armies will fall on you from every conceivable angle. And if you do hurt my daughter I, personally, will tear every limb from your worthless body with my own bare hands."

Aegon's eyes narrowed as he glared at Lady Stark, his mouth twitched as if he was itching to say something. In the end, all he managed was a limp: "bitch!"

"Quite possibly," she answered, flatly.
Jon decided to step in before the parley descended into a slanging match.

"And even without the Starks, the Lannisters are here. You have nothing on them, my lords. There is nothing to stop them smashing your Golden Company on the rocks. You should have taken Joffrey alive, your cause was lost as soon as you killed him. Even Cersei might have been beneficial, but Tywin doesn't strike me as the sentimental sort. No, you lost as soon as you killed Joffrey, hoping House Stark would be blamed," he said. Some of the faces in front of him paled, showing him the truth of his words. "Your best chance at survival is to pack up your camp and return to the Free Cities, leaving my sister behind. Just go. Leave Sansa and any other prisoner you have, and just sail away while you still can. Before Stannis gets here. If you do not, you will be destroyed."

Aegon simmered. "Are you threatening me, bastard?"

Knowing what he knew about bastards, Jon tried not to smile. "No. On the contrary, I am offering you an escape route, a chance to live through this-"

"You're trying to show me for a coward. You want me to flee my country, tail between my legs," Aegon cut in, his face reddening in anger. "You're trying to humiliate me-"

"He's trying to save you, you lackwit!" Catelyn retorted. "You will not get a better offer than this. Leave Sansa with us. Return to your army and order a retreat. Robert will not pursue you, but only so long as no one else is killed."

"Oh, so Robert is afraid, is he?" Aegon laughed. "There's no other reason he would let me walk away from this."

"Fear doesn't come into it," Jon snapped. "Robert is no fool and wishes to end this farce before anyone else gets hurt. Such is the nature of diplomacy."

"Somehow, I doubt Robert even knows you're making this offer," said Connington. "I can just see his face when he realises you've given us a chance to walk away."

"And we're going nowhere," Aegon insisted. "As a show of goodwill, I extend an invitation to you both to come to Storm's End and visit Lady Stark. There will be no hostage swap. There will be no retreat. And despite your woeful attempts to trick me, you're welcome into my halls."

Varys had been inspecting the fingers of his gloves when he casually looked up at Jon and Catelyn. "That offer sounds final, to me. If you agree to come to Storm's End, we will, of course, negotiate further. So, I ask you again: will you walk away now and do battle on the morrow? Or, will you come with us to Storm's End, see Lady Sansa and try to reach a settlement?"

Catelyn and Jon slid down from their saddles, withdrawing to the rear of their guard to discuss the issue privately. It was fraught with risk, in light of Aegon's past behaviour. But if they walked away now, there was a chance they would never see Sansa again. He could see from the look on Catelyn's face that she had already made up her mind.

"You can go back to camp," she said. "I don't care what they do to me, so long as I see my daughter again."

"I'm coming with you," he replied without hesitation. "I want to get Aegon on his own."

She had never cared about what happened to him, either, and she wasn't about to start pretending she cared now. She nodded her head and returned to the parley without another word.
Blood spilt over the stone steps of the servant's entrance. A red waterfall that would almost have been pretty, had it not been spilling from two corpses with open throats. Not as troubled by the sight as she thought she might have been, Sansa lifted the burlap sack over her head and slipped off her shoes. Barefoot, she trod carefully over the spillage and bodies alike.

"Remember, there's still guards on the main doors," Ser Cortnay reminded her. He wiped his dagger on an old cloth before sheathing it at his hip. "If they hear so much as a squeak from within, they'll be all armed and ready to kill. Make sure there's no blood on your feet before you go in."

While the first man had been taken at unawares, the second had put up a fight. His sword was drawn and lay useless at his side. It was sad that they had to die, but they shouldn't have taken Robert's castle. That was Sansa's reasoning as she noted their youth.

"What are you going to do with their bodies?"

Ser Cortnay raised a grim smile. "Leave it to me, little lady. I'm sure there are some hungry dogs out there somewhere."

Sansa shivered at the thought of it, but took his advice and left it to him.

Stannis' fleet had already been spotted, most of the guards were up in the turrets tracking their progress. But every time she hoped for liberation, she remembered the ominous green jar of wildfire and wondered what Aegon would do with it. There wasn't much of it, she didn't think Aegon could do a lot with it. All the same, she noted the worry in Ser Cortnay's eyes and guessed she might have been underestimating the innocuous looking substance.

Upon reaching the back door of Aegon's chambers, she glanced over her shoulder to Ser Cortnay once more. "Thank you for helping me."

Edric came next, but Ser Cortnay was reluctant to let him go inside. If they were caught, he'd be the first to die. Sansa might have a little more hope since her death would bring down the wrath of the North on their heads. What small advantage she had, she exploited to its fullest. All the same, the boy followed her in.

Servant's doors were designed to be discreet and the hinges were mercifully silent as she let herself in. Even through that door, her presence in the room was still screened off. So, she paused and listened for signs of life. She checked her bare feet again, making sure no trace of blood clung to her skin. Although she couldn't see any, she still wiped them on the rough fabric of her sack.

For a man calling himself king, Aegon didn't have much. A few sets of clothes, a stolen crown kept on a cushion and wooden toy soldier. Edric crept in behind her, bearing a set of keys he kept bunched together in his hands. Neither dared use their voices, lest they bring in the guards on the main doors. And Sansa was still barefoot, so she made no noise as she moved through the room.

There was no sign of the sword, Blackfyre. But she quickly abandoned the notion of doing anything more than she originally planned to do, anyway. She placed the sack quietly on the floor, where it was muffled by a thick rug. It was Edric, however, who found the box with the dragon eggs in it. The lock had already been smashed off, presumably when they were taken from the Red Keep. She performed the swap quickly, exchanging eggs for stones as fast as she dared. Her friendly stonemason had done his job well, even smoothing the stones for her. Only one was a little too large to fit, while the others were too small. All the same, she managed to force the box shut, before Edric put it back where he found it.

On the way out, she noticed the crown again. Another stolen item, she was sorely tempted to take it.
But, Edric was tugging at her sleeve and motioning out of the window. It was Aegon and his party, returning already.

With no time to lose, she left the rooms. Already, the two bodies were gone and a servant was scrubbing the steps. Once past the servant, Sansa could speak freely again. "I'm taking them to the godswood. If anything happens to me, you must tell my brother where they are in case I can't get them to him."

"Why did you only take the eggs?" he asked. "They're useless."

"Because they're not Aegon's," she retorted, continuing down the turnpike stair. "None of this is his, but I can't very well sneak the whole castle away from him. So, I'm starting small."

"But that sword you mentioned, we didn't even look properly," he protested. "The crown, too. And Aegon's going to know the eggs aren't real as soon as he looks at them. You didn't even try to disguise them."

"Because I'm past caring, Edric. These belong to someone else, and I need to get them back."

She was tired of his questions, too. Stannis would be here soon, Aegon's days were numbered. She made her way down the corridor and another flight of steps, where Edric led her into the kitchens. With sack double wrapped in her own cloak, she made her way outside and into the enemy camp.

Jon's nerves prickled as he passed through the barbican of Storm's End. It wasn't fear that had him on edge, it was the chill of passing into the enemy camp. The feeling of strange isolation, knowing if anything did happen none could rescue him. They found the fortress eerily silent, too. The forge was closed up, a stone mason's workshop stood empty by a postern gate. He could see soldiers patrolling the battlements, but most were out facing the coast and watching for the first sign of Stannis Baratheon.

Melisandre was out there too, he recalled. Ser Davos and rowed her out there in a small sail boat with black sails so the enemy wouldn't see their approach. Exactly what she was doing had him mystified, more so since she appeared to be rather pregnant. However, all thought of them was pushed aside when he heard Aegon giving the command for Sansa to be brought outside.

Catelyn dismounted immediately, instinctively heading for the doors to the common hall. Instead, Sansa came from the direction of a large Godswood. Jon's heart leapt into his throat at the sight of her. She was thinner, pale and drawn looking. But when she clapped eyes on her mother, her whole face lit up in a smile and her cry of relief and happiness echoed around the empty yard. They hugged each other tight, clinging on to each other for what seemed a small eternity.

To Aegon's credit, he gave them some space and Jon seized the advantage.

"Thank you," he said.

Aegon looked back at him as if he'd spoken a foreign language. "I don't mean to be a tyrant; I don't willingly snatch girls from their families."

"All the same," Jon repeated. "Thank you."

Meanwhile, Sansa and Catelyn had reluctantly drawn apart and now she was looking at Jon. He excused himself from the pretender and drew his sister into a rib-cracking hug. Her tears of relief soaked through the shoulder of his tunic. The sight of her had never been sweeter.
"I've missed you so," she said, voice muffled by his clothes. "I've been so afraid, but I've missed you more."

They drew apart for a moment, but only so Jon could look at her properly. Her hair was uneven now, where a large chunk had been cut off and sent to their father. He had so much he wanted to say, so much he wanted to tell her, but knew time was scarce and he got on with it.

"I've made up my mind," he said. "I'm not leaving here without you. I need to talk with Aegon on his own, and see if I can't talk him into retreating and leaving you behind-"

"He'll never agree, Jon. He's mad," she said, voice choked.

"But listen, if that doesn't work then I'll try and talk him into an exchange. Me for you."

Sansa was shaking her head. "You can't. Father needs you to fight. I need you to fight."

"I think that's enough for now." Lord Connington the Undead forced his way between them, separating them. "You can say your goodbyes later, Snow."

Jon dearly wished the punch the man but restrained himself for Sansa's sake. However, if it came to battle, Connington would be the first in command he'd go for. Nor was Sansa best pleased, as she pushed past Connington and threw her arms around Jon's neck. Her beautiful face was contorted with pain and fear as she clung to him. But what she said next threw him. "I'm going to get some treats for your horse."

Jon frowned as he held her. "Sansa, don't worry about the horses."

Before she could say anything else, Catelyn steered her away. As she went, she looked back at Jon, full of longing and, just perhaps, a glimmer of hope.

"She's not hurt," said Aegon.

Jon was still watching Sansa being led away. "All the same, she belongs with her family."

It was growing dusky as they made their way into the common hall. While Catelyn was inspecting Sansa's living conditions, Jon had Aegon to himself. Even Varys and Connington had left them to it, opting to dine together at the far end of the hall. Still, Jon felt that was too close for comfort.

"Aren't you worried about Stannis?" he asked.

Aegon only laughed. "Should I be?"

"Stannis attacking from the sea, Tywin attacking on land. The knights of the Vale are on their way, both land and sea. Nor have the Dornish come out for you. I hear they let you use their ports, but that's not the same as sending reinforcements, is it? It's like they're testing you, waiting to see if you're worth their while."

"You're trying to unnerve me again," said Aegon. "But you don't understand. I've lived my life for this. I'll will take what is mine or die trying."

"Sansa isn't yours," Jon pointed out. " Nor are my dragon eggs. Nor was the crown and the jewels you stole from the Queen."

"Your dragon eggs?" Aegon queried. "The crown is mine by birth right. The dragon eggs the property of House Targaryen. Unless you're of House Targaryen, I don't see how they can be
yours."

Jon couldn't help but smile. "Fair enough. I'll concur on that point. What did they tell you about your father?"

Aegon didn't answer right away, instead he fixed Jon with a calculating look. It was like he was asking a trick question. "That he was Rhaegar, of House Targaryen. Slain by the usurper, Robert Baratheon."

"And what did they tell you about the last year of his life?" he queried. He was genuinely curious. "Who was he with? What was he doing?"

"What has that to do with anything?" the prince answered, shrilly. But he soon simmered down again, his shoulders relaxing where they had been tense. "I have a theory about that. I know what your whore aunt did. She seduced him, led him away from his wife and children, all the while writing to her brother saying she had been abducted. He was in on it. And your father, too. They put her up to it, knowing what would happen if Robert found out. They plotted the destruction of my house."

Beyond the mullions, darkness thickened. Small lights flickered on the walls, larger ones out at sea. It looked as if they were greeting Stannis with fire ships. The voices of the soldiers grew louder.


"A bastard, unfit to rule," Aegon answered, quickly. "No one will support a bastard."

"So, by your own admission, bastards are unfit to rule?"

"I told you, didn't I?" he snapped back, growing weary of Jon's questions. "And that whore is barren as a brick. She's bore nothing for nobody, everyone knows that."

Jon had what he wanted. Although he had no doubt Aegon would backtrack as soon as Lyanna provided the proof of his illegitimacy, he had already exposed the pretender prince as a hypocrite. He would have no support, he would have no respect. Now sensing their time together was drawing to a close, he tried for one final time to play for peace. To play a hand for Sansa's life.

"Swap us," he implored Aegon. "Let Sansa come home and keep me here. I'm far more valuable than a girl."

"This is a trick; do you think we're stupid?" Aegon rounded on him. "If I keep you, I'll keep you both. I'll have them march you down to the cells now."

"But you leave Sansa to walk around," Jon said. "You're afraid of men. You're afraid of the men you try to coerce into fighting for you but Sansa is fine. You can push her around, she's just a little girl. I came here to get the measure of you. It didn't take long."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Aegon shot to his feet, anger at the perceived slight on his character.

However, Jon wasn't interested anymore. He was already leaving, barely acknowledging the faint flicker of worry that he might be apprehended. As he walked, voices rose in anger from outside and a faint green glow illuminated the horizon.

"Your grace, it's time," said Lord Connington. "To the battlements."
Aegon set off from the dais at a run, shoving into Jon deliberately. "Come and see, bastard. Come and see what we've got for Stannis."

Outside, the fleets were meeting. He thought he'd already seen one fire ship. Sansa and Catelyn were outside, holding each other tight as they run together across the yard. He tried to reach them, but an explosion shattered the very air around them. Brilliant green seared across the sky. Sansa screamed in terror. Everything was green. A bright, glittering emerald green.

With his heart pounding in his chest, Jon ran up the battlements to where he could see the sea ablaze with bright green fires. Robert's flagship, the Queen Lyanna, was engulfed in emerald flames as she was swallowed whole by the boiling seas. More and more of the Baratheon fleet, unable to change course in time, sailed into the fires.

"Wildfire," he murmured beneath his breath.

Aegon laughed as he turned to Jon. "Go back to your usurper King and tell him he's next."

If only there was a way he could shove Aegon off the battlements without taking himself down too. All the same, Jon briefly considered it. Instead, he chose revenge. He grabbed the Pisswater Prince by the front of his cloak, slamming his head into his nose where it promptly burst with blood and snot. Aegon stifled his cry of pain.

"Lyanna's son," he hissed in the puppet prince's ear. "Lyanna's son will come for you and you will never know peace again."

He stormed off the battlements, out into the yard and found his horse again. Sansa had made good on her promise and provided an extra saddlebag of treats. He'd thank her by avenging her. He was about to leave, when Catelyn came running across the cobbles.

"I'm staying," she cried to him over the noise. "I can't leave her here. Tell Ned I chose to stay."

He thought this might happen, so did not waste time arguing with her. Worried that Aegon would have him apprehended, he couldn't even afford to argue with her. Instead, he drove his spurs into the horse's flanks and galloped out of the barbican. The whole camp was illuminated in green. The whole sea ablaze. Nothing doused wildfire, he remembered. Everything it touched would blaze until either it or the substance was all burned up. He kicked his horse again, urging in on faster and faster until they cleared the camp. It was near empty now, as the soldiers would be savaging what was left of Stannis' army as they tried to climb ashore.

They came to a rest half a mile from their own camp, where people huddled in small groups watching the skies burn green. Before joining them, Jon slid down from the saddle and looked inside the saddlebag Sansa had insisted on giving him. He pulled back the drawstrings to reveal dragon eggs. All three of them.

"Your grace, come inside." Jaime was being sensible, but Lyanna could not tear her gaze from the skies over the eastern coast. It seemed the whole fleet was ablaze and those flames could only be wildfire. Every day, it seemed, the situation grew more desperate.

Jon was out there, she knew. Still at Storm's End as part of the peace mission. Well, their attempts to make peace were blazing into ash now. There would be little left to salvage after all this.

"My nephew," she said, feeling numb. "My nephew is with this Aegon. This prince of Pisswater bend. If Jon is hurt, I will tear Aegon's fucking spine out."
Robert had left her as soon as they heard the first explosion, leaving only Jaime Lannister to guard her. Eddard had gone with him, too. Just as she was about to tell him about her first marriage, the explosion happened. She wondered if the timing was an omen, a sign that she shouldn't bother. But that was ridiculous and well she knew it.

However, common sense did win out in the end and she withdrew back into the tent. Jaime watched her. "Can I ask you something?"

Lyanna nodded, gesturing for him to sit opposite her at the table. Stuck in limbo until they knew more about what was happening, she may as well talk if only to fill the terrible silence.

"That day I came to you in your chambers, when the wolf had been attacked," he began, not quite meeting her gaze. "Why were you crying?"

It took her a moment to recall the events. Although not that long ago, it felt like another lifetime. But she got there in the end. She remembered the Seven Pointed Star, the blue rose pressed inside the pages and Rhaegar's name scrawled on the flyleaf. She met Jaime's gaze, his eyes as green as the wildfire tearing their navy apart.

"I was missing someone who's no longer with us," she answered, flatly. "Someone I once loved."

"Rhaegar," he said in an undertone.

The inside of the tent flashed green. Half a heartbeat later, another explosion was distant and muffled. She didn't try to hide her feelings from Jaime.
"Wildfire," Jaime spoke in a hoarse whisper as his gaze roved over the tent's interior. Like he thought they had a secret cache of their own hidden away somewhere. The green flash snuffed out, leaving them with only candlelight to see by. As the distant crack and crump of the explosion also faded, he relaxed again and even tried his hand a jest. "Dragon or no, at least Aerys will be smiling down him."

Neither he nor Lyanna laughed.

"He wanted to burn you, didn't he?" she asked. Often, she wondered what those final few hours of the Mad King's life were like. Those final, frantic spasms of Aerys' death throes. "Is that why you killed him? I wouldn't blame you for that, not at all. If anyone tried to kill me or mine, I'd have at them no matter who they are."

"Me?" Jaime repeated, laughing drily. "Well yes, I suppose he did want to burn me. But he wanted to burn the whole city along with me. Rhaegar was dead, so Aerys had wildfire rigged up all around the city, in the underground tunnels and vaults. Rossart, the pyromancer, had been made Hand of the King, and Aerys gave the command to blow the city as Robert's forces drew near. So, I went and I killed Rossart myself. Then I killed Aerys."

Lyanna was silent for a moment, inwardly recoiling from what he had told her. Two questions sprang into her mind simultaneously: why had he not told anyone of his heroism and was the damn wildfire still under the city even today? Their gaze met and she thought she had the answer to the latter. Her voice was barely a whisper when she asked: "Does Varys know?"

"Surely, if Varys was going fulfil Aerys' final wish, he'd have done so while we were all still inside the city," he posited. "Just think of it: you, me, Robert, Lord Stark, several Stark children, Stannis, little Shireen and Renly … all gone in the striking of a single flint. Aegon could have just walked into the ruins of the city and taken up residence unopposed."

"But Varys isn't stupid," said Lyanna. "He wouldn't resort to so drastic a measure from the off. No, I think he would keep it as a last resort."

Jaime just shrugged. "Perhaps. But we'll catch the bastard before he has a chance to enact it."

Varys hardly mattered. The fact that the wildfire was still under the city was the key issue. It could have blown at any second over the last fifteen years. So long as it remained there, growing older and more volatile with age, it could still blow at any second henceforth. But when Jaime spoke again, he reverted to the subject they had reached before the second explosion had thrown them off course.
"I wanted to go with Rhaegar to the Trident," he said, eyes unfocused as he slipped back into the past. "It was he who told me to stay and guard his father. He told me that, when he got back, there would be great changes. I took that to mean that he would be king and his father overthrown."

Lyanna nodded. "That sounds about right. But, was there a baby swap? Did you see Elia?"

Jaime's expression clouded. "No. I did not. If I wasn't guarding the King, I was guarding the Queen. Never the Princess, even after Llewelyn Martell was sent to the Trident. The truth is, your grace, invalidating or disproving Aegon's story is going to be difficult. Unless we take his handlers alive."

"But, in the meantime, I have these," she stated. She rose from the table and crossed the room to where she had her documents kept safely out of the way. They were locked in a box, hidden inside a larger chest her clothes had been packed into. Handing them to him, she added: "Take a look."

He did so in silence, turning each parchment toward the light of the guttering candle. All the while, she thought of the wildfire percolating beneath King's Landing. It gave her something to focus on, at least until they were both startled by the tent flaps being suddenly thrust back and a dark figure falling through the opening. But it was only Jon. He smiled at the sight of her and let a burlap sack fall at his feet. She could see at least three large, heavy objects inside and she sincerely hoped they were what she thought they were.

"Look what I got," he said, holding up the sack for her to see. However, having clearly expected to find her alone, he faltered at the unexpected sight of Ser Jaime.

Even so, Jaime raised a smile as if all were normal. "Don't tell me, I think I can guess. It's the heads of Aegon, Varys and Jon Connington?"

Lyanna laughed, gesturing for Jon to enter properly. But all he did was hold the sack open for her to see the eggs, then promptly took them over to the table and placed them there still inside the sack.

"Lady Stark refused to leave Sansa's side," he said, returning to her. "I need to find Lord Stark, he has no idea… why are you showing him those documents?"

"Jon!" she chided him for the rude tone of his question. In return, he met her gaze with a look on his face that said: 'but he's a Lannister.' It was time they both faced facts and she softened her stance, adding: "In a few hours, everyone will know. Go and find your father and stay with him. Under no circumstances leave his side."

He was burning to gainsay her, she could tell. He hesitated a moment too long, torn between doing as he was told and trying to think of something better. But Jaime was there and it was clear Jon still mistrusted the man. His presence seemed to make Jon's efforts not worth the while. In the end, he kissed her cheek and left without another word.

Alone again, Lyanna and Jaime faced one another across the small table. Between them, a single candle swayed in the small draught.

"Rhaegar was a good man," he said, at length. "I keep having this dream about him, where I'm lost beneath the mines at Casterly Rock and he's there. He's just a shadow, but I know it's him. I did nothing while his mother, the Queen, was beaten and raped by the Mad King. I wanted to save her, but I did not. I know I failed them both…" The rest of his sentence was left hanging as his gaze slid out of focus as if he was reaching far, far back into his memory. A cavern in his mind where he never went. "I was sworn to protect the Queen as well as the King. But Jonothor Darry said: 'aye, but not from him.' And if you show Robert these documents- "
"You don't have to worry about that," she cut in, second-guessing where he was going. "This is my doing and mine alone. I'm not important. If you feel you have failed Rhaegar or Rhaella, get to Jon and get him to safety. Don't let Robert kill him-"

"Jon?" he cut in. "Your nephew?"

He wasn't comprehending what she was saying. And before she could clarify any further, Robert returned in a towering bad temper. Eddard was close behind him, harassed and dishevelled. Both men paused, regarding the scene before them for a brief second.

"Stannis is dead," Robert declared. "Ser Jaime, get out there and see to it his body is returned."

Lyanna's heart folded in dismay, but she kept her composure as she discreetly slid the documents off the table. As she did so, she nodded to Jaime signalling to him that she did not object to his absence. Like Jon moments before, he hesitated before obeying his king. Lyanna watched as he slipped out into the frantic night before turning to her brother. "Lord Stark, Jon is searching for you. He has news of Sansa and Lady Stark."


Robert flopped down in the chair Jaime had just vacated, asking her to fetch him some wine. With her documents burning a hole in her pocket, she did as he asked and poured herself a good measure into the bargain.

"I know you were not close, all the same, I am sorry for Stannis' death," she said, handing him the wine. "Wildfire is a cowardly way to decimate a fleet."

He said nothing, but she sensed his grief. Or, maybe, it was regret. She had never heard Robert say anything about either Stannis or Renly that wasn't a complaint, an insult or underpinned with anger. But under that blustering exterior, there was some semblance of brotherly love there. She would have bet on it.

Robert downed his wine in one and buried his face in his hands. "What am I to do about that wretched bastard?"

"I may not know for sure," she said, sliding into a seat opposite him. "But I think I know a good starting point. Robert, there's something I need to tell you."

He lifted his face from his hands, a small glimmer of hope in his bright blue eyes. It almost pained her to see it.

Although she wished her mother was safely away, Sansa was never more grateful than to be in her arms than she was at that moment. For a long time, they didn't even talk. They just held each other as chaos broke out all around them. The Golden Company had wiped out Stannis' fleet and now they were cutting down whatever sailors and soldiers had survived the wildfire as they waded ashore in search of safety. But all they found was steel, fire and death. Meanwhile, she hid in her rooms and was too afraid to even look out of the window. She trembled at the thought of seeing what she was hearing. What she had thought to do was take the stolen key she had and secreted it down her bodice.

Earlier, Aegon had come down from the battlements with a busted nose and a temper like a charging bull. He berated her and Catelyn for Jon attacking him then promptly signed a death warrant for him. "That's treason," Aegon had muttered all the while. "There's only one answer to treason and I'll cut his damn hand off, first."
It worried her, at first. Until her mother assured her that death warrants drawn up against real princes by bastard pretenders weren't worth the parchment they were written on. All the while, the real explosion was just waiting to happen. And waiting was the worst part. When it finally happened, she was almost relieved.

It was around midnight, or shortly after, that the castle was rocked by the sound of a dozen doors being kicked in all at once. Aegon was raging, the sound of his voice echoing down the halls and galleries as he called everyone outside. Servants shouted, crockery was smashed on stone floors and running footsteps thundered overhead. That was soon followed by the muffled sounds of a hasty and violent search being conducted. Aegon had definitely discovered the theft of his dragon eggs and it would be minutes if as long as that before her chambers were reached.

"Sansa, stay close to me," Catelyn urged, gripping her hand tight. "Whatever happens, I won't let them take you. But if we get a chance at freedom, and I tell you to run, you run. Understand? Even if you have to leave me behind, you run for your life."

She went to reply, but the sound of her voice was drowned out as their door smashed to splinters. Half a heartbeat later, armed men were storming inside and two of them dragged Sansa and her mother out. She almost tripped, but Catelyn had a steady hold of her. Catelyn berated them, only to be hit in the face so hard that even Sansa screamed. Without further ado, their chamber was being torn apart.

"Into the common hall now," Harry Strickland commanded them. He was outside, overseeing the search but too craven to take part.

They made their way as quickly as they could, clinging to each other even though Catelyn's mouth was bleeding heavily. Whoever hit her had done so with a gauntleted fist, opening her lip and cracking her front teeth. Sansa wept at the sight of the blood but composed herself before Aegon could witness her distress.

He was there but standing by the hearth and talking to Varys, rather than sitting at the high table. Septa Lemore was there, also. She was sitting with little Edric Storm. Ser Cortnay Penrose was overlooking the hall from nearby, talking with Jon Connington and Rolly Duckfield. Sansa watched the men for a moment, their discussion seemed heated. Then her attention was drawn by the sound of the hall doors being barred, trapping them inside. It made her feel sick, at first. But the servant's door, always forgotten, was still unsecured.

"No one leaves this hall until either my dragon eggs are found, or..." Aegon began. Looking right at Sansa, he added: "or, someone confesses what they have done with them."

Angry at her mother's busted lip and Jon's death sentence, she looked right back at him. It took every ounce of her courage not to falter, but she didn't.

"There are hundreds of people in this castle," she said. "What makes you think we know anything."

"Because it's obvious, isn't it?" Aegon retorted. "Your brother comes in here, sweet-talking his way into the castle, tries to threaten me with talk of another prince and the dragon eggs mysteriously vanish with him."

"If you think it was Jon, why are you holding us?" Catelyn demanded.

Aegon rolled his eyes and Sansa noticed a broken blood vessel on the left. A souvenir of Jon's punch, or so she hoped. "How could he have known where they are? Someone helped him. A certain sister who thinks's he's the gift of the gods to all mankind."
Catelyn laughed. "Do you mean Sansa? She would not help Jon. My other daughter, for a certainty. So, before you accuse my daughter of thievery-"

"No one's accusing anyone of anything," Varys interjected. He still smelled of rosewater as he wafted his way into the centre of their gathering. "Look, the dragon eggs are useless, they're only stone and this here," - he broke off, gesturing to Aegon – "is the only dragon that matters. We're merely making enquiries to find out what happened."

"The only dragon that matters," Catelyn was laughing again, but it sounded hollow and weary. She wiped her sleeve over her mouth, turning her gaze to the Master of Whispers. "You were good, Varys. I'll give you that. In fact, you were very good, back in the day. But your day is done and you're not good enough anymore. You failed. There was a piece of the game hidden right under your nose and you never knew he was there, did you? Seven hells, he was in my home and even I didn't know. Perhaps, had you known about him, you wouldn't have had to resort to this pretender?"

Everyone was looking at Catelyn now, especially Septa Lemore. She drew closer, while Aegon frowned and almost backed away.

"What's she talking about?" he asked. "Woman, you're raving mad. What are you talking about?"

"Rhaegar annulled his marriage to Elia so he could marry Lyanna Stark," said Lemore. "They had a son. A son raised in secret at Winterfell, not even his own mother could acknowledge him for fearing the secret would get out."

"These are lies," Aegon spat. Sansa could see he was trembling. Fear or rage, she could not tell but hoped it was both. "You've been my septa for two years nearly. Why are you lying?"

But Lemore did not answer him. She got up and approached Varys. "You know who I am, Varys. You knew that when you sent Jon Connington to find me. Lady Stark speaks truly. Jon Snow is Aemon Targaryen, son of Lyanna and Rhaegar. You know I know. I nursed Princess Elia all through that bad business. She consented to let Rhaegar go, and it broke her heart. I was there through it all. End this farce, tell us who this boy is? For his sake, as well as ours."

Aegon lunged at Lemore, but Connington got between them. The Septa didn't even flinch, but hasty words were exchanged between Aegon and his men. Sansa strained to hear what was said but couldn't make it out. Connington and Duckfield immediately left the room, barking out a command that the door be unbarred for them. As they left, the shadows in the room shifted and warped. The air around them grew cold.

"They've been sent to kill Jon," Catelyn whispered in her ear. "Pray he stays with your father and the Queen."

"No!" she cried out. Before she knew it, she was on her feet and facing the pretender. "Face him in battle or die a coward!"

But Aegon was silent, immobilised by the realisation that he was undone. His face was white, the blood draining rapidly from him. He retreated to the sides, looking sick. Varys wasn't faring any better.

"It matters not," he said. "No one knows of Aemon Targaryen, everyone knows of Aegon."

"And everyone knows Aegon is dead," Catelyn pointed out.

"Is he a Blackfyre?" Sansa demanded, pointing to Aegon. "I read a book about them on the way to King's Landing-"
She cut herself off as the shadows warped again. They merged and writhed as they took human form, growing before her very eyes. She screamed aloud as she fell back into her mother's arms. Aegon shouted something indecipherable but loud enough to bring Duckfield rushing back into the room. It was too late, however. Varys was already dying in the rushes, choking on his own blood. The shadow monster made its way toward Aegon, only Duckfield lunged in its path. Like Varys, in the blink of an eye, he was dying in the rushes with blood spilling from mysterious wounds.

The shadow had a face she recognised, but the name eluded her in that moment of panic. Meanwhile, Aegon fled screaming and ran right into Connington's arms. Catelyn didn't miss a beat as a storm of chaos broke over them. She gripped Sansa's upper arms and shoved her violently out of the door. "Run!" she screamed at Sansa. "Run now, get out!"

Sansa felt Lemore's arms wrapped tight around her chest, pulling her away. But at the same time, Connington look at the bodies on the ground and at Catelyn. The killer shadow was gone.

"You did this," he snapped. "You did this to free your girl-"

"It was a shadow," Sansa shouted back, but Lemore was all but dragging her away. She saw the blow of the sword, she saw her mother crumple to the ground and lying motionless in the rushes. She tried to scream again, but Lemore was dragging her and pushing her out of the door. Run, a girl's voice told her. It sounded like Arya. Just fucking run.

Still not unable to believe what she had seen, Sansa and Lemore pushed through the crowds of soldiers. They had as long as the confusion lasted before anyone realised what they were doing. All the same, Sansa crashed to a halt outside the dungeons.

"Ser Loras!" she called out. "We can free him."

Lemore was breathless, sweating. But she nodded and drew a knife from under her white septa's robes. Sansa prayed the guards were ignorant of the chaos breaking out in the castle above them. But their chances were vastly improved by the arrival of Ser Cortnay, who had run out after them with little Edric in tow. Penrose drew his sword. She yearned to ask after her mother, but she dared not and feared the truth anyway.

They met one guard, that Ser Penrose killed with ease. She fumbled for the key stolen some days ago and struggled in her haste to get the door unlocked. Once inside, they were faced with a long row of cells. Three more guards were engaged in a fight, with Ser Penrose taking out one and Lemore another with her dagger. Blood sprayed down her white robes, while Sansa wrested the dead guard's keys from his belt.

"Free them!" Penrose shouted. "Free them all."

Each key was numbered to spare the turnkey a headache, but still, Sansa was all fingers and thumbs as she paired each one to the right cell door. As she opened each one, hungry and furious prisoners burst out and rushed for the exits where they could get out and take up arms against their captors. Ser Loras was in the fourth and when he rushed out, he grabbed her in a tight hug.

"Give me the keys," he said. "I'll do it, you run. Get out of here."

He was emaciated and weak. But Ser Cortnay was strong and had a sword, she did not argue. She spun around, rushing for the exits when a blade sank deep in her stomach. She hadn't even seen the man push past Lemore. Only the flash of the steel blade, sinking into her flesh. 'Oh,' she thought to herself as she looked up at Lord Connington, 'that wasn't very chivalrous.'
Connington wrenched his sword free of her belly, then came the pain and the cold hard floor.

"Lady," she murmured as her eyes drifted shut.

When she opened her eyes again, she was out in the open and looking up at the night sky, at the red comet burning overhead. The pain was gone; only fury remained. Sansa threw up her head and howled at the stars. She howled and howled again with her wolf’s voice until the stars bled and the skies opened. Her sister answered back with distant, muffled cries of grief and pain; her silent brother was so far away, but she knew he sensed her all the same. Alone in the empty castle, she was wolf.

In accordance with his wishes, a funeral pyre was already being built for Stannis Baratheon. Under direction from Robb and Tywin Lannister, the men were gathering the wood to make pallets which would be stacked up on top of each other. Work was fast, but effectively, especially since Stannis’ body hadn’t even been brought back yet. Lyanna watched them for a while, hoping Robert wouldn’t throw her onto the pyre with him by the time the night was done.

Meanwhile, he read the documents she showed him several times. He laid them out on the table, studying them one at a time as though he might have missed something. Lyanna remained silent as he read, wary of interrupting although the wait for the explosion was an agony in and of itself.

"These," he said and then fell silent again. "These are real… They have your seal, Rhaegar's seal and Elia’s seal. The High Septon agreed to it. These were meant for the registry at Oldtown."

He got to his feet and poured himself a healthy measure of wine. Although he sounded calm enough, she knew there was a storm brewing beneath that outward show of passivity. Just one wrong word and he'd be off. For now, she felt it safer to let him do the talking.

"All these years we've been married and never once did you let on that you were married," he said. The hurt in his voice was unmistakable, he looked bewildered and lost. Seemingly restless, he also got up and paced slowly around the tent. "Why didn't you tell me, Lyanna? What did you have to hide? If he forced you, it was no true marriage. But then, I remember all the times you defended him. Him and his family, sick and warped with inbreeding and all the evil deeds they visited upon this realm. And you, with what I thought to be a soft woman’s heart, were always there: making excuses, defending him and that fucking inbred family of his. After what he did to you, I thought you were just too good for this world."

Still, she did not answer and her silence infuriated him. He gripped her shoulders, pulling her sharply and shoving her against the table. She stifled a cry as she bashed into the table. The eggs jolted in their sack but neither she nor Robert paid attention to them.

His spittle sprayed against her face as he shouted in her face. "Answer me!"

"I – I had to protect myself," she blurted out, trying to back away from him. "After what was done to Elia and the children, is it any wonder I feared you?"

"But I did this for you!" he shouted back at her. "And you gave me that ultimatum: stop hunting those children or lose you for good. I should have known then. I should have realised. You loved them. You loved him. Do you love him still?"

"That hardly matters now we're married twelve years," she protested. "I never told you and I'm sorry for it. But I couldn't risk what happened to Elia and the children."

Robert backed down. "Her death… it was never meant to happen. You know that. It was wrong and I said it was wrong. She could have lived. She could have been sent to Dorne. You knew my stance,
and still, you didn't tell me. Only the children had to die, you knew that."

"Robert don't!" she pleaded as he inched closer and closer to her. Finding herself trapped between him and the table, she tried to wriggle free of him.

"Don't what?" he asked. "I'm not doing anything."

"I mean, don't go down this route," she replied. "I wish with all my heart that I had told you, but at the time I couldn't. The longer it went on the harder it got--"

"Oh, spare me, you whore!" he cut in. Colour rose in his face, crimson and clammy with sweat and fury. "You loved him. You love him still, I can see it. You were always defending him and protecting those damn children and I should have seen it--"

"Yes, I loved him," she cut in. "But I stopped you from killing those children because not to have done so would have been the shame and disgrace of all fucking humanity. Victory made you a monster--"

The blow hit her square across the jaw, drawing the metallic tang of blood on her tongue. He pulled her just so he could shove her back against the table again, causing the dragon eggs to jolt and her long dormant wolfblood to stir back into life. She cried out, lashing at his face with her nails only for him to catch her wrist and grip it tight.

"You attack me, your anointed king," he hissed at her, teeth clenched.

The pain in her wrist sharpened as he bent it back, making her hand go numb. But her blood was up, an anger she had not felt in decades simmered and seethed inside her. She looked him in the eye as she said: "I had his son. I birthed Rhaegar's son. And I would never have married you if not to protect him."

For a moment, she thought they had both stopped breathing. The light in his eyes died and left them dull and glassy. His grip left her wrist and, swift as a viper, closed around her throat in a vice-like grip. He lifted her off her feet, causing her to struggle and lash out with her feet, kicking him in the stomach. Still, he did not let her go. He slammed her back against the wall, where she hit her head so hard she saw stars. He squeezed and squeezed at her throat, crushing her windpipe as he leaned her backward over the table. Her spine was not meant to bend that way.

Unable to breathe, struggling for breath, she used her fingers to pry his grip away. But she was weakening. Pressure built up fast in her chest, her life rapidly choked out of her. When she tried to breathe, all she could do was making a gargling sound somewhere at the back of her crumpling throat. Her vision blurred, her eyes popping out of her head and grew weaker and weaker.

Blindly and in a panic, she summoned her flagging strength and reached for the nearest object. At that moment, she didn't know what it was, but she smashed it into the side of Robert's head. His grip only tightened until she smashed him again, this time in the face. His grip on her throat fell away, Robert stumbled in a daze and Lyanna was left on the floor still clutching the dragon egg. The orange and black, she noted.

"What in seven hells is going on?" Eddard had appeared through the tent flap, looking at them both. Lyanna tried to speak but could only croak an indecipherable noise. Lord Stark had no time to react before Robert rounded on him, a hunting knife flashing its way to his throat.

"traitor!" he yelled. "You fucking traitor."
A candelabra had fallen, the flames taking hold. Lyanna used what was left of her strength to get between Ned and Robert, only succeeding in having the King latch on to her again, his hands twisting and pulling at her hair. She couldn't even scream, but Eddard drew his sword as Robert tried to choke her again. Throwing his sword aside, Ned resorted to pulling them apart with his bare hands. Then it was over, when Lyanna reached for Ned's sword just as another sword cut Robert through the back of the throat. His blood sprayed over her face and clothes.

Dazed and bewildered, Jaime swayed on the spot where Robert once stood. "I swore to protect my Queen," he murmured, low and cracked with emotion. "I swore to protect the Queen."

Jon watched the new arrivals in numb disbelief. Lady Melisandre and Ser Davos Seaworth bearing Stannis' body on a stretcher, helped by a handful of others. Without much ceremony at all, he was laid on the pyre and left there. Melisandre, no longer pregnant, came to stand beside him.

"There's one more," he said, still numb with shock. "Robert's dead, too."

"Robert!" she repeated. "What happened?"

Clearly, she hadn't been on speaking terms with R'hllor in the last few hours. He barely knew himself, but he recounted all he could. Now, it seemed, his parentage was out too so he told her that as well. All the while, the funeral pyre grew taller. In the tent behind them, Lyanna was being treated by a maester while Tywin, Eddard and Jaime argued over what to do about Robert's body, what they should do next and why they were in this position at all. It was all futile, of course. Robert would have killed them all.

"Burn him with his brother," said Melisandre. She was quite matter of fact about it. "There is power in King's blood. But you need one more."

"One more what?" he asked, looking over at her.

She lowered her voice as she explained. "One more sacrifice to R'hllor. Living, if possible. Take the dragon eggs and place them on the pyre. Only death can pay for life."

"I am not burning a living person," his tone was final and he walked away.

He returned to the tent, where Lyanna was unconscious and laid out on the bed. On the table beside her, dreamwine was sitting in a little thimble. Just enough to make her sleep. The breath caught in Jon's throat when he saw her, however. Her eyes were blackened, her lips swollen and split. All around her throat, red and purple bruising marked the places where Robert had tried to kill her.

Ignoring the heated discussion between the three men in the room, he knelt by his mother's side and kissed her brow. Oblivious to his presence, Lyanna slept on. Her breathing was shallow, rattling through broken sounding ribs. Dressed only in a linen shift, he could see bruises and cuts on her knees, complimenting those at her throat. Dried blood crusted her lips and chin. He barely recognised her now that her injuries were fully blossoming.

"He was trying to kill her," Jaime was saying. "Had I not intervened he would have killed you too, Lord Stark. She told him about the boy, that's what she said before the maester put her to sleep."

"What boy?" Tywin asked. "You mean she bore Rhaegar a son?"

Jon glanced over his shoulder, but they were too busy talking about him to talk to him. His poor father was silent with grief, his face white and stricken. Just for a moment, he wondered who his father would have saved: his best friend or his sister? In the end, Jaime made the decision but he
liked to think the best of his father.

"King or no, we must fight the Golden Company," Tywin was solemn and utterly unemotional. "That is our primary concern. After that, we will discuss the succession. Stannis' daughter is in the North--"

"And Rhaegar's son is right over there," someone else pointed out. It sounded like Robb.

"Tywin is right," said Lord Stark. "Golden Company first, only then the succession."

Morale was non-existent among the men in and out of the tent. Lyanna looked too weak to live, but the maester assured him she would be fine. Robert's bloated corpse lay at the back of the room, like a busted chair someone forgot to leave with the rest of the rubbish. Jon had never really dwelled on Robert, but he realised he had hated the man. They had used his cloak to snuff out a small fire. It's singed remains covered his face.

His inner-musings were interrupted by the arrival of Ser Barristan. "Lord Stark. Jon. It's Lady Sansa."

Jon rose, closing the gap between himself and his father. The old knight had a tear in his eye and he slowly shook his head.

"No!" Lord Stark's cry was full of anguish as he saw her laid out on the ground. Her auburn hair was fanned out behind her head, her white dress soiled with blood from a gaping, open wound. Ser Loras and a septa stayed by her side, only moving when Eddard approached and gathered Sansa's body up in his arms. He cradled her, stroking her hair and rocking her back and forth.

Naked and bound in chains, Jon Connington was silent and bloodied.

"He was captured by the prisoners she died trying to free," Loras explained. "He killed Lady Stark, too. I thought I would bring him to you, my lord. It is for you to decide his fate."

"Is Aegon dead?" asked Jon.

"No."

"Good. By tomorrow, he will be," Jon replied. "We have nothing left to lose. My brother and I will lead the army and we will smash every last one of them."

He had no voice in the grief he felt. There was no name for the pain. All he could see was his perfect little sister lying dead in their father's arms. Lord Stark was shaking visibly, holding her tight as though he might squeeze the life back into her.

"Leave her with me."

Jon turned to find Melisandre at his side, looking over Sansa's body. "What?"

He remembered her bringing Lady back to life. Could she do that for people?

"Light the pyre," she said. "Burn the dead. You know what to do, Jon. You are the Prince That Was Promised."

"I am not burning my sister, dragons or no-"

"I will take care of Sansa," she said again and nodded to the prisoner. "But Connington?"
He remembered what he said before, about not burning a living man. But when he looked at Jon Connington, he felt his conscience slipping away. He wasn't a man. He was Sansa's murderer. Jon approached him with Loras at his side, Melisandre close behind them. Maybe Jon Stark would have listened to those earlier doubts and granted a clean death. But Aemon Targaryen had to be sterner than that. Sansa didn't get a clean death.

"I don't care what you were to my father," said Jon. "My real father, that is. For I hear you were more than fond of him. The point is you murdered my sister. And while Melisandre here has powers beyond all our reckoning, that's not the point either. You murdered my sister."

"Do what you will with me," Connington retorted. "Aegon still lives. Aegon still has the Golden Company. They will fight to the death."

"Then they will all die," Melisandre remarked. "And your false King."

Loras laughed, but Jon remained stoic and stony-faced. Inside, he felt peculiar. Maybe it was all the grief and pain of the last several hours, maybe it was the sight of Sansa so helplessly deceased. Something inside him had given way and he felt all the more powerful for it. He felt untouchable. Out of the blue, he felt like the balance of nature was stacked in his favour and he was no longer afraid of anything.

"If you don't burn the fucker alive, I will," someone said. The decision seemed final.

He drew his sword and placed it point down at his feet, his hands resting on the pommel. "I, Aemon of the House Targaryen do sentence you to die. If you have last words, speak them now."

He used his birthname, although he knew he never would again. He was Jon. Just Jon. But he wanted to see the look on Connington's face. He wanted to see the dawning comprehension in the old man's eye, of just how wrong he had been.

"Lord Tyrell, secure the prisoner to the pyre."

Connington struggled as he was led away, but Loras and the Stormlands man who secured him had little sympathy. Jon wondered how they managed to get Connington passed the Golden Company unless they didn't want him either? That was banished from his thoughts as Margaery appeared, falling into Loras' arms with a cry of joy. They held each other tight, which brought him just a twinge of sadness as he remembered Sansa.

"Light the pyre," Melisandre urged him. "Lannister men are seeing to the old king. It is time, my lord."

Stannis had already been arranged on the pyre. Connington was chained and shackled in place. Robert's bulk was trickier and Lord Stark tried to protest. It was half-hearted and he soon returned to his daughter's side. Jon wondered if he should campaign to reprieve Jon Connington if Sansa was miraculously brought back. But no. It didn't change the fact that Connington had killed her. Only death can pay for life. He would pay anything for Sansa's.

"The dragon eggs," Melisandre reminded him. "You must do this."

"So many people have tried before," he pointed out. "But on the promise, you try to help my sister, I'll do anything you ask."

"Then get the dragon eggs."

Lyanna had woken up. She watched him enter, black and blue and unable to speak. When she tried
to get up, he lay her back down again.

"It's all right," he assured her. "I will look after you."

He got the eggs and brought them to the pyre. Before starting, he sought out Margaery and asked her to look after the Queen. Before they parted, he realised he had not seen her all day. And that was a very long time because he was in love with her.

"Jon, everyone's saying you're Rhaegar and Lyanna's son," she whispered low, conspiratorially. "Is it true?"

"You'll see," he assured her. "Just, stay with the Queen. Please."

She nodded and let him go on his way.

One of the eggs was crusted with dried blood, where Lyanna had used it to smash Robert's face in. Orange and black, he removed it from the sack and placed in the crook of the king's arm. The gold and silver he placed at Stannis's feet. The green and white he gave to Jon Connington.

"You're mad," he said. "This is madness."

He was probably right and he was glad no one else was paying him any attention. They were all too preoccupied elsewhere. His father with his sister, Jaime and Ser Barristan with the royal troops – now minus their titular head.

"At least have the decency to kill me first, you tyrant." Connington sounded weary rather than pleading.

"I would have if you at least had the decency not to kill children," he replied. "And Melisandre said it's better this way. More powerful. You will help the dragons return, my lord. Just not in a way you thought you would."

If he suffered too much, Jon would put an arrow through his heart. He resolved that much, at least. All the same, he shivered in disgust at the thought of making his grandfather proud. The kindling was alight now, crackling into a fire. Everyone now gathered around. Tywin, Robb, his father and the Tyrells. Melisandre had taken custody of Sansa, just as she promised. Lysa Arryn appeared, flanked by Knights of the Vale. Supported between Jaime and Margaery, Lyanna came hobbling out of her tent. Unable to stand, they lowered her gently in front of the pyre as it took flame.

Jon couldn't guess at how she felt toward Robert now. Her expression was blank with incomprehension. Melisandre chanted a prayer in High Valyrian, sending up blessings to her mysterious fire god. He was of the old gods and he didn't think they approved of fire. Almost as if at Melisandre's command, the flames leapt higher.

"Stand back, Jon," Ser Barristan urged. "You're much too close to the flames."

The old knight's hand closed around his arm, gently pulling him back to safety. But it wasn't hot. It was a warm breeze playing against his skin. He heard Jon Connington roar in pain, but that was soon consumed by the fires and they blazed higher. The bodies and the palettes were black shadows at its heart.

Jon felt himself being drawn closer. Ser Barristan shouted at him. Ser Jaime came rushing over to grab him. Melisandre's prayers grew more fervent as he followed the sound of her voice into the heart of the flames. Still, he did not burn. All his clothes caught fire, but the sensation was warm and soothing on his skin. He heard only the roar of the flames filling his ears, but if he opened his eyes
and looked, he could see the images forming the flames.

Sansa transformed into a wolf stalking through an empty castle. The girl with lilac eyes smiled at him as she walked into a pyre of her own making. Daenerys. He knew her name, now. He turned in the heart of the fire, letting the flames lap against his naked skin. When he opened his eyes again, all he saw was the orange and reds of the flames. He saw his mother kiss a silver-haired prince who then dropped to his knees and kissed her swollen belly. "Aemon," said Rhaegar. "Aemon Targaryen, the third head of the dragon. He is the dragon."

The vision was chased away by the sound of cracking stone, so loud it was deafening over the roar of the fire. White-hot looking flame erupted within the fire but separate from it. A girl's voice sounded over the roaring flames, soft and sweet. "Wake the dragon," she urged him. "Wake the dragon." The sound of cracking stone filled his head and his body once more. The same white-hot conflagration that barely registered on his senses.

He heard his mother screaming from within a tower, saw her legs open to reveal a gaping, bloodied wound where her privates should have been. She screamed and screamed again as her labours advanced, tearing her insides out. "The dragon has three heads," said Rhaegar from somewhere far away. For the third time, the sharp, whip-like sound of cracking stone filled the space around him. Another spasm of molten flame as fire became flesh.

He knew what it was. He knew what he had done. Down on his knees in the pit of the fire, he rolled over on his back and let the tide take him. It all faded into darkness, sweet and warm, where he slept as sound as a newborn.

It was long past dawn when he awoke, naked and bald and covered in ash. The stuff was choking him every time he inhaled. He thought he saw an ember among the dead ashes, but realised it was an eye. A tiny eye belonging to a red and black dragon. He sat up and let the little creature hop onto his outstretched fingers. As he sat up, the gold and silver hopped up on to his shoulder and Jon could feel its little claws digging into his skin. Finally, the green and white scampered up his thigh and onto the crook of his arm, able to take flight just long enough to reach that particular spot.

Amazed, overwhelmed, he rose from the ashes of the pyre heedless of the huge crowds of people that had gathered around the fire pit. They saw him go in. Now they were seeing him standing, unburnt, in the morning sun with three newly hatched dragons spreading their translucent wings.

Naked as his name day, Jon drew himself to full height as the red and black dragon shrieked a greeting to the crowds. The other two joined in, filling the morning air with the sound of their shrill music. All around him, the people dropped to their knees.
"Mother." Lyanna stirred as she felt herself being rocked back and forth. The sharp motion abruptly ceased, but the damage was done and she was waking. Injuries ached and pained her, more so than the day before when Robert inflicted them. Bruises had blossomed overnight like glasshouse flowers, covering her pale skin. Regaining consciousness felt like swimming through thick treacle. "Mother, wake up. Wake up now!"

She tried to speak but could only wheeze. Her muscles ached and her throat burned. The last thing she remembered of the night before dropped back into her memory, physically jolting her. She saw Jon walking into the flames, she struggled to stop him before Jaime Lannister halted her. He wrapped his arms tight around her middle, shouting in her ear: 'You're too late, your grace.' Already pained by the loss of her niece and the husband that tried to kill her, she lapsed into hysterics until someone forced the dreamwine on her. The last person she recalled seeing was Eddard, dazed and silent, unable to say a word as a new nightmare unfolded before him.

"Mother, get up!"

'Mother, he called me mother'. Lyanna jolted again, forcing her heavy eyes open as she struggled to sit up. Wrapped in Ser Barristan's Kingsguard cloak, he greeted her with a tight embrace. His skin was smudged with soot and dirt, to her own heartbreak, his hair was gone. Otherwise, he was unhurt and she wept with relief. A million questions stormed through her head, but she couldn't pick out just one and they were all left unasked. Nor could she deny that her relief was matched by a moment of anger. She wanted to smack him for giving her such a terrible fright.

"Am I mad?" she asked, her voice a hoarse whisper. "I thought you were dead."

He hopped up onto the bed with her, holding the cloak closed securely. "I know, I'm sorry. I would have told you, had I known myself. But, mother, there's something you need to see. Come."

Rolling off the bed again, he headed right for the door and paused to let her catch up. Her injuries slowed her, but she pulled on a cloak and fastened it tight around her middle. Seeing her difficulties, Jon came up to her and offered an arm to lean on.

"Why?" she asked. She meant why did he walk into the fire. It made no sense, but she was still too groggy from dreamwine and grief and confusion to question anything in any great detail. She found herself letting it all happen, waiting for it all to start making sense.

"I'm not telling you," he replied with an impish smile "I want to show you."

All eyes turned to them as they emerged into the open, but none dared approach. Everyone seemed to have gathered in the paddocks Robert cleared, the centre of which was now dominated by the scorched pit of the former king's funeral pyre. Lyanna shivered as she noticed it, momentarily losing track of where Jon was leading her.

"This is why I needed to go into the fire," he said, helping her through the front of his and Robb's tent. He was as keen as a puppy to show her this thing. "Look! What do you think of them?"

She didn't see at first. Robb and Margaery were in there, both staring avidly into a wooden box that had been used to transport victuals. The girl was cooing at the box's inhabitants. Robb, still painfully subdued from the death of his sister, smiled vacantly as he reached to touch whatever was inside.
They saw her coming, quickly withdrawing to give her space to look inside. Even then, it did not register. She thought it might be some joke. She thought they might be puppets or painted toys. She waited for Jon to explain the jest, but all he did was look from her to the baby dragons curled up in the box. Wisps of smoke curled from their nostrils and one awoke: the silver and gold, who turned its ice blue eyes to hers.

Lyanna gasped aloud, her knees buckled. Jon and Robb caught an arm each, preventing her fall. Her hands flew to her face, to disguise her jaw hanging open like a lackwit. Meanwhile, the red and black stirred and lifted its head. Lyanna felt her heart melting.

"What do you think, mother?"

She flinched at the sound of that particular noun. But she then realised: everyone knew, there was nothing to hide. No more secrets. No more hiding. Everyone knew and they must have seen the whole thing. They must have seen Jon walk into the fire and come back out again with three hatchling dragons. She saw the way the people outside all turned to them as they emerged from her tent and now it made sense.

Robb guided her into a seat before she fell down. She pinched herself, to make sure she wasn't dreaming. And Robert be thrice damned, for she could not physically speak the great rush of words and thoughts that were racing through her mind. She tried all the same.

"Miracle," she rasped. "Miracle."

Jon nodded, pulling up a chair to sit beside her. Robb and Margaery, sensing their need to be alone, quietly departed the tent. Outside, she knew, the forces were gathering to chase down the Golden Company. Before that, however, Jon pulled over his box of dragons.

"The red and black is named Sanya," he said. "After Sansa and Arya. The white and green is Rhaegon, after Rhaenys and Aegon." Jon paused and picked up the silver and gold, letting her take hold of it. "And this is Rhaeanna, after…"

The hatchling squirmed in her hands, its supple tail curling around her wrists with surprising strength. All the while, tears slid down her face and she was incapable of stopping them.

"Rhaegar and Lyanna," she murmured, finishing the sentence for him. "If he could be here now … if he could see this…"

Her throat dried, sapping what was left of her weak voice. But she had the feeling this didn't need to be said. They both knew it already. All the same, her heart ached for Rhaegar. For the first time in fifteen years, she let herself feel the devastation of his loss. Although she had grown to also love Robert, in a way, it had never been safe to admit even to herself that she loved Rhaegar still. Now he was really a dragon reborn. The dragon spread its wings and flew to Jon's shoulder.

"Melisandre made it possible for me to walk into the fire and hatch the dragons," said Jon. "Now she's going to help Sansa. I think we should let her try, before it's too late. Can you convince father?"

She look in Jon's dark grey eyes, weighing him up for a moment as she mustered up her firmest whisper. "You are king. Command."

"Everyone knelt when they saw the dragons," he ceded. "But no one has sworn to me as their King yet."

"They knelt," she replied. Trusting her legs to hold her up, she rose and caressed his newly bald head. The poor thing blushed self-consciously.
"The Maester assured me it would grow back," he said. "It might not even take long."

"It's awful," she sighed. "But worth it."

Somebody, somewhere, must surely own a spare hat. In the meantime, Sanya landed on his head, acting as a makeshift hat until a real one could be found. If anything, she only seemed to emphasise her master's newly shorn state. He picked the dragon off and disappeared behind a screen where she heard water being poured into a bowl. He had clean clothes somewhere, which she soon picked out of his strongbox. A white cotton shirt and woollen breeches, matched up with a grey tunic. Ghost lay curled up and asleep in a far corner. She hoped he wouldn't feel neglected now that the dragons were here.

As soon as Jon was washed and dressed, they stepped out together with the infant dragons trying to take flight. Until the day before, she had been the Queen. She was used to people looking at her. But Jon seemed self-conscious and lowered his gaze. They paused on the way to Eddard's tent to let some young squires look at the dragons. Then Ser Barristan fell into step with them, dazed and happy as he clicked his fingers to get Rhaegon's attention. After him, Jaime appeared from a press of Lannister fighting men.

Both she and he stopped, her heartbeat fluttering at the sight of him. He wasn't looking at the dragons, he was looking right at her as he closed the gap between them. The night before, she had no voice at all to thank him for saving her life. Once, a long time ago, he let a queen be raped and beaten. Now both had exorcised those old ghosts of the past and there were no words. She kissed his cheek and choked back a sob.

"Your grace," he said and touched the spot on his cheek that she had kissed. "Your son is the heir-"

She pressed her index finger to his lips to silence him. Tywin held back, watching over the audience with great reticence. As well he might.

"Later," she said, sounding like a croaking frog.

She looked to Jon, but he was continuing toward Eddard's tent. If Jon took the throne, Tywin was going to be a real problem. There was no getting away from the fact that he ordered the deaths of Elia, Rhaenys and the real Aegon. But Tywin was shrewd and might be just shrewd enough to join his forces to Jon's, get him on the throne, swear fealty and then retire to Casterly Rock and never show his face in King's Landing ever again.

Jaime raised a pained smile and offered her an arm as he escorted her the rest of the way. "I think you are Queen Mother, now."

It made her laugh to think of it. It made her sound ancient. Like an old dame, presiding over a court being rapidly overtaken by the next generation. She was still in her early thirties, other women her age was still bearing children, but the latter was true. It was the turn of the next generation now and she wished them all the luck in the world as she watched Jon and Margaery fall back into step with one another. There had been something between them since they first met. A spark she couldn't define. She saw it every time they looked at each other, building up over time as they tried to contain it. He was a legitimised bastard and she was the most eligible Lady in all the land. However, she did not think Mace would object now and she had a feeling she was looking at the future Queen. Lyanna did not envy her.

"I don't know what I will do now," she said.

"The not knowing part is what makes it fun," he laughed.
She returned his smile, but it felt strange as the truth of his words dawned on her. Eddard would never have forced her to remarry. All the same, Robert had stipulated in his will that she was to be a free woman, at liberty to remarry – or not – at her leisure, to whoever she wished. She could live where she wished and her dower's portion and royal pension gave her ample means. She could go anywhere and she thought she might do just that.

However, in that moment, the only place she was going was to her brother's tent. She didn't know what to make of Melisandre and less of her powers, the fire god R'hllor. Thus far, she had viewed it all with deepest suspicion. All the while, Jaime viewed the dragons with similar sentiment etched in his features.

"I cannot even comprehend what occurred during that fire," he eventually said. "Maybe I never will. But I know my brother will be itching to see real dragons. Would it be a lot to ask if one of your final acts as Queen were to be to make an irascible dwarf a very happy man and summon him to court?"

Lyanna raised a smile that hurt her bruised lip. "I'd be delighted to."

Pale and cold as ice, Sansa's body lay on a trestle table. Her hair was wet and Eddard knew she wouldn't like that. A fine white cloth covered her body from the underarms down, after she had been stripped and washed by a Septa and the Red Priestess, the only women on hand who could have done it. That was the only time he had left her side and returned to the camp, just in time to see Jon walking into the flames. He was too far away to stop it and it had been bewildering and horrifying in equal measure.

As for the result … he fretted, as he fretted about many things. Every time he thought of Jon, he thought of him as he did any of his children. He thought of them as just that: children. Children playing in the snow at Winterfell, chasing each other through the yards and their laughter ringing through the halls. He of all people knew childhood passed in the blinking of an eye, but his heart kept telling him they were children still. Now one of those children was about to be king, a position he received no training for. Another would be Lord of Winterfell in all but name if he were kept on as Hand. And another lay dead on a trestle table right before his eyes.

It didn't seem possible, it didn't feel real. It was like someone had made a mannequin of Sansa and tried to pass it off as her. He remembered the songs she sang so prettily, the games she played and the dance steps she learned by heart. So full of life and music and warmth, this shell laid out before him seemed as far removed from Sansa as the moon from the sun. Even her skin was like the surface of the moon. Pale, translucent and unblemished, freezing to the touch.

Even her wound had been neatly stitched up and now covered by the cloth that preserved her modesty. A small dignity afforded her in death. The sound of footsteps from outside drew him from his musings but, before the newcomer could enter, he bent down and kissed his daughter's brow.

"Lord Stark." Lady Melisandre's voice lilted with the accents of the East. "It is time, my lord."

He did not turn his gaze from Sansa. "Will you put her in a fire, like Jon?"

"No," she assured him. "This is different, it's not magic my lord. R'hllor may bring your daughter back, he may not."

R'hllor definitely wouldn't bring her back if the priestess didn't even try. Eddard felt he was betraying his own faith. It felt wrong; a subversion of nature. All the same, he could not accept her life ended here. It was wrong, it was completely unfair. So much potential had been snuffed out through the actions of one bitterly angry man and it laid waste to Catelyn sacrificing her own life to save Sansa.
A double waste, a crippling tragedy, and he couldn't even think of how he was going break it to the younger children that their mother was dead. Never mind their sister, too.

A fire flickered into life, but it was only small. It had to be if the ritual was to happen inside the marquee. Melisandre turned her red eyes to him. "I need to remove the cloth."

"You're starting right now?" he asked, barely above a whisper.

"Immediately."

He nodded and backed out of the tent. Once outside, he winced against the morning sun and tried to remind himself of Jon's faith in the priestess. But try as he might, he remained tense and anxious as the ritual began. Already, he could just about hear her voice, intoning prayers in High Valyrian. It occurred to him she could teach the language to Jon, now he had dragons to raise. The realisation came as a moment of banality in a time most extraordinary.

He had camped away from the others. Just far enough to affect a little privacy, so he attracted no undue attention as he paced outside. But he hadn't gone entirely unnoticed, either.

"Lord Stark."

The voice came from close by and he turned to find the Septa who had helped Sansa escape, before returning her body. He hadn't seen her properly until that moment, it came as a mild surprise to hear she even knew his name.

"Do you remember me?" she asked.

She drew closer and he remembered her name was Lemore. Loras had told him. Jon had briefly spoken with her but did not mention knowing her. Her dark hair was liberally streaked with silver, her septa's robes showing a lean figure. There were crow's feet lining her haunting lilac eyes. Eddard felt his heart stop beating then drop into the chasm of his roiling stomach.

"No," he murmured, brow creasing. "It's not possible. Robert told me. He told me you were dead."

Ashara averted her gaze, stepping back from him. "Things were complicated after the war. What I did, I did for the best."

Ned's head was spinning and he had other places he needed to be. He couldn't fathom why someone would have to fake their own death and claim it was 'for the best'.

"All these years, I thought I might have been to blame," he said, choking on his own words. "I remembered you so often I thought you were haunting me. I thought you blamed me, too. And now you turn up all these years later in the retinue of a pretender-"

"It's not what you think," she cut in.

But Ned wasn't listening. "And now I need to be with someone else. Another innocent victim of this infernal farce."

She said his name again, but he had already turned away. Lyanna and Jon were approaching from the opposite direction and he found himself all but running up to meet them. He didn't see where Ashara went, but when he kissed his sister and looked back, she was already gone.

"Who was that you were talking to?" Lyanna asked, trying to see past him. "She looks familiar, Ned. Who is it?"
"No one," he answered. Unintentionally sharp, he drew a deep breath and tried to pull himself together. "No, she's someone. She's certainly someone. We need to talk, but later."

Before Lyanna could press the matter further, Jon cut in and diverted them back to the reason for their being there. "Father, what's happening? Is Melisandre in there with Sansa?"

"She is," he answered. "We all should be in there with Sansa."

"Then what are we doing hanging around out here and talking to strange women. Come along," Lyanna chivvied them.

She stepped past him into the tent. Jon tried to tell her Sansa was all but nude, but it was too late. Lyanna was in, with Jon following closely. The dragons, mercifully, left at the door in the care of Ser Barristan and Ser Jaime. By the time Eddard reached the others inside the tent, the air was hot and scented with spices burned in the fire. Melisandre bent over the body, her mouth pressed to Sansa's. She breathed deeply, pressing her hands heavily over her heart. The effect was instant. As if a bolt of lightning had passed right through her, Sansa jolted violently and drew a deep, sharp breath.

Ned advanced on her, pushing the priestess aside as his daughter lunged off the table and straight into his arms. He held her so tight he thought he might never let her go.

Wrapped up in her father's coat, Sansa remained seated at the edge of the table and looked from one face to another. The brazier still burned close by, casting a warm light around the tent. Despite that, she still shivered. Her father was on one side, Robb on the other. Jon sat opposite her, while Melisandre hovered in the background. Lyanna had gone to find her a new dress.

"I was a wolf; Lady, I mean," she said, recalling it all clearly. "Almost as soon as Lord Connington … hurt me. I fell asleep and woke up as Lady." She paused and frowned. "It wasn't even like falling asleep. It was instant. One second I was me, then half a heartbeat later I was Lady."

It was like someone had shut out all the light and when it came back on again, she was somewhere far, far away. While the others insisted she had been dead, it came as a relief to know it was for less than a day. A day in which Jon appeared to have lost every hair on his head but bringing that up right now felt like it might be rude. Not to mention what could have happened to Lyanna. She was black and blue all over.

"Sansa," her father put his arms around her again, but his hold was gentle. "That's not possible."

"But it happens all the time," she said. "I saw Lady being attacked because I dreamed I was her."

Robb looked worried, his brow furrowed and his face half in shadow. "I dream I'm Grey Wind all the time. Every single night."

"It happens to me, too," Jon added. "Not every night, but often enough. Ghost led me to the dragon eggs at Dragonstone. I thought I was going mad."

Robb nodded. "Same. I didn't say anything lest Luwin have me confined. You know how he feels about visions and magic."

Ned sighed heavily, bewildered and lost. "I've seen Jon walk into a fire and my daughter brought back from the dead. By comparison, turning into wolves at night is almost logical. The world is going mad."

"I wasn't dead," Sansa insisted. "I know what I did and where I went. I saw Master Tarly who gave
me beef steaks to eat. I slept by the hearth in the Queen's rooms at Maegor's. I scared a guard who was patrolling the corridors alone." She paused, turning to her brother. "Why did you walk into a fire? Is that why you're bald?"

Robb suppressed a laugh while Jon unconsciously ran a hand over his head.

"I'll show you in a minute, sister," he said.

"It's not magic," said Melisandre. She emerged from behind the brazier. "You're all wargs, bonded to your wolves. That was the reason R'hllor brought Lady back."

Her explanation was met with silence. Sansa had never even heard the word before, but her father didn't look altogether surprised. Nor did he elaborate. He kissed her cheek and said: "Go with your brothers. See what Jon has to show you. Don't worry about anything."

Worry was a natural reaction to anyone who said 'don't worry'. All the same, Sansa was reeling from what had happened and grasped at a chance to escape the questioning. Her wound didn't hurt at all. In fact, she felt only like she had overslept on a rock-hard bed and had been left stiff and sore. As such, she slid down easily from the table and followed the boys outside. She was about to ask what had been happening when she saw the dragons. A sight so unexpected, that sent her heart soaring so high, she missed the startled looks people were giving her – the dead girl who had risen again.

She shrieked a piercing shriek, jumping for joy. The red and black, her favourite, had settled on an upturned barrel and was now dining on burnt bacon donated by a passing guard.


She threw her arms around him and kissed his cheek.

Later, while she ate and washed and dressed, Margaery filled her in on all she had missed while 'dead'. Jon and Robb had been called away to plan the final assault on Aegon, leaving the dragons in their care. So, as they talked, they fed them and tried to play with them.

"Is Jon King, then?" she asked.

"In all but formal declaration," Margaery answered. "Once he defeats the pretender, it will be final. House Tyrell is already pledged to him, and House Stark and the Vale into the bargain. House Tully has been summoned, but they won't go against Lord Stark."

The mention of House Tully reminded her of her mother, of Lady Stark's last stand to get her to freedom. The grief was raw and weeping inside her, but she tried not to show it in front of Margaery.

"I so wish I could see the look on Aegon's face," she said, her voice an undertone. "But I suppose he won't even see the dragons. They'll be back here, with us, while Jon and the royal army finish off those sellswords. If you had seen the pretender with those eggs, you would understand my desire."

While her eyes fell once more on the little hatchlings, her mind's eye conjured up Aegon. She tried to detail, in her imagination, the twisted fury on his face as he beheld them. In her imaginings, his face was green with envy and contorted beyond recognition.

"What is he like?" asked Margaery.

Sansa grimaced. "An up-jumped little monster. I thought he might be a Blackfyre, but now I think he's just a foundling. Perhaps he's so angry now because even he doesn't believe the lies anymore?"
Before anything else could be said, Jon and Robb returned. Armoured and with swords at their hips, they halted before the girls, both of them smiling at Sansa. Jon had acquired a woolly hat.

"Sister," said Robb. "We have a plan, if you're willing and able."

Intrigued, she sat up and nodded for him to continue.

Jon and Robb rode side-by-side, surrounded by the peace banners of their standard bearers. The white silk snapping in the wind was the only sound to be heard above the steady hoof-beats. It was already late afternoon and the sun was just starting to sink over the western horizon of the realm. His realm, according to many. He still didn't know how to feel about that. So much happened in so short a time that his head was still spinning. Events had overtaken him and he racing at a chance to just stand still and take stock of it all. But Aegon was still there. Bloody Aegon, looming over the horizon in a long, chilly shadow.

Already the golden company had retreated. Where their camp and had been was now littered with rubbish and patches of scorched earth left over from their cookfires. A flagpole mounted with golden skulls had been trampled into the dirt and the air smelled of smoke and rot. He thought an unofficial raiding part might already have passed through.

Together, they crested a hill in box formation and never once broke ranks. As he suspected, the sellswords hadn't gone far. They had abandoned Storm's End, having been chased away by Melisandre's shadow magic. But still they camped around the walls, spreading out into a nearby town. At the top of the hill, they waited for Aegon to ride out and meet them.

"Aegon's the one with the bluish-blonde hair," said Jon, leaning into Robb's ear.

"I'm looking forward to this," he replied. "It's him I blame for my mother's murder."

For a moment, Jon thought their adversaries had backed out. But soon he saw them. Aegon, surrounded by new generals to replace the ones killed in the previous night's chaos. Out at sea, beyond the castle, the wreckage of Stannis' fleet still smouldered on the shore. Despite such an impressive coup against the royal fleet, they still looked bedraggled and lost. Only Aegon remained buoyant, but Jon could tell even that was a sham.

"We heard the usurper is dead," said Aegon, once they were barely feet apart. "Had I known you were set on tearing each other apart, I wouldn't have bothered with the Golden Company. I'd have just let you kill each other first."

"We have a new King," said Robb. "You're looking at him. Kneel and swear fealty, if you are to stand a chance of leaving the field alive."

Aegon sneered. "You mean the bastard?"

Jon met the pretender's gaze. Without saying a word, the kingsguard in the immaculate white cloaks moved into formation around him. Ser Barristan to his left, Ser Jaime to his right. Arys Oakheart and Boros Blount remained directly behind him. Their meaning was clear and they were protecting their king.

"The only bastard here is the one I'm looking at now," said Ser Barristan, meeting the pretender's gaze.

"Spare yourself, bastard. Turn your armies around and leave these shores," Jaime instructed. "Don't ever come back."
"You murdered a mother of five," said Jon. "Hardly a glittering start to your reign, less so for the supposed rebirth of House Targaryen."

"Your shadow monster killed my men," Aegon cut in, angrily. "Your sister talked endlessly of the honour of House Stark. I hardly think shadow-binding a shining example of 'honour'."

"Shadow monster?" Robb asked. "Never heard of such a thing. It seems the Prince of Pisswater Bend is running mad. Can't have a man like that on the throne."

"You goad me, but Princes rise above such childish taunts," Aegon replied, his tone icy. "As for your sorcery, it cost you your own sister. Sansa is dead. I saw her corpse myself."

Now Aegon was trying to goad them, Jon could see it in him. "It pleases that me you have mentioned Sansa. And you can rest assured I put Jon Connington to good use as penance for his actions."

He gestured to Ser Arys, who motioned to the others to move aside and form a path. Robb had planned what would happen next and Jon was in two minds about it. Only the thought of spooking the Pretender had won him over to the idea, as well as Sansa's willingness to participate.

"What trickery are you playing now, bastard?"

Aegon augmented his affectation of indifference with an eye-roll. But his expression soon changed to one of whey-faced horror as Sansa rode through the newly formed path. She sat side-saddle on a white charger that matched the white silk gown she wore. Her hair was arranged in a long, but untamed braid that wound over one shoulder. On her head, she wore a tiara borrowed from Lyanna, the stones glittered in the light of the setting sun. Drawn to her full height in the saddle, she did not take her eyes from the pretender. Even as the dragons were released from their cage and rose up behind her, spreading their wings in appreciation of their sudden freedom. Sanya, the red and black, flew straight to Jon's shoulder and wrapped her tail around his neck.

The stunned silence of Aegon and the Golden Company was broken by a buzz of whispers and gasps as the dragons shrieked. Snapped out of his daze, Aegon backed his mount away from Sansa looking sick to the stomach. Holding the reins, his hands shook.

"You said you wanted the dragon eggs back," she said. "Sorry. It's a bit late for that."

Aegon dismounted his horse, stepping forward to get close to the dragons only for the kingsguard to bar his path. He swore heavily, looking daggers at Jon as his own guard pulled him back. His gauntleted hand flew to the pommel of his sword, opened his mouth to speak only for Sansa to cut him off.

"That sword is rightfully yours too, Jon. It's Blackfyre. He told me on the ship during the crossing from Pentos."

"You're a lying bitch," Aegon spat at her. "When I win, on the morrow, it will give me unspeakable pleasure to have you killed all over again. By the inch, this time."

"You're deluded." Casually, Jon slid down from the saddle of his destrier and approached the pretender. Within kissing distance, he stopped and looked him dead in the eye. "Had anyone else said that to my sister, I'd be angry. But, coming from you, it all just sounds a little hollow."

Aegon replied by spitting in his face and taking a swipe at Sanya with a mailed fist. The dragon dodged him easily. Being so small, not yet capable of producing proper fire, she relied on a shrill warning shriek to ward off her attacker. Robb drew his sword, but Jon raised a hand to stop him.
With the other, he wiped the spit from his face.

"Very dignified," he remarked facetiously. "I cannot imagine why the Lords of Westeros aren't rushing to name you king."

"We haven't just come here to exchange insults," said Robb, coming to join them. "Aegon, you have lost. You fled Storm's End and the servants inside won't let you back in. You didn't kill Sansa. You lost your other hostages. You've lost Varys, Connington and Strickland. I believe Duckfield is dead, too. Your cause is lost. Surrender now and spare any of these men having to die for you. Release them from their contract and disperse them."

"Meanwhile, I've hatched the dragons and united the royal army under mine and Lord Stark's command," Jon took up the thread. "The throne is mine, if I want it. Surrender now and you will live at the Red Keep as my prisoner. Alive, but a prisoner for the rest of your days."

"I'd sooner die," Aegon retorted. "I'd prefer to die."

Jon resorted to the next best thing. "Single combat, you and I."

Aegon nodded to the men surrounding Jon. "They'll kill me."

"And your men will kill me if they so much as take a step toward you," Jon pointed out. "Do something brave, just once in your life, and face me man-to-man in single combat. You have Blackfyre, a fine blade. Show me how you use it."

"Tomorrow," said Aegon. "Our armies meet in the morning. We will settle this the old fashioned way."

In the end, the pretender's expression was hard to read as he turned and walked back to his horse. Briefly, he glanced over his shoulder but Jon couldn't tell if he was the subject of that forlorn gaze or the dragons. The last parley ended, there was nothing else to say. Thwarted of a peaceful settlement, Jon had to profess himself disappointed. Sansa and Robb came to a rest either side of him, his sister giving him a rueful smile.

"It was always going to be this way," she said.

"Come, brother, enough of this," Robb cut in. "We need to move the troops to a position on high ground and I want the best spot before the sellswords can take it."

Jon nodded, turning his horse around. Before returning to camp, he glanced over his shoulder once more. But Aegon was already gone.
Sea mists rolled in from the eastern coast, reducing visibility to mere yards. From Shipbreaker Bay, shrouding Storm's End and creeping swiftly over the surrounding lands, it had descended so fast it took Jon completely by surprise. He lit an old oil lamp, but the flame only caught the fog and diffused a useless fuzz of light. Cursing the weather, he called Ghost to heal before he could get lost in the fog and sought out his brother.

All night, Robb had been tense and nervy. Jon put it down to pre-battle nerves. After all, neither of them had fought before. Not properly. Not outside the sparring yard in Winterfell, wrapped in layers of padding and using blunted tourney swords. Overnight, it seemed, they had both gone from that to live swords and steel breastplate. But there was more to his brother's agitation than that. When Jon found him, he was still pacing the interior of their tent and biting his nails, agitated more than nervous.

"We can't stay here," he said, as soon as Jon appeared. "We need to move."

Jon was puzzled. "And where do you propose we go?"

Mid-pace, Robb changed direction and pulled out an already dog-eared map and spread it out on a trestle table.

"We're here and the Golden Company are there," he pointed to the relevant places on the map, marked out in red ink. The Golden Company attacking from the south, while they attacked from the north-west. "If they're going to retreat, they have two choices: south, toward the Dornish Marches or the east coast, where they have ships waiting in the bay."

"It's not exactly ideal," Jon agreed. "But it's dawn already, what can we do about it?"

"Leave a small force here while we manoeuvre into a better position, cutting off their coastal retreat," he said. "But we've got to do it now, before the light improves and or the fogs lift."

Jon hesitated, unable to take his eyes from the map. What Robb was saying made sense, but it was a risk. If they left a small force where they were all supposed to be, it split the army and guaranteed those left behind would take heavy casualties. But most would live and would be defending the stronger position, cutting off the most likely point of retreat into the bargain.

However, much he tried to argue otherwise, the worst thing that could happen was Aegon escaping. He would flee to the free cities, where the rich Merchant bankrolling him would merely do it all again. Sansa had told them about this Ilyrio Mopatis. A man so wealthy he practically owned Pentos and was now using the Golden Company as his own private army. If Aegon fell back into the hands of Mopatis, in a few years they would be back here, fighting the same battle again.

But even Robb's plan wasn't perfect in terms of containing the enemy.

"What about the Dornish Marches?" Jon asked, tracing his finger over the rugged buffer zone that separated three warring kingdoms: The Stormlands, The Reach and Dorne. "Even if we do cut off the coastal retreat, they can still flee across the Marches and be back under Doran Martell's protection by evenfall if they ride hard enough."

Robb's expression darkened. "The Marcher Lords positioned there might be able to hold them. Aegon would probably be able to slip through, however. It's him we need. All the damn Golden Company could go sailing into the sunset, for all I fucking care. As long as we get the Pretender."
But, is the Pretender really betrothed to Princess Arianne? Are the Dornish really supporting him?"

Jon sighed and shrugged. "I wish I knew, brother. Aegon bragged to Sansa about the betrothal. Martell let the Golden Company use his ports before they landed in Shipbreaker's Bay. It doesn't look good. But, where are they? They're not with the Golden Company and they're certainly not with us."

However, there was no escaping the fact that having just one dubious escape route was better than two. And although Robb's plan was hasty and a risk, Jon had agreed to it. At the eleventh hour, they changed their position under the cover of thick fog, clinging to the trees that hadn't been burned away.

Under the command of Ser Davos Seaworth, what remained of Stannis' fleet was blockading Shipbreaker Bay. But it wasn't enough to stop all the Golden Company fleeing with the Pretender on board. And as the bulk of the royal forces trudged across the rough terrain, Jon had to repeatedly remind himself they needed backup on land. All the while, the heavy fog persisted. While it afforded them cover, he was aware of the fact that they couldn't see their enemy just as their enemy was oblivious to them. For all he knew, Aegon and what was left of his command had had the same idea.

It was too late to back out now. By mid-morning, they were closing in on Storm's End while, hopefully, the Golden Company were still creeping up on the original site, hoping to take them by surprise. While engaging the smaller host, emboldened by the small numbers, Jon hoped Robb's plan to take them by surprise from the back end would work.

"What if they have more wildfire rigged up in Storm's End?" Jon asked as the Castle appeared on the south-eastern coast.

"Unlikely," said Robb. "Sansa said there was only one vial and it looks like they used it all up on Stannis."

"And it hardly matters," said Ser Barristan, who'd been tailing Jon closely all the way across land. "They would need access to Storm's End to ignite it and we aren't going to let them back in."

Jon realised he was worry about things not likely to happen, small matters and technicalities. His father always said the worst part of any battle was just waiting for it to begin, and this fretting was just a symptom of that. Then circumstances once more turned in their favour as the sun rose properly, slowly burning away the sea mist that had closed over them at daybreak.

Shortly before noon, they left the woods and formed up along the east, barely a mile from Storm's End. The wind had picked up and Jon briefly worried the region might soon be living up to its name. But that would be for later. Right at that moment, they were forming up several miles from their original position and their enemy was looking the other way, just as Robb had planned.

"How long do you think it'll be before they turn around and realise we're here?" asked Ser Barristan.

Shielding his eyes from the sun, Jon looked across the field to where the Golden Company was preparing to attack their small, diversionary forces. He could see their golden banners flapping in the brisk wind, armoured elephants taking pride of place among the cavalry and row after row of indistinguishable armoured troops. If they left it too long, the Company would smash through the lines of their diversion and still put them at a disadvantage.

"Let's not leave it too long," he cautioned. "Form up now, let's end this mummer's farce."

All he needed was Aegon. As soon as the Pretender was dead, the battle would be fought and won
and he had to be among that throng of people somewhere. It crossed his mind that Aegon might be in hiding already, but he soon ruled it out. When it came down to it, both he and Jon wanted essentially the same thing: each other dead. This was their only chance to settle the score.

His generals had their squires make last adjustments to their armour, Jon doing likewise for Ser Barristan. Until decreed otherwise, he was still the old knight's squire and he took his responsibilities seriously. As he did so, Ser Barristan imparted some last-minute words of advice.

"Remember, you're the finest swordsman of your age," he said, tilting Jon's chin up so they held eye-contact. "But don't be rash and don't take unnecessary risks. You're not immortal and if you're going to die on a battlefield with a sword in your hand, make sure it against a worthier opponent than this up-jumped pretender. All right?"

Jon smiled, suppressed a laugh. "Understood, ser."

"There's no shame in falling back among your men if things get too rough," the old knight continued. "That's what we're here for: to cover your arse if you make a mistake."

All around them the vanguard took shape and the cavalry moved into position. Jon briefly squeezed Ser Barristan's hand as he gave back the old knight's sword, assured all was as it should be. Back on their horses, they galloped to the front lines as the Lannister forces rose and fell under Tywin's austere command. Jon watched him for a second, wondering how he really felt about all that was happening. If ever there was a man in a no-win situation, it was Lord Lannister. But, to all intents and purposes, he carried on as if he'd never betrayed Aerys at all.

Jaime Lannister riding to Jon's side took him out of his musings. He wasn't entirely comfortable with it, he felt like he was being coddled, but it was expected of him that he'd ride into battle with the Kingsguard at his side. But if it came down to him and Aegon, he knew he'd shake them off somehow.

Their cavalry fell still and silent for the duration of a single heartbeat before the war horns shattered the silence. They sounded again, cutting over the strengthening winds, and Aegon realised he had made his first major mistake of the battle.

Already Eddard was regretting his decision to remain at the camp. The place was deserted, with just four kingsguard left to guard Lyanna, Sansa and Margaery. From that, Eddard could only surmise that the latter was to become their new Queen, in good time. He could see her now, pacing nervously, her face pale and drawn. Her father, two older brothers and her possible future husband were all doing battle that day and her anxiety was more than understandable. Words were empty at times such as these, so he left her to her pacing and muttered prayers.

Sansa was in Lyanna's tent, working steadily at her sewing. In times of stress, she fell back on the familiar to keep her occupied and she seemed quite happy. Whatever it was she was making, it was fashioned from white wool, trimmed with white fur and seemed to have ears. He bent down to kiss her head as he passed. Briefly, she paused mid-stitch and looked up at him, smiling brightly.

Lyanna was sat at the table, sipping warmed wine and maintaining her composure admirably. Unlike the other women, this wasn't the first time she had watched her menfolk riding off to the battle and, in her heart of hearts, knew full well it wouldn't be the last. As he neared her, she put down the goblet and used her foot to push over a chair. An indication that he should sit with her.

"Yesterday, you said we needed to talk about Septa Lemore," she said. "Now's a good a time as any."
By the entrance, Sansa once more put down her needlework. "She said she knows you, father. I was meant to say, but I forgot."

Ned raised a smile, reassuring his daughter it was perfectly all right. Getting killed tends to take most people's minds off things. Usually permanently, but he would always be grateful that his daughter's death was altogether more temporary. That, on top of the mysterious Septa, had given him and everything he believed in quite a jolt.

"Is she a real Septa?" he asked, looking from Sansa to Lyanna. "She showed little inclination toward the faith when I knew her."

"Who is she?" Lyanna asked, taking up her wine again. Her voice was sounding a lot better, at least. Meanwhile, Ned felt the stunned fog settle around him again. "Lya, she's Ashara Dayne."

Lyanna spluttered the wine she had been about to swallow, inadvertently sending a fine misting spray of the stuff over the tablecloth. Unperturbed, Ned calmly wiped a droplet from his face. She looked a little embarrassed, but shock and disbelief soon overwhelmed her.

"Can't be!" she gasped. She paused, her brow creased into a frown as she thought it over. "But they never did find her body, did they? And, really, no one ever did fully explain what happened to her. The whole thing was very strange."

Sansa's mouth was hanging open, but she soon realised and closed it again. "She said she was serving a Septry in the Dornish mountains."

"There you go then, Ned, she is a real Septa," Lyanna said. "What else has she said? What did she tell you?"

Ned thought back on the encounter. At the time, he thought Sansa was dead herself and not really in the mood to listen. "Well, not much. I thought I might go and find her again."

"Rightly you will," Lyanna retorted. "Go. She's packing up your old tent. Go find her now. Then come back and tell me everything she says."

He gave his sister what he hoped was a disapproving look. All the same, he was still reluctant to leave her for more serious reasons. "You'll be alright, won't you? On your own, I mean."

"I'm not on my own," she pointed out. "The dragons, Sansa, Boros and Meryn. Just go, Ned."

Given little choice in the matter, he soon found himself back out in the deserted camp. Margaery still paced, but a small dog had come to join her. She looked up briefly, nodded an acknowledgement as he passed and resuming her anxious wait. He wished he could find a way to alleviate her worry.

As for Ashara, she was where Lyanna said she would be. She was washing a set of Septa's robes in a stream that ran past the camp. Many had been using that stream for clean drinking water, but it felt churlish to point that out now. It took her a full minute to realise he was standing there, watching from the embankment. When she did, he unintentionally gave her a fright.

"I'm sorry," he said, leaning against a tree. "I should have announced myself."

Ashara soon gathered herself. "No, Lord Stark. It's quite alright."

The sodden septa's robes were clutched in her hands, dripping heavily as she waded ashore in a linen shift that reached her knees. The stream was deep enough to have wet her hems.
"Do you mind if I join you?" he asked, reaching out to give her a hand up the muddy bank.

He pulled her up the bank with a firm tug, bringing her to a halt just inches from himself. For a long moment, they both stood nose to nose, looking at each other closely as if they suspected some trickery.

At length, Ashara answered. "I'd like it if you did."

The cavalry charge seemed to take forever. An endless sprint across empty ground, the enemy drawing closer and closer and closer still. The minutes ticked by in what felt like hours, until it ended with a deafening crash of steel on steel and horses whining on impact. Spears cut through armour and the battle claimed its first blood from the very fist second of engagement. Luckier men simply had their horse's legs cut from under them and they leapt from the saddle just in time. Mercifully, Jon was not among them but he fell against the wall of the enemy, bringing him to a standstill.

His sword was already drawn and his shield was barely up before he deflected the first blow of an enemy weapon. It felt like a morning star and the spikes thudded against the oak, chipping the painted wolf. Despite his head reeling, he thrust his sword out from under the shield and took down his first casualty. He didn't see who it was, he didn't try to look. But he knew the man was dead when he pulled his sword back and it was red with blood. The man dropped to the ground to be trampled under Jaime Lannister's horse.

Behind them, thousands of light infantry were now running into the fray. Armed with whatever they could find, swords, spears, axes or even pikes, they dodged under the cavalry's horses and began hacking at the foe, cutting a path through the press of bodies. Heavier infantry stayed by the mounted knights, protecting them as best they could as they pressed through the Golden Company's lines.

Jon struggled to keep up with what was going on and who was where. He saw Robb, still mounted, already cutting a path through the enemy and leading the Northmen ably. But up front, the press of fighting men was so tight, Jon could barely breathe. The press only seemed to intensify as more and more of the enemy reached the front, adding their weight to the ever-growing pressure.

Then the archers unleashed the first round of arrows. Jon didn't even hear the command, then the air was suddenly think with quarrels and arrows as they rained down from somewhere far behind him. The roar of an elephant informed him at least some had hit a good target. But the beasts had thick hides and armour to boot. If he looked up, he could see three of them still lumbering through his own lines, crushing infantrymen underfoot as they advanced.

He cursed, falling back as Ser Barristan advised him before anyone else could hit him. A mace had already glanced off his helm, but that was enough to make his ears ring.

"Will someone take down those fucking elephants!"

It was Jaime Lannister who cursed, aiming the sentiment at no one in particular. But, as someone who had taken them on before, Ser Barristan kept a cool head.

"Aim for the riders!" he commanded. "Aim for the elephant's riders and let them run free. They'll wreak havoc on their own side as much as ours."

No sooner had he said it than the command to nock, draw and loose went up again. Lannister archers unleashed a volley of arrows, sending them raining over the Golden Company. Only one or two needed to hit home. And it did. Square in the elephant's eye, it was impossible to tell who took the lucky shot. But the elephant, blinded and in agony, began to run amok. Half a hundred other arrows
seemed to be lodged between its plate, but it was the eye-shot that finished it. The rider on top, a man who looked the size of a pin from on ground, was thrown helplessly as his mount no longer obeyed his command.

The animal's cries of pain were gut-wrenching, easily smothering the sound of the fighting and dying men the lumbering creature crushed underfoot. But suddenly, the front lines broke as even their enemies fled the out of control elephant. Jon could breathe again and his view of the battlefield opened at last.

"We're in," Ser Barristan called out, his voice amplified by his helm. "Go now. Don't waste time."

The horns blared, signalling the advance. Jon dug his spurs into his horse's flanks and galloped through the opening now spreading through the human wall. Every man he ran past he swung his sword at. He took a man's head off with one blow, took out another's horse but had to dodge a third he lunged a spear in his direction.

Now, all he needed was a sight of Aegon. Just one glimpse of the pretender to give him something to work toward. He thought he saw him fighting among the foot soldiers of the Golden Company, but when Jon cut that man down it turned out to be someone else. It happened again and again as he sought his adversary. He began to worry that his initial assessment had been right: Aegon had been too craven to fight, after all.

Somewhere in the distance, war horns blared again as their advance on the enemy continued. Another elephant had been felled already, its foot hacked off and its rider crushed beneath the falling weight. It was as the crowds parted that Jon finally saw him. Even now, in the heat of a losing battle, the Pretender had the sheer nerve to be fighting beneath the banners of House Targaryen.

Affronted and furious now, Jon advanced on him. He was flanked by two generals, but Jon had no idea of who they were. Nor did he fear them. Aegon raised his visor and Jon did likewise. They found each other from across a press of fresh fighting. The war horns blasted again, much louder than before. Quickly, Jon glanced toward the renewed commotion and noted with a jolt to the heart, the sun spear banners of House Martell surging across the field, thousands strong.

Who had they come out for? Right now, it was impossible to tell and Jon was taking no chances.

"You didn't give me the chance to explain," said Ashara, wiping a tear from her lilac eyes. "I wish you had."

"I was a little distracted," replied Eddard. "Sansa. Lyanna and Robert. Jon. Everything was happening so fast, and suddenly you were back."

Nothing seemed to fit. He remembered the last time they saw each other, just before she was supposed to have drowned herself in the Torrentine, her body allegedly washed out into the Summer Sea, never to be seen again. He had grieved for her and she didn't seem to know how much.

"You helped me," he continued. "You kept our secret all these years. You gave us Wylla and you let us leave Dorne unhindered. Was it because of Aegon? Is that why you joined his side? I don't understand any of this. You were with him, then you started helping Sansa, now you say you're on our side."

"Like I said," she repeated. "I tried to explain all this yesterday. Listen, Ned."

They had left the riverside and returned to his tent. Already, whoever was left in camp was starting to pack up. Either they would retreat to safer ground, should the royalist forces be defeated, or they
would be advancing on Storm's End by evenfall. The castle would be retaken and given back to Robert's heir, Shireen Baratheon. For now, however, Eddard was all ears for what justification Ashara had for being caught up in this mummer's farce.

"I'm listening," he assured her.

"It was never meant to be permanent," she explained, her gaze growing distant as she recalled events from long ago. "When I left Starfall, not long after you came to see me there, I was sheltered by the Martells. I stayed first in a residence close to Starfall, then at a Septry where I was looked after by the septas and the Septon himself. I didn't want them knowing who I was, I didn't want special treatment, so Ashara died and Lemore was born.

Everything was fine, until a few years after that. Doran learned of Aegon's survival. He had been about to wed Princess Arianne to Prince Viserys, a contract had been drawn up and plans were afoot to travel to the Sea Lord's Palace in Braavos to sign the contracts. But Varys put a stop to it, claiming he had a much better suitor for Arianne."

"Aegon," Eddard guessed as Ashara fell silent.

She nodded. "If Aegon was indeed who he said he was, he came before Viserys in any succession. And, naturally, the Martells had no idea about Jon. But if Aegon was real, he came before Jon anyway. Even the annulment was secret."

"The Dornish would be quite prepared to overlook that matter," Eddard said.

"Quite," she confirmed. "But Doran's too clever by half to accept anything on faith alone, Ned. He sent a messenger to me at the septry, wanting to know if I was in on the plan and if that was the real reason I wanted to live quietly. I knew nothing of it but, since everyone believed me dead, I agreed to take holy orders and join Aegon's retinue as a Septa. I hate to use the word 'spy', but…"

Eddard finished the sentence for her. "But you were a spy for Doran Martell,"

She smiled sheepishly. "I was reporting back to him the whole time. He only let the Golden Company use his ports so I could speak with his agents and Aro Hotah."

"And what did you tell him?"

Ashara looked him in the eye for the first time. "I forget the precise wording. But needless to say, he's very angry that certain people have been using his dead sister and nephews to destabilise the realm."

"It's over, Aegon," said Jon, looking his rival in the eye. Not far away, the Dornish forces were demolishing the Golden Company's vanguard. The Stark and Tyrell forces, those that had made it in time, were routing the rest. "You never had Dorne, you can't retreat south and you can't get back to your ships in the bay. Call it off and lay down your sword."

Not only did Aegon have the nerve to fight under the banners of Targaryen, he also had the brass necked audacity to be wearing Robert's old crown wedged on to his helm. It had been stolen before Varys fled King's Landing. The sword he carried, now wet with blood, was Blackfyre. Like everything else about Aegon, from his name right down to the armour he wore, it was all stolen and borrowed, pilfered and taken without right. Only Aegon's pride was his own and Jon knew he would never surrender.

"This ends only when one of us is lying dead in the dirt, bastard" the Prince of Pisswater Bend
replied. He dismounted his horse and wiped Blackfyre in the grass. "Perhaps it's true, what they say about you, that you're my brother. And they say that kinslaying is a terrible curse. But I'm prepared to take that chance."

Jon shrugged. "It's not something I have to worry about. You're not my brother. You're nobody."

He drew his sword and lowered his visor. The blade was crusted with drying blood, but Rhaegar's old ruby winked at him in the pommel where it caught the sunlight. The blade had been Rhaegar's too. Dimly, he remembered his mother wishing him better luck than its previous owner. Just as his father had before him, this decisive battle was coming down to single combat and he'd be needing all that luck on his side.

While Ser Jaime and Ser Barristan took care of the generals at Aegon's side, Jon went straight for the great pretender. He blocked the first blow, but Aegon kicked out at him, sending him reeling head over heels in the dirt. He rolled over, pushing himself up with all his strength so he could spring back up again and attack before his adversary could do any real damage. He thrust the blade at Aegon, only for him to parry almost lazily.

Realising he was being made to do all the hard work, Jon relaxed his sword arm and dropped his shoulders. Turning to one side, presenting the narrowest target, he let Aegon come at him. He parried blow after blow, letting the pretender wear himself out. But he was too good to fall into that trap entirely and soon slackened. The two of them ended up circling each other while the others fought all around him. Jaime despatched one of the generals while Ser Barristan fought three at once.

Somewhere close by, Jon just caught sight of a Dornish spearman skewering an elephant through the belly. Its guts spilled out, showering down on the spearman who ran between the falling beasts legs with a roar of triumph, covered head to toe in blood and gore. The spectacle distracted Aegon as well and Jon seized the opportunity to launch another attack.

The blow was not parried in time and he struck Aegon's helm so hard the pretender staggered back. Angered and thrown off guard, Aegon was no longer luring Jon into a trap. He attacked and attacked again, but Jon had wrong footed him already and quickly did so again. He darted around a lunge, fast on his feet and struck out from behind, knocking Aegon to the ground. Jon raised his sword and thrust it with all his might, only for Aegon to roll out of the way just in time.

Cursing, Jon quickly gathered himself and swung the blade once more. Aegon met it and, just for a moment, their blades met and scraped against each other. Until Jon lashed out with his right foot, kicking his opponent as hard as he could. Once more, Aegon staggered back like a drunk falling out of a winesink in the early hours. But he gathered himself and fought back, striking Jon's helm again. The stolen crown Aegon wore had fallen off. Jon couldn't see where it went, but that hardly mattered. He smiled to himself as the symbolism hit home and renewed his attack once more. He dodged another blow, spun around his opponent and lashed him across the back of the neck. Aegon cried out in pain as he sank to his knees. Deaf to his suffering, Jon swung the blade again and sent him crashing into the dirt.

Felled and dazed, Aegon's laboured breathing echoed from within his helm. Breathless himself, Jon stood over him and used the toe of his boot to raise the visor. His father always said you owed it to a dying man to look him in the eye, but he had no interest in hearing Aegon's final words. Too much had been said already. His sword point found the weak spot under the gorget of the helm, he bored down heavily with all his might and drove the blade through the pretender's throat.

Aegon died quickly, choking on the blood that bubbled up around his mouth. It was over and Jon wrenched his blood father's sword free of the pretender's corpse. Above their heads, the skies cleared
again, reflecting the rays of the sun in the dead man's eyes. Whoever he really was, Jon no longer cared. Exhausted and dazed, he pulled off his own helm and watched as the last of the Golden Company were routed and cut down.

Ser Barristan was the first to realise it was all over. Voices called out, horns sounded, Jon once more lost track of what was happening. He was only grateful for the fact that the world was once more slowing down, returning to normal as the fighting ceased. All around him, exhausted men were pulling off their helms and collapsing to the ground through aching exhaustion. The only thing keeping Jon on his feet was the blood still coursing through his veins and the rush of exhilaration it gave him.

He was dimly aware of Ser Barristan hunkered down by a Hawthorn Bush. When he reappeared again, he had the crown in his hands. It had rolled there when Aegon lost it. Now he was holding it out in front of him as a wide circle of people formed, all looking on in silence.

"Kneel," Ser Barristan told him.

Me? Jon wondered: why? It came to him a second too late, but it all felt so unreal. He tossed his helm aside and knelt as asked, letting himself be crowned at last. Aching all over and with the taste of blood on his tongue, Jon arose again as a king in name and proclamation. The chorusing voices calling out: 'long live the king', rang in his ears.
A Lannister Pays His Debts

Storm's End yielded without fuss. Although trouble was the last thing Jon expected from the inhabitants, he was still relieved once the portcullis was up and the drawbridge down. Most of the staff had fled and those that had remained were quiet and shiftiy, watching from the side lines as Jon led the way inside and got his first look at the damage inflicted.

Chunks had been taken out of the curtain walls. But it was nothing like enough to cause substantial damage. After all, Bran the builder had made them several feet thick to withstand the wrath of the gods, if the old stories were to be believed. A fire had broken out in the main keep, leaving scorch marks on the outer wall. Some windows had been smashed and they found the High Septon – who they didn't even realise had been taken from the Red Keep – cowering in the Sept.

"Robb," he called out to his brother as soon as he was through the barbican. "You stay here and help the others. I need to go in."

"Wait and I'll come with you- "

"No," Jon insisted. "You stay out here with the others."

Clearly stung, Robb looked like he was about to protest only to change his mind, as if he'd remembered Jon was king now and it was wrong to push a king. But it wasn't that. Jon couldn't tell if Robb understood what he was doing, but nor did he hang around to explain. It was a surprisingly delicate situation he suddenly found himself in. If Lady Stark was still inside the castle, Jon couldn't let her son see her like that – not before he knew what state her body was in. Nor did he wish to sound like he was coddling his brother. Instead, he found Ser Loras and entered the castle with him.

It was darkening outside already. Inside, the halls were gloomy and cold. By the light of an oil lamp they were able to find their way to the common hall, where Sansa told them the final confrontation took place. Sure enough, they found the bodies there. Several of them. He tried not to recoil from the sickening smell of decay and congealing blood as he swept his lantern around in a wide circle. It's soft yellow light illuminating a scene of abject horror.

Varys was the one he noticed first. Death had engorged him even more, leaving the fetid carcass bloated and swollen. Beside him was a man Jon had seen during his parley with Aegon, but the name had escaped him now. Another man lay dead by the empty hearth, his face resting in the ashes. He thought it might have been Harry Strickland.

"They can be taken out and disposed of," said Jon, swinging the lantern around to Ser Loras. "Burn them, throw them in the sea. It really doesn't matter. But where is Lady Stark?"

"She's here."

Lying close to the doorway, her body twisted and half in and half out of the hallway. Jon must have stepped right over her when he came in, but he had not seen her. Her eyes were open, glassy and dull. For a moment, he thought she was wearing a black dress. But it was blue, stained black with dried blood clotting around a tear at the front. The sword that killed her must have passed right through her ribs.

Together, he and Ser Loras separated her from the others and laid her out on a trestle table. By that time, a few timid servants had peeked around the doorway and had soon been roped into helping. One fetched a sheet while two females undressed the corpse and set about burning the bloodstained
clothes. In a show of respect for the dignity of the dead woman, Jon turned his back while she was stripped and washed in an effort to make her presentable before her son arrived to claim her.

All the while, he tried to put a name to strange emotion settling over him. Even now, he was unable to pretend he had been close with Catelyn, but he still felt some strange sadness over her passing. No more would pass between them and, now she was dead, he wished her only peace.

Rather than stand there brooding at a wall, he helped haul away Varys' body. For such a large man, it was always going to be tricky. Between five of them and a makeshift stretcher, they managed it. Out into a yard at the rear of the common hall, well away from the sight of anyone else, they lit a funeral pyre with dead tree branches for kindling. Varys was soon joined by the rest of the enemy dead, all of them befouling the air with their smouldering carcasses.

"What became of Renly?" asked Loras as he watched the bodies burn.

"He was interred at the Great Sept of Baelor," Jon assured him. "As befitting a Prince of the Realm."

Ser Loras nodded, his eyes brimming with tears that reflected the flames. Taking that as a sign he needed to be left alone, Jon returned to the hall where Catelyn had been shrouded to the neck in a clean white sheet, hiding her injuries. He himself brought one hand to her face and gently closed her eyelids.

"We're ready to take her to the Sept," he informed a passing servant. "Tell Lord Stark."

Until Robb arrived, he stood guard over the body himself with his sword drawn and positioned, point down, at his feet. Blackfyre, taken from Aegon's body, was his now. It felt strange in his hands, although it was only a ceremonial sword. His blood father's old blade would suffice for any real fighting, should it come his way again. As for Aegon himself, he had taken precautions and made a point of showing every man, woman and child from Storm's End to King's Landing that he was dead and never coming back. This time around, there could be no doubt.

Alone in an abandoned sept with just a corpse for company, Jon finally had time to think. He was king now and he had to keep reminding himself of that. Inside, it felt no different but for the mild sensation of numb disbelief. But outwardly, things were changing already. People treated him differently, they deferred to him without question and they tried to follow him everywhere. He had always hated that about high lords. The way their retainers and hangers-on followed them like ducklings. Even his father's men did it. The only one who dared strike out alone, that he had noticed, was Tywin Lannister and Jon suspected they might have something in common after all. Even now, Tywin was alone as he stepped into the sept and looked at Jon from the doorway.

"Your grace," he intoned, inclining his head by way of deference.

Jon felt his body tense. "I sent for Robb."

Did he state that as a warning, that he wouldn't be alone for long, or was he genuinely pointing out that the older man shouldn't be there? Jon felt it was a bit of both.

"He will be here," Tywin's voice sounded like stone, his expression was equally as mobile. "Presently."

"Then why have you come?"

"You know why." It was a statement, not a question.

Of course he knew. Aegon really was dead, and they all knew why and who ordered the death. But
Jon had to admit, he hadn't the faintest idea of what to do about it. Striking against House Lannister would only be to start his reign by creating a powerful enemy. Doing nothing would make him look weak. Retribution would make him look punitive and vengeful. Jon wanted none of those things. He wanted nothing from Tywin.

"I have no interest in taking down House Lannister, if that's what you're worried about," he said. "You will be at my coronation, you will bend the knee and swear fealty to me, then you will be forever banished from my court and King's Landing. Rulership of the Westerlands will be granted to your eldest son, Lord Tyrion, until your grandson comes of age."

Tywin's expression still did not waver, even as he stepped closer to Jon. "Your grandfather was completely insane-"

"I don't suppose killing his grandchildren made him any saner," Jon cut in.

The interruption bothered Tywin, although he tried to hide it. His green eyes flashed, just momentarily. "Robert was king and I did what was expected of me to ensure his smooth succession."

"You came late to Robert's cause and you made up for lost time," Jon continued. "You ordered the deaths of my brother and sister so as to guarantee your loyalty would never be questioned. It was a gesture and nothing more. Now, I am king: what will you do to guarantee that I never have to question your loyalty to me?"

The question was rhetorical. There was nothing. Jon had killed the pretender himself. He held Blackfyre, the sword of Aegon the Conqueror, in his own hands. The Golden Company were broken and defeated. Dorne had come out for the Iron Throne and Prince Oberyn was still in a rage for his beloved sister. That rage had been temporarily abated through the killing of the Mountain. But Oberyn was no fool and he knew Lorch and the Mountain were only the goons sent to do the slaying. The real killer was the man who gave the order. Tywin Lannister.

Tywin's eyes narrowed. "Tyrion is coming to court, as per the summons of the Queen Mother. I will offer him as a hostage to ensure the cooperation of House Lannister."

"Tommen," said Jon. "You will be relieved of the burden of your responsibilities, free to enjoy a well-earned retirement at Casterly Rock, while your son takes over the running of the region. Meanwhile, Tommen will be raised as if he were my son at my court as a guarantee of House Lannister's loyalty."

Their eyes met. Grey on wildfire green. Initially, Jon could see why Tywin's people feared him. He was austere, expressionless and possessed of an icily calm temperament that was somehow scarier than those who shouted and raged. It was something akin to menace and threat, insidious and ever-present. But now, as their conversation progressed, Jon just grew exasperated with the man. Like Aegon, Tywin was being given a more than generous offer. Walk away. Enjoy your ill-deserved old age. Live your fucking life like so many of your victims never got to do. But the old man was just standing there, glaring back at Jon as if he was the one who had committed great atrocities.

A muscle in Tywin's jaw twitched as he spoke: "You already have the loyalty of House Lannister. I fought for you. I swore to you as King."

"And a Lannister always pays his debts," Jon retorted. "Now I'm calling in your debt to House Targaryen. You should be grateful for the significantly reduced interest rates, my lord."

Drawn to full height, his grip tightening around Blackfyre's hilt, Jon refused to back down. He refused to lower his gaze or show a flicker of fear. He would not give an inch and, in the end, it was
Tywin who broke eye-contact first. From Jon to Catelyn's body and back again, he wavered and seemed to remember where they were. Slowly, he backed away. A retreat hastened by Robb's arrival, who pushed through the doors and silenced his apologies as soon as he noticed who was in the room.

"Lord Lannister was just leaving," Jon assured him.

"Good," said Robb, casting the intruder a dark look. "I want to be alone with my mother."

Jon took that to mean he too should be scarce, but he lingered a while to give Tywin time to vanish. Whether he had handled that situation right, only time would tell. Nor could he speak with Robb about it. Not when he was about to form up his own mother's funeral guard. Accordingly, he gave his brother a nod of encouragement before slipping out of the sept and into the settling night.

Sunlight. That was the first thing Lyanna noticed when she awoke that morning. A glorious sunrise that made the world look fresh and new and golden. While Margaery helped her dress, they gossiped and laughed like the last few weeks simply hadn't happened. Sansa joined them, showing them the hat she made for Jon. It was fashioned in the shape of a wolf's head, with white fur and red eyes just like Ghost. Wearing it, his face would be showing through the wolf's jaws and would look a right sight. All the same, she approved heartily and tried it on herself. It did not do to take oneself too seriously.

They broke their fast on honey and fresh baked bread, brought in from the nearby village. Now the Golden Company were broken, they could access the local amenities to her immense relief. But, after that, they left their camp behind and set off for Storm's End mounted on matching chestnut chargers.

Ser Jaime had come to escort them, with Meryn Trent and Boros Blount who had been left behind the day before. And it was Ser Jaime she found herself falling into pace with as they rode out across the rugged landscape of Storm's End.

"I never did get the chance to thank you properly," she said to him. "For what you did back there. I pray you don't suffer for it."

He laughed wryly. "What can they possibly do? Call me 'Kingslayer' with double the emphasis?"

Lyanna saw his point, but she felt he had missed hers. "Why don't you just tell them what you did and why? If people knew, if they had the full story, they would call you what you really are. A hero."

Now that she was no longer Queen, she could afford to be less guarded. All the same, she did not laugh when she noticed him blushing.

"That's even worse than being called a Kingslayer."

Lyanna rolled her eyes. "Your pride is staggering, you know that? Even when it's to your benefit you keep it all to yourself."

"I told you," he protested.

"And I thank you for it," she replied in all earnestness.

Whatever witty retort was on his lips, he silenced it and met her gaze. The look that passed between them was one of mutual understanding. Mutual respect, even.
As the day progressed, the sun continued to shine on them. Margaery brought out her hawks, setting them free to catch a rabbit for supper. Later, in the afternoon, they passed through a village where the body of the pretender had been paraded through the streets. Out of curiosity, Lyanna dismounted to take a look.

Naked and beaten, Aegon was trussed up on a horse with his wrists bound to his ankles. His skin was covered in dirt and bruises, a knife had been shoved up his rear end. She grimaced at the sight of the handle protruding from between his arse cheeks. Rather than dwell on that, she moved to his head and lifted his eyelids. From what she could see, they were pale blue. Nothing like Rhaegar's indigo. His hair was matted with filth and blood, to the point where a natural colour was nigh on impossible to discern.

Meanwhile, Sansa moved silently to her side. At first, she wished to protect her niece from the ghastly sight. But she soon noticed the girl wasn't in the least bit fazed by it.

"Is that him?" she asked her niece.

Sansa nodded, her expression mildly disgusted. "That's him."

Lyanna nodded to the soldiers who were parading the body through the streets, showing the terrified people that the troublemaker really was dead. Next, the grotesque trophy would be paraded through the capital, where they were all due to arrive the following morning. The Golden Company had been kind enough to leave some ships, which they gladly availed themselves of.

"What about Ilyrio Mopatis?" asked Margaery once their journey continued. "He seems to have been the one really pulling the strings."

"It was him," Sansa chimed in. "They took me to his palace and it was twice the size of the Red Keep. He could probably just buy another pretender and another army."

That was where they came unstuck. Out of reach in Pentos, there was nothing they could do. And Lyanna disliked it intensely. The Faceless Men sprang to mind, but they charged what people could afford. As such, a King would have to pay a fortune and Jon did not have a fortune. Not after the debts Robert racked up.

Meanwhile, her musings were interrupted as Storm's End finally came into view. The stag of House Baratheon flew from its ramparts, a sign that all was back to normal. Lady Shireen was already being brought back from exile, having only reached the Riverlands it would not take long for her to sail back and take up her inheritance. She was a sweet girl that Lyanna had always been excessively fond of. She reminded her of her nephew, Bran. Another sweet child they were all excessively fond of. Perhaps, she dared to hope, the alliance between House Stark and House Baratheon wasn't quite dead, after all.

As the others fell behind their procession, Lyanna found herself once more with Margaery. She hoped she would, for it was time they talked.

"I wish there was some advice I could give you," she said. "For what lies ahead."

Margaery didn't pretend she knew not what Lyanna was talking about. "Jon hasn't asked me yet."

"'Yet', is the operative word in that sentence," Lyanna pointed out. "He will ask and, in a year or two at most, you will be his Queen."

The colour rose in her cheeks. "I'll try to be just like you."
"Oh, don't do that," Lyanna replied. "Be just like yourself and I think you'll do much better."

That counted as advice, she supposed. Even if she could say more, she wouldn't. It was no longer her place, really. She had to stand back and watch the next generation make their own mark on the world. She had to let them fall, make mistakes and find their own way. At most, she would stay nearby and ready in case they came to her looking for guidance and she would give what she could. But her day was done, and she was glad of it.

Margaery looked like she understood that, too.

"Thank you, your grace," she said. "But, you're not leaving us are you?"

"Not entirely," Lyanna replied.

She looked to Jaime, hovering nearby. He was Kingsguard, he would always be at the Red Keep. For now, he was escorting her the rest of the way to Storm's End, where she could see her son waiting for her outside the barbican. Her heart lifted at the sight of him standing there, the world a much different place to when they had last been in each other's company.

"You should be with the King," she said as he stuck by her side.

Jaime just shrugged his golden shoulders. "Perhaps. But, for now, you are still my Queen."

Despite having shed that burden already, Lyanna smiled brightly. "Why thank you, my brave knight."

Aware that everyone was watching, Jon greeted his mother with a chaste kiss on the cheek. But, once they were onboard the ship bound for King's Landing, he sought her in her small cabin. It was there that they wrapped their arms around each other and held on tight. While they embraced, he tried to remember how long it was since her visit to Winterfell. Five, maybe six, months at most. He had known her only as Aunt Lyanna, the Queen. And in that short space of time, they had changed everything. Looking back, he couldn't make sense of how they did it.

"Your sister and Margaery are looking after the dragons," she said. "And Ghost is asleep in your sister's bunk."

"Who is that Lady at father's side?" he asked, curiously. "I thought she was Sansa's new septa, but she's more interested in Lord Stark now."

Lyanna hesitated. "Just an old friend."

"They're not... you know..." his sentence trailed off, the heat rising in his face. He could not bring himself to say what he was thinking. "I mean, father loved his wife and Catelyn's barely cold and not even in her grave yet-"

"Gods, Jon, of course he's not," Lyanna cut in. "Poor Ned is devastated over Catelyn. I don't think he will ever recover. But, Septa Lemore is an old friend, someone he once knew well. There is absolutely nothing untoward going on."

Relief washed over Jon and he relaxed just as the ship sailed out of Shipbreaker Bay. From out of his pocket, he pulled the hat Sansa had made for him and pulled it over his head. It was silly, but beautifully crafted and he liked to see his mother smile as he wore it. Sansa won't let him forget who he really is. A Stark born and reared who happened to be in possession of three fine dragons.
The real Ghost had been deeply sceptical of the dragons, at first. Last time they were all together, Jon noted the wolf keeping his distance and occasionally looking a little disapproving of the newcomers. However, relations soon thawed and Ghost had gone as far as to lick a smudge of dirt from Sanya's head. There was hope yet that they would all soon get along just fine.

"I've sent for my aunt Daenerys," he said. "I've offered her a place at court and Dragonstone to live in."

The sight of his mother's wide smile of approval gratified him. He had already told her about his showdown with Tywin Lannister, but only time would tell with regard to him.

"I really do hope she comes," she replied. "I hope Daenerys comes, and that Robb stays a while. Margaery and her brothers, too. Now you've sent for Tommen and I daresay Shireen will be looking for a place at Court. Sansa and Arya. It's the way it should be."

Just for a moment, he thought he saw a flicker of sadness in her eyes.

"And you," he pointed out.

Lyanna shook her head. "No. You're a new king, and this is a new start for the realm. Fill your court with young people who want to shake things up and are not afraid of the future."

Jon had to suppress a laugh. "You are not old."

"Perhaps not," she ceded. "But there's no point pretending I am not of the old order. Robert, Rhaegar and I, we made the realm bleed without even touching the crown. We could never be released from the past. Even if your father had lived, we would never have washed the blood from our hands. I can admit that, now I've helped put things right. You, Margaery, Shireen and Robb and all the others, you're the ones who can build on whatever's left. Daenerys too, if she so chooses."

He didn't agree with what she was saying, but nor did he argue. How she viewed her own turbulent past was entirely her business. But her honesty was something he couldn't help admire. Searing and frank as it was.

"I don't want you to leave Court, you're still the Queen Mother."

Lyanna's smile was gentle. "If I stay at court I might upstage you. But there's a nice townhouse close to the Sept of Baelor up for sale. It once belonged to Gyles Rosby, who I am sure will be happy to sell it to me."

"If he doesn't, I'll knock it down and build you a new one from scratch," he said. "Because you had to leave me once, and I won't let you do it again."

"Never," she agreed. A tear tracked down her face, but she soon wiped it away. "Now, I'm sure you have other business to attend to."

Jon nodded and took the hint to leave her in peace. However, before he could reach the door, she pulled a ring from her finger. He remembered the ring from months ago, when she had sunk her hands in the mud to soothe his and Arya's stings from the Poison Kisses they'd picked while travelling The Neck. It was the ring worn by all Queens of Westeros and now it was in his hands. White gold, set with rubies and emeralds. He met her gaze and smiled his understanding.

After leaving his mother's cabin, he fixed his hat in place and sought out Sansa. She was lying down, reading a book she picked from the library at Storm's End. Ghost was still asleep at the foot of her small bunk. She looked up and smiled radianty at the sight of him.
"I didn't think you would actually wear it," she said.

"Why ever not?" Although, he preferred it with the chin ties undone so the wolf's lower jaw hung limp down his neck. He kissed her brow before seating himself beside her.

"Did you see Trystane at Storm's End?" he asked.

Sansa didn't look so keen anymore and just shrugged. "No. But the Martells will be at your coronation. Maybe I'll see him then."

"Of course," he said. "Listen, if he is no longer agreeable to you, tell me and I'll smooth things over between father and Prince Doran."

"It's not that," she assured him. "It's just, so much has happened since then. So much has changed. I suppose I don't know anymore."

Jon understood. Only the gods knew what it was like to die and come back. The gods, and now Sansa. She needed time and space, so much so he thought it might be a good idea to send her back to Winterfell, where Luwin could oversee her healing. He certainly wouldn't trust Pycelle with her.

They were far out at sea now, the ship rocking on the strengthening current. Leaving his sister to sleep, he found Margaery next. She was still up and about, watching the gathering dusk from the deck of the ship. The wind blew her hair and gown, outlining her body perfectly. He had always thought her beautiful, now she made her own light as she turned to face him. When they met, he greeted her with a kiss that lingered far longer than was considered chaste.

He pulled the ring from his pocket and clenched it in his hand as they drew apart.

"I am a king without a queen," he said, looking her in the eye. He remembered the first time he ever saw her and when he wore her favour in the tourney, it made his heart leap into his throat. "I do not think it is any great secret that you mean the world to me."

He noted that her chest was no longer rising and falling, like she had suddenly stopped breathing. She did remain upright and looking him right in the eye, silently urging him on as he opened his hand to reveal the ring.

"Say it," she murmured, almost pleadingly.

Jon wished he had taken time to rehearse this moment. Alas, he had not and it was too late to back out now. To his dismay, he realised he was still wearing his wolf hat.

"I'm asking you to be my Queen," he blurted out.

The boat rocked, but Margaery had already fallen into his arms. Her cry was stifled as she buried her face in his shoulders. Leaving the ring, she wrapped her arms around his neck and they held each other tight and kissed each other one more time. That night, he took the liberty of staying in her cabin, both of them squeezed onto her bunk. With old Olenna looking on with eagle sharp eyes, nothing would or could happen between them. But they talked into the small hours and, eventually, she put on the ring and stretched her arm out so they could both see it.

"Look, Grandmama!" she cried in a burst of excitement.

It was a little large for her, but the goldsmith could resize it. The emeralds caught the light of the small lantern hanging from ceiling. And, just for a second, even the Queen of Thorns looked dewy eyed.
At some point, he must have dozed off. The next thing he was aware of, he was being shaken awake and a broad morning light was streaming through the porthole. They had docked in Blackwater Bay. Shielding his eyes from the sun, he glanced outside to where crowds of people had lined up along the harbour to welcome them back home. And he was home, now. The Red Keep was his residence, those were his people come to see him safely ashore. It felt strange, like it should have been happening to someone else.

"Come on," said Margaery, smiling down at him. "Come and see."

Hand in hand, they ran out onto the deck. Lyanna was already there, with Lord Stark and the mystery septa friend of his. Ghost came bounding over to him as a roar went up from the assembled crowds. He hoped they didn't think they were the Golden Company, come to invade the city. But, it didn't seem that way.

Jon walked up to the gunwale of the ship, one draped around Margaery and the other around Sansa. She wiped a tear from her eye and waved to the crowds. It was then he knew it was all theirs.
The Prisoner

Inside the Queen's apartments Lyanna ran her finger lightly over the mantelpiece. Since she had left, it seemed a fine layer of dust had settled over everything in there. What few nick-knacks she had, she picked up and blew lightly on them before packing them into a strongbox. An enamelled vase, a decorative sword and a gilded horseshoe tied to a nail in the wall with a blue silk ribbon. Floral tapestries that had been in place for thirteen years slipped down from the walls, hitting the floorboards and sending up thick plumes of dust that made her dog sneeze. If they had ever been cleaned before, she had no memory of it.

With a distant expression on her long, solemn face she watched the careful dismantling of her life as Queen Consort of Westeros. The official jewels were set aside, ready to be put in storage for the day Margaery and Jon married. Everything else was her personal property. Gifts of earrings, jewels and trinkets – all gifts from Robert. Pieces would be set aside for her nieces, others she would keep in hopes of a granddaughter to one day pass them on to. Others, she kept for herself.

Official documents pertaining to her affairs – both private and of state – would be rolled up and sent to the citadel, where the Maesters would chronicle her life and times for the sake of posterity. Briefly, she wondered what they would say about her. Would she be remembered well? Would she be remembered at all? Perhaps, she thought, she would be a mere footnote. An interim between two phases of the great Targaryen dynasty, the queen who presided over an intermission in history. A woman who helped destroy and who helped to rebuild. Quietly, she thought she might be happy with that.

Her books came next. Followed by her hangings and gowns. A tiara and a few mismatched stockings of garish silk. Shoes and slippers, combs, thimbles and a myriad of small items easily overlooked. Life's detritus, the useless items that unconsciously accumulated through the span of a lifetime. She found Rhaegar's old Seven-Pointed Star, a blue rose from the infamous garland still pressed inside the pages. She found his name, scrawled in his hand, on the flyleaf. Just below, the fine paper had wilted where a teardrop had dried. That was her own.

Just beyond the open door of her chambers, she heard the faint rattling of chains. She knew who it was, having been at the Red Keep so long she now recognised people by the sound of their footsteps alone. And poor Maester Pycelle had a distinct shuffle in his step by now. His back bent with age and shame, his feet dragging through the dust. She wondered what he was thinking now, how he felt about the ascension of the grandson of the king he betrayed.

It came as a pleasant surprise that Pycelle made it to her chambers without falling over. A greater surprise still in that Eddard had accompanied him. The pair of them stood in the doorway, looking over the Queen's apartments as if they were expecting to be somewhere else.


Eddard looked as solemn as she felt, his eye downcast. Hardly surprising, given that Catelyn was due to be cremated on the Blackwater that afternoon. They found a boat for her, they gathered some of her possessions to see her on her way. Everything was set for Catelyn's final journey.

"While we were away, Yoren came," said Ned, moving to stand by her side.

Yoren, the wandering crow who roamed the realm in search of victims for the Night's Watch. She wondered why Sam looked so pale upon her return.
"I'm sorry to have missed him."

There was more bad news coming. She could feel it oozing from her brother.

"You recall the deserter I beheaded before you came home? he mentioned something about the Others," said Eddard. "I told Benjen when he came to see you. When he returned to Castle Black, he organised a great ranging north and he hasn't been seen since."

Lyanna heard, but she did not immediately understand. "What, Ned? Are you trying to tell me our little brother is dead?"

Eddard's breath hitched as he struggled to compose himself. "We don't know, Lya. He's just … gone."

"But what about the others who went with him?" she asked. "Have they not been seen? Surely someone saw something?"

"Dead, as far as we know," he replied, paling. "But Benjen was not among them, there is hope of survival."

"Well, that's not bloody likely now, is it?" she retorted. "Lord Commander Mormont will send out a search party, I know he will. Gods, Ned, not knowing is the worst part."

They had always been close, especially as children. A memory of them sparring in the yard flashed through her mind, a time she knocked him into the dirt when she was eight and he was six. But he was none of the child he had been and if anyone could survive the far North, Benjen could. She tried to take comfort from that, but it was woefully insufficient until Ned put his arms around her and eased her into the nearest seat.

Pycelle was still there, hovering at the edge of the room. His sandals scuffed the boards as he leaned his weight on one foot and then the other. Had she still been queen, it would have been an obligation to offer him a seat at her table. Unfortunately for him, she was no longer queen. But she did need some official business to take her mind off her missing brother.

"What is it Grand-Maester?"

Even Ned was giving the man a dark look for intruding upon their time.

"Yoren wanted to trawl the dungeons for new recruits, your grace, alas there was no one here to authorise such an action," he stammered.

Lyanna scowled. "Since when did Yoren need authorisation? He's always had free access to the prisoners. Always. You should have just let him in. You know that, surely?"

"Yes, but Baelish said -"

"Baelish be damned," she cut in.

"I've already advised you to take this matter to the King," said Eddard. "The Queen Mother is no longer in a position to help."

Hesitant, as he suspected they were tricking him, Pycelle looked between Ned and Lyanna. When they remained silent, he starting shuffling laboriously toward the door. Where in seven hells does he think he's going? Lyanna thought to herself, frowning deeply.
"Grand-Maester, he's through the other door," she said, pointing to the door that adjoined the King's apartments to the Queen's. "It's much quicker."

The colour rose in the Grand-Maester's face. Whether it was exertion or embarrassment, Lyanna couldn't tell. But he was another who needed to be put out to grass now that a new order had taken over the running of the realm. In silence, both Ned and Lyanna waited until Pycelle was finally out of the right door and into the right apartments.

"What in seven hells has gotten into him?" asked Ned.

Lyanna sighed. "That's just him, Ned. Gods, I'm glad it's someone else's responsibility to deal with these people now."

While Pycelle was gone, Ned remained. Both their minds turned back to Benjen, lost in the northern wilderness. Something more was amiss. She could feel it in her bones.

"I cannot believe this is all mine, now." Jon was wide-eyed as he explored the King's apartments. Already, Sam had organised the removal of all Robert's effects and belongings and the rooms were blank canvasses, waiting to be coloured to Jon's own tastes. Only the crowned stags fixed to the walls remained. "I want my House sigil on that back wall and I want the bed drapes replaced."

For the time being, he couldn't think of any immediate changes he wished to order. But, he knew he would in time. He loved his new solar, the audience chamber and the terrace. The terrace in particular. It was a wide, sweeping balcony that led down to a set of steps and a private garden. He could come out there in the evening and watch the sunset. At that moment, however, it was the dragons who benefitted from the terrace. Sanya liked to perch on the terrace wall, while the other two spread their wings and tried to fly from one flagstone to another. Sam watched them, transfixed and mesmerised.

"I think I should have told you."

"Told me what?" Sam turned away from the playing dragons. "You mean about your parents?"

Jon nodded. "You were the first friend I made in this place. Proper friend, that is. I don't mean my sisters or Ser Barristan. On that level, I think you might be the only friend I made here."

Sam blushed and stammered a word of muttered thanks. "The feeling is mutual, your grace. I think you might have saved my life, actually. I would never have survived the Watch."

Jon had his doubts about that but kept them to himself. "You said you wanted to be a Maester, I remember you telling me."

"Yes," he answered, ruefully. "It would have been ideal, but my father would never allow it."

"Your father wouldn't allow it," Jon agreed. "But your king commands it."

Suddenly breathless, Sam drew himself to full height and met Jon's gaze easily. "D-do you mean that? You're sending me to the citadel?"

"Yes," Jon smiled. "You no longer have a Queen to serve and it will be two years before Margaery and I marry. If this is what you want, Sam, there's nothing stopping you."

"Oh, yes!" he gasped. "Yes, I would like that. Thank you, your grace."
Jon waved away his thanks. But before the new maester could leave, the old came shuffling into the chambers from the direction of Lyanna's old rooms. Sam made his excuses and left them to it, to Jon's regret.

"A small matter, your grace," Pycelle assured him. "Three criminals locked in the black cells and condemned to death by King Robert."

Since when was the deaths of three people a small matter, he wondered. "Who? Why?"

The old Grand-Maester reached up his sleeve and drew out a scroll of parchment. After unrolling it, he read aloud the names and charges: "One Rorge, an undesirable from Flea Bottom. His friend, Biter, who slew a number of people. And a third man, your grace. Name unknown and deeds unknown."

While Rorge and Biter sounded thoroughly charming, Jon pulled back at the third unknown man. "What do you mean unknown? You can't put a man to death for no particular reason, Grand Maester."

"He's a foreigner, Your Grace-"

"Which is not a crime."

"A Lorathi!" Pycelle exclaimed.

Jon was askance. "There's no law against Lorathis, surely?"

Jon freely admitted he was new to kingship. Matters of laws and constitution were equally new to him and he was learning as he went. But he had grown up knowing what laws they had were generally considered reasonable. Hanging Lorathis because they're Lorathis was not considered 'reasonable'.

"Of course not, your grace, but he must have done something. People don't generally end up in the Black Cells for nothing," Pycelle explained. "He must have done something terrible to find himself there and the papers have since been waylaid. That is all, your grace. Had Yoren been allowed access to the Black Cells, he could have taken them and spared you the grim task of re-evaluating the sentence imposed by your predecessor. If you take my advice, you will reimpose the death sentence passed by King Robert and concentrate on your coronation."

"If it's all the same to you, I would rather look into the matter independently before signing people's lives away," he replied, taking the scroll of parchment from him. "My thanks, Grand Maester."

Taking the hint that their audience was at an end, the Maester began shuffling away. At first, Jon thought it was because he knew Pycelle frequented Baelish's brothels that he made his skin crawl. But it was more than that, he just couldn't quite put his finger on it. And once he was gone, he went in search of his mother through the connecting door.

He found her talking to his father in a low voice while all around her, her possessions were packed up in boxes ready for moving to the Maidenvault. It's where she would be living until she found a new permanent home. Like conspirators, they abruptly cut off their talk as soon as he stepped through the door.

"Did Robert sign any death warrants before he left?" he asked, handing Lyanna the scroll. There was a small chance his father had, but he wouldn't have deputised to a hangman. "Father, do you remember them?"
One thing Pycelle hadn't mentioned was that the deaths were due to be carried out the next morning.

"Those names mean nothing to me," she said. "Nor a Lorathi."

"Robert didn't mention them to me, either," Lord Stark added. "Send a messenger to Yoren, he'll be on the Kingsroad, and tell him to come and collect them. That way, you won't be killing innocent men and you won't be releasing criminals back onto the streets."

It was an eminently sensible and neat solution. But still the mystery Lorathi troubled him: no one knew who he was, or why he was in the Black Cells. Not even the gaolers remembered his arrival, only that he was there and had been for several days. At least, for now, he assuaged his conscience by cancelling the executions and commuting the death sentence to indeterminate imprisonment. Yoren wouldn't turn them down, no matter what they'd done.

Beyond that, there were still scores of Robert's loose ends to tie up. Items he had ordered showed up, his personal effects were uncovered all over the room. Letters and papers pertaining to foreign affairs were disorganised and kept in loosely tied bundles. On the desk, a request from Petyr Baelish for permission to marry Lady Lysa Arryn, addressed to Jon rather than Robert. 'Why not?' was his gut reaction. The two of them had been carrying on for years, according to Ami Frey. Then his business voice made its presence felt: because she is a great lady and he is copper-counting brothel keeper. He reached for a quill and wrote the word 'declined' across the top of the page. Part of him wished they would disobey his order just so he would have an excuse to cast them both down, but he had a feeling they were cleverer than that.

Having placed a permanent obstacle in true love's path, he found himself heading for the external door, where Ser Barristan stood guard.

"We're going to the black cells," he announced. "Would you come with me?"

Ser Barristan frowned during a moment of hesitation. "Of course. Is there any particular reason?"

Jon explained on the way down there. Like everyone else, he knew nothing of the mystery prisoner and the feeling that something wasn't right grew stronger.

The black cells were deep below ground, deeper than the regular cells were ordinary prisoners were kept. The idea was that the worst of the worst would be housed there until they could be dispatched, either to the hangman or the Night's Watch. Which of the two, society generally did not care.

What they found down there was a man alone in a cell, seemingly quite at ease with the world regardless of his imminent death. Half his hair was white, the other half red. Jon could see it through the flame of a torch, given to them by the gaoler, when he first though the effect was a trick of the light. Meanwhile, the prisoner looked up at Jon as if he had been expecting him all along. That alone was strangely disarming and just a touch disconcerting. As such, Jon found himself momentarily tongue-tied.

He cleared his throat to break the silence. "You're here, in my cells, and no one knows who you are. How is that?"

"A man is in the wrong place at the wrong time," he answered in an old cliché.

Even so, someone should have remembered bringing him here. "But who? One of the gaolers should remember you."

"Actually, your grace, Varys often dressed as a gaoler."
Jon swung the torch around to Ser Barristan who remained by the door. "Really?"

"He was a man of many guises," the old knight replied. "If he brought this man here, then who knows why?"

Jon motioned toward the prisoner. "Surely he does."

"He doesn't," the prisoner assured him.

He talked about himself in the third person and Jon was wary of anyone who did that. They sounded half-mad. But if it was Varys and he was toying with other people's lives as he so often did, Jon grew even more suspicious. There had been no trial, no evidence and no specific crime mentioned. Nothing. Yet, the man was condemned to die all the same. Jon misliked it.

"So, you were just brought here and that was it?" he continued.

"That was it."

"You know you're going die tomorrow, don't you?" The sentence had been commuted, but he wanted to see if it compelled the prisoner to speak, to give some account of how he ended up there.

"Just so."

The prisoner sounded like he was discussing the weather. As if finding himself locked up and condemned to death was nothing out of the ordinary. It was unnerving. Everything about the Lorathi unnerved him, set him on edge. His demeanour suggested he was supposed to be here. Like he set out to end up in the cells. Jon misliked that, too.

"Well, King Robert is dead," said Jon. "His decrees died with him and I will not be pursuing the matter. You're free to go."

The prisoner still didn't look surprised. His expression remained neutral, composed. In the meantime, he was tempted to take a look at Rorge and Biter, whoever they were. However, unlike this prisoner, they had documents detailing their misdeeds. It was a roll of parchment as long as his arm, but the Night's Watch would see to them.

"A King saves a man's life," the prisoner eventually stated. "It is a very good start."

"Yes, I suppose it is." Jon was already returning to the exit, leaning down so he wouldn't hit his head on the low-hanging doorframe.

"Only death can pay for life," the prisoner called after him.

Half in and out of the cell, Jon froze. Melisandre was always telling him that. It was how he hatched his dragons. Death paid for life. He looked back over his shoulder, but the torchlight no longer reached the corner of the cell. That heavily accented voice emanated from the darkness. "Give a man a name. Any name. The balance will be restored."

Jon frowned, his blood running cold. "Not today."

Sansa had to stoop as she held her little sister tight. Arya's skinny arms wrapped around her middle, pressing her face into the place where Jon Connington had thrust his sword. However, it did not hurt anymore, although the scars were as livid as ever. In that sense, it would likely never heal. She was marked for life. But no one could see it and if she had a husband in the future, only he would know
Meanwhile, Lady and Nymeria playfully snapped at each other in a corner of the room as they became reacquainted as Arya and Sansa settled on their father's terrace. It had been left to Jory Cassel to fill Arya in on all the details, of how Jon became king and who his real parents were. She had been miles from King's Landing and reliant on second hand information coming from someone who didn't have the full story himself.

"Jory told me you were dead," said Arya once they were settled. "I believed him because Nymeria wouldn't stop crying. I dreamed I heard Lady howling, too. She sounded like a ghost."

"I wasn't really dead," she replied. "Just, somewhere else."

Somewhere else. That was how she came to think of it. Not dead. Not alive. Existing as part wolf on some other plain she couldn't name.

"I wish I had killed Aegon," Arya bitterly remarked.

There was a time when she would have made some glibly dismissive remark, but that was not now.

"He's dead and that's all that matters," she assured her sister.

Across the quadrangle, above the Red Keep, the Targaryen banner flew once more. Sansa had found a strawberry pie in the kitchens and they shared it as they talked over the changes their lives had seen.

"Jon's still our brother, isn't he?" Arya bit her lip as she asked. She looked troubled.

"Yes, always," Sansa assured her.

Maybe she had just gotten used to it and Arya was still in shock. She was grieving for their mother and, in a sense, a brother too. It felt different, like their world had bent itself out of shape and they were struggling to get it back to normal. No matter how hard they tried, there was still a ripple in reality. However, they would get there. Sansa was confident of that.

"Let's go and see the dragons," Sansa suggested, hoping it would cheer her up. "You haven't seen them yet, have you?"

"No, I wanted to see you first," Arya replied.

Strangely touched by that, Sansa looked away for a moment while she got a hold of her emotions. But, after a second or two, the feeling dissipated and they both laughed as they raced for the door and down the steps of the Tower. She had to hitch her skirts above her ankles lest she trip and break her neck, then they found Prince Trystane waiting for them at the bottom. Sansa came to a halt before she crashed right into him and they looked at each other, both smiling from ear to ear in recognition.

Trystane steadied her, ever so gently, and offered her an arm. Her heartbeat raced as the butterflies fluttered in her belly.

"You wish to go home, don't you?" Jon looked in his father's eye as they met along the battlements. Casting his mind back, he recalled his father saying he didn't really want to leave Winterfell in the first place. While he had hoped things had changed since he'd become king, he hadn't truly expected it. Now Benjen was missing and Jon knew his father had no real choice.
All the same, Lord Stark did not reply immediately. He came to a rest at Jon's side, looking out over the city from between two merlons. Far below them, the castle grew quiet as evening settled. On the morrow, his coronation would be help in the Great Sept of Baelor and a feast would be held that night to celebrate. Although it was his party, he would be among the first of the revellers to leave. Come the dawn, his grooms would arrive to wrap him up in cloth of gold to escort him to the Sept of Baelor. There the High Septon would put a shiny hat on his head and call him king in front of all the Lords of the realm. He just wanted the whole thing over and done with.

"I'm not leaving immediately," his father assured him. "I'll stay, for a year or so. But you must start looking for a new Hand right away."

Relieved he wasn't going to be dropped in it from the get go, Jon raised a pained smile. No matter when he left, he would miss Lord Stark. His father in all but blood. Even so, he would not pressure him to change his mind. As to who came next, Jon had no idea.

"I wish you weren't going," Jon said, glancing up at him. "All the same, perhaps Prince Oberyn will agree? He already has a seat on the Small Council."

It was the first name that came into his head, just to sound like he wasn't entirely lost at sea. But his father looked approvingly at the suggestion. "Whatever happens, you need closer ties to Dorne. Jon Arryn tried for Robert, but it came to nothing."

Out of nowhere, Lord Stark placed a hand on Jon's head giving his bristly scalp an affectionate rub before pulling him into a bearhug. It felt like the weight of history falling from a man's shoulders.

"I'm proud of you," he said, voice choked with emotion.

Jon couldn't think of what to say, a lump formed his throat that cut off anything he could say. Then the moment passed and his father returned to Maegor's, slipping through a door to where Septa Lemore was discreetly waiting for him. Ashara Dayne. Jon caught a glimpse of her as she turned and followed his father inside. Regardless of what Lyanna had said, he couldn't see them remaining as just good friends for the rest of their lives.

Left to his thoughts, Jon looked out over the city. His guards were nearby, patrolling in silence. Over at the Maidenvault, down below, Jaime Lannister was a golden blur helping haul his mother's possessions into her new rooms. Up on the battlements, a man with red and white hair appeared at Jon's side, startling him from his private musings.

"You!" he gasped.

The former prisoner did not look alarmed, even when Jon pointed out the guards nearby. A faint half-smile played at his lips, almost amused.

"You saved my life and a debt must be paid," he said.

"The debt is quite repaid, I assure you," Jon replied. "Just … go back to doing whatever it was you were doing."

"The debt is not paid," the man insisted. "Give a man a name. Any name."

Only death could pay for life. Melisandre had taught him that. But this felt wrong. All wrong. Jon backed away, putting some distance between himself and the former prisoner. "Who are you? You're a Lorathi. What brings you to King's Landing?"

"A man has a purpose," said he. "Jaqen H'ghar is the name and at your service. I gave you a name.
Now give me a name. Any name."

'A' name, Jon noted. Not necessarily his name. Despite his increasing discomfiture, he refrained from calling the guards but did have second thoughts about the wisdom behind setting this man free.

"If I give you a name, will you go?"

"Immediately."

Jon hesitated, circling around Jaqen without taking his eye off him. Was he mad? Quite possibly.

"What if it's the name of someone important?"

"A debt must be repaid," came the answer. "The Many-Faced god does not discriminate."

Jon felt his flesh crawl. The Faceless Men worshipped the Many-Faced God, he read about it once in a book. What was he doing here? Who hired him? His thoughts flew to Varys, who might have hired an assassin to kill him. But Varys had not known about him and if he had, Jon knew he would have been dead already and Jaqen long gone. Nor did it explain how he came to be in the Black Cells. The Faceless Men never got caught. Unless they wanted to be caught.

Perhaps he wasn't a Faceless Man and only said what he said to make Jon think that. Whatever the case, he recovered himself and returned to the wall. Looking out over the Blackwater Bay, if he sailed in a straight line directly over the Narrow Sea, he would reach a place where an angry man plotted revenge against him. It was going to be a problem soon and might need nipping in the bud.

Jon smiled, looked to his new ally and said: "Ilyrio Mopatis."

The name had been spoken and Jon drew a deep breath as he turned back to his city, his realm. Jaqen H'ghar barely made a sound as he slipped away into the darkening night.
Epilogue: Night Gathers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Epilogue: Night Gathers

(One Year Later)

The Qartheen ship docked proudly in Blackwater Bay, towering over the merchant vessels that made up the city's usual maritime traffic. Shielding his eyes from the sun, Jon regarded it closely, a frisson of nerves making his spine tingle. Locating his aunt had been one thing, then bringing her home had been another and the whole process had taken the best part of a year. Such was the vast and sprawling nature of the world they inhabited. It was with only a small tinge of sadness that he realised he would probably see very little of it. It was a sharp contrast to the girl on the ship, whom he suspected had seen more than enough of it.

He tried to get her in view but all he could see was the mast and the rigging, the crow's nest reaching for the clear blue skies. Behind him and his entourage, the city had been spruced up for the occasion. Densely populated streets had been cleaned, the wide roads leading to the Red Keep had been decorated with coloured bunting and freshly pressed banners to welcome the exile home. Even the people had come out. Wary, at first, fearing an unknown girl who was more a foreigner than Westerosi. Those who remembered the Sack and those who once proudly displayed the Stag of House Baratheon carefully modified their own memories.

"Are you nervous?" Margaery was at his side, mounted on a white charger caparisoned in cloth of gold. Her hair was unbound, loose about her shoulders the way he most liked it.

"No," he replied, but it wasn't quite the truth. "Just apprehensive, I think."

"Don't be," she tried to assure him. "She's your family. You're her only family."

That was true. While he had his mother and the rest of House Stark, Daenerys had no one. Her husband was dead, her brother had been killed in an unfortunate incident no one could fully explain and her child had died in her belly. Now they had each other.

And the dragons, of course.

Sanya was almost too big to be perching on his shoulder but she still tried it all the same. As long as she kept her tail curled around his neck, she could just about balance herself. But her talons were long and sharp, breaking his skin regularly and she was the larger, more aggressive of the three. Rheanna and Rhaegon were flying overhead, circling the ship where they could probably scent Daenerys' three.

"You should be greeting your cousins, too," he told Sanya as he extracted her from his shoulders. "Never mind skulking back here and snapping at strangers."

Her eyes met his and he was left with a familiar uncomfortable feeling that she somehow understood him. However, with a final lash of her tail against his thigh, she spread her wings and joined her sisters in the sky.

"They go through a difficult adolescence, you know," said Lyanna, the Queen Mother.
Like Margaery, she was mounted on a white charger but it was caparisoned in cloth of silver. She had also made good on her sentiments about leaving the Red Keep. Old Lord Rosby had sold her the townhouse she wanted and she had set up home there some time ago. Even so, she was a stone's throw away from the Red Keep and could arrive within minutes of being summoned. If Jon needed to get away from the Court, even for only an hour, her home was a convenient and welcome retreat.

"Surely, it cannot be as bad as raising an actual adolescent," Lord Stark said, frowning at his sister.

All of the Stark children present that day turned sharply to face him. Jon, Robb, Sansa, Arya and Bran. The latter having recently arrived to begin his training as a knight – just as he had always dreamed. Eddard wilted under the intensity of that questioning gaze.

"Don't look at me like that," he said defensively. "You've all had your moments, you know."

As though not quite sure what to do with herself, Lyanna looked to the skies as she stifled a laugh. "What I mean is, they're willful and stubborn. You'll need to show them a firm hand, that's all. I remember Rhaegar telling me."

While they were all distracted, the three dragons had suddenly become six. Jon's heart leapt and he sent up a silent prayer to the Old Gods and the New that Sanya behaved herself. Shielding his eyes from the sun again, he noticed she had fallen into place alongside a black dragon that was slightly larger than her. They snapped at each other, two flames merged from each of them. But after greeting each other with a mutual show of aggression, they began playfully wheeling around themselves.

"What's taking the Princess so long?" Arya asked, exasperated.

Some of the household guards were looking a little weary too. They'd been standing straight and stock-still for over an hour now. The members of the Small Council had gone from dignified silence to exchanging idle chatter among themselves. Ser Barristan appeared to be missing in action and Prince Oberyn was searching for his paramour.

"She's probably combing her hair," Jon replied, assuming her hair had now grown back just as his had. "Or whatever it is women do when preparing to appear in public."

Arya scowled at him but whatever reply she had was cut off by the arrival of Ser Barristan Selmy.

"There's another ship incoming from the Night's Watch, your grace," he said, explaining his absence. "I've sent a messenger out on a rowboat to hold them off until evenfall."

"Thank you, Ser Barristan," he replied. He felt bad for making the Night's Watch wait, especially when their excursions south were so rare, but it had to be done. "Any idea what they want?"

Ser Barristan shrugged. "None whatsoever, your grace."

They were holding a banquet in Daenerys' honour that evening, but he saw no reason why the men from the watch couldn't join them if they so desired. In the meantime, there was one small matter to attend to while Ser Barristan and Bran were finally in close proximity.

"By the way, Ser Barristan," Jon began. "Now I've had to admit at last that I'm no longer your squire, it's time you met my younger brother, Brandon."

While Brandon turned red in the face, Ser Barristan smiled broadly. "Ah, your replacement, your grace. An honour to meet you, Lord Stark."

Brandon, wide-eyed and tongue-tied, could only gulp in reply and Arya was kind enough to disguise
her laugh as a cough. Then everything was drowned out by a sudden fanfare of trumpets and a steady beating of drums. Jon turned sharply to the ship, where a young woman mounted on a beautiful silver-white horse was making her way down the gangplank.

"This must be the Princess," said Sansa, steering her mount to Jon's side.

Jon's three dragons peeled away from the others and flew back to his side of the two households now forming up on shore. His apprehension grew as he watched his aunt dismount and plant her dainty feet on Westerosi soil for the first time in her life. There she stood, before kneeling and touching the stone with her bare hands. When she rose again, it looked like she was wiping a tear from beneath her eye.

"That's definitely her, Jon," said Lyanna. "Go."

He was nervous now. However, he could see his aunt was dismounted and he slid down from the saddle of his own horse. Still, he hesitated, then raised a hand to his men. "Wait here."

From the day they named him King, he had not had a private moment. Even when he used the privy someone lurked outside, standing guard and one even tried to come in with him once. It was expected of Kings, apparently. He soon put a stop to that, but they still insisted on watching over him as he bathed and slept and did all the other silly things most people did in sweet solitude. But this, the first meeting of the aunt he never knew he had, would be a moment he would share only with her.

Daenerys soon noticed him walking toward her, alone and without so much as a groom in attendance. Likewise, she motioned to her Dothraki handmaids to remain at a distance before approaching him alone. Their footsteps were measured, each understanding without saying anything, they had to arrive at the midway point together and at the same time. Behind him, he could sense his household holding their breath. They could not see how Jon's smile matched hers as they finally arrived at a speaking distance.

"Princess Daenerys of the House Targaryen?" he asked.

She couldn't be anyone else with that silver-gold hair and those lilac eyes. Lilac eyes still filled with unshed tears as she glimpsed her home after long years of penniless exile.

"King Jon of the Houses Stark and Targaryen?" she asked in reply and knelt.

"King's Landing is yours," he answered, raising her straight back up again. He motioned to the streets decorated with bunting and banners before added: "Be welcome, aunt."

Her lower lip trembled as she said: "Nephew."

A simple declaration that meant nothing else needed to be said. They were family and they were together, at last. They leaned in close, kissed each other's cheeks and embraced for all to see and with not a care in the world.

Back at the townhouse, dressing for the evening's banquet, Lyanna allowed herself a small sigh of contentment. Her one remaining handmaid – which was all she needed these days – had laid out a new gown and some jewellery for her. She was a lot plainer these days, but she was grateful for it. Sometimes, she forgot she was once as wild and wilful as Arya and dropping the pretence of Queenliness and come as a breath of fresh air to her life. Although she rather lacked Arya's energy in these days of encroaching middle-age.

Sat at the table, she began brushing out her hair in preparation for the upcoming banquet. "That went
well, didn't it?"

Eddard was close by, watching her from the doorway of the drawing room. "Very well, she seems a pleasant girl. I'll admit, I worried she might hold a grudge."

"I don't suppose you can hold much of a grudge for something you don't remember," she posited. "But still, this is a new start for her. For both of them. I hope it all works out."

That sounded more glib than she intended, but she believed her point stood. The past felt like a line had been drawn beneath it. Whatever happened no longer mattered and things were slowly being put right.

Finally, Ned entered the room and perched on a wooden stool. "The Night's Watch is here. I'm thinking I'll sail back North with them when they leave."

Lyanna wasn't surprised. "I thought you might. Have you told Jon?"

She looked at his reflection in the mirror rather than twist her neck over her shoulder. He appeared older than when he had first arrived in the city, just over a year and a half ago. Tired and drawn. While he was no doubt keen to establish Jon on the throne before leaving, that was safely accomplished and she thought only Ashara kept him in the city.

"I did but I'll speak with him again this evening," he replied. "Prince Oberyn is already being talked about as my successor."

"And if they're here about Benjen," she said, quietly. "Well, had he been found safe we would have heard from him personally much sooner. If they're coming here to talk to us in person, the news must be grim."

Ned did not contradict her. "I think we should prepare ourselves for the worst, sister."

She turned in her seat to face him properly. "If that is the case, I don't think we should tell Jon until tomorrow."

"Yes, let him enjoy the banquet," Ned agreed. "Let him have this evening with Daenerys and Margaery. But the Watch is due at evenfall, I'll speak with them myself as soon as they get here. That way, we will know."

Lyanna nodded, a heavy feeling settling in the pit of her stomach. For a year now, she had kept hope alive. And hope was a cruel thing. Hope seized you by the throat and wouldn't let go. Nevertheless, she continued her preparations for that night's banquet once Ned had left. She put on her pretty new dress and slid the earrings into her ears. She picked a necklace and a matching diadem and put the finishing touches to her hair as Ser Jaime arrived at her door. She knew it was him by the tread of his boots on the cobbles outside and the sound of him being admitted to the kitchen via the back door.

She went out to greet him, keeping her expression neutral until her maid had withdrawn and left them alone.
"Here you are," she said, looking him up and down. "And here am I."

"So it seems," he answered. His expression was unreadable, as always. "I've made up my mind. I'm going to speak with the King ... I can no longer serve in the Kingsguard."

A kingslayer twice over, it was never going to be easy. Untenable seemed more likely than not. But they both knew there was more to it than that. They both knew how they really felt about each other.

"I'll help in any way I can," she assured him. "If you want me there, or if you think it will help if I speak with Jon first. I mean, he's going to find out the real reason why sooner or later."

"I know," he said. "Right now, one step at a time. I'll be released from my vows and then..."

He trailed off, waiting for her to take up the slack.

"And then we'll decide what comes next together."

"One thing we both have is time," he replied, raising a pained smile.

Lyanna partly disagreed. "But not right now. We're both expected at the banquet tonight."

"I passed your brother in the street," said Jaime, ignoring her hint. "He was his usually cheery self."

"Leave poor Ned alone and let's just go," she said, aiming a playful swat at his arm.

He smiled in a manner almost self-conscious. In Jaime, a Lannister to the core, it was almost unsettling. All the same, he opened the door for her and motioned the way out. "After you."

He was here only to escort her back to the castle and it was a pleasant evening. Warm, but with the unmistakable air of autumn approaching. Summer was done, it seemed. But, as of yet, the white ravens remained at the citadel. It wouldn't be for much longer, however. Not with the leaves turning on the trees and the chill creeping in at dusk and dawn.

While they walked, she tried to pinpoint the moment she realised she had fallen for Jaime. When he saved her from Robert? That seemed likely. But he was Kingsguard and she a fresh widow, still expected to observe a period of mourning for her late husband. Now, that period of mourning was over. She discarded her widow's reeds a few days ago and once more dressed in colour and light. It was like waking from a long night, finding herself on the brink of a new beginning. She looked up at him beside her and did not try to hide the smile. Things were complicated just now, but that would not last.

Seasons turned, times changed. By now, Lyanna was more than used to it. She welcomed it.

"They say the last dragons were no bigger than dogs," said Daenerys. "And I worried mine would be the same. But not now. Look how big they are. And yours, too."

Jon had shared the same concerns himself. Especially after he had the skulls brought up from the dragon vault and lined up in the throne room, just as his Targaryen predecessors had done. He saw for himself then, just how small and sickly the last few dragons must have been. But his three girls grew so quickly his worries soon subsided, just as his aunt's seemed to have done.

"Oh, mine feed constantly," he laughed. Even now they were fighting among carcasses deemed unfit for the night's banquet. "And they're quite unaccustomed to sharing, I'm afraid. But I'll make sure Drogon, Rhaegal and Viserion get a good feed, too."
Daenerys laughed. "There's no danger of mine going hungry, nephew. They'll ensure they get their share."

They were watching from the terrace overlooking the King's gardens, where his girls had set up their own lairs among the foliage. While relations between Dany's dragons and his seemed cautious bordering on tense, Jon couldn't help but wonder about their future. Perhaps, just maybe, there might be dragon eggs forthcoming once they reached physical maturity. It was then that he realised he simply had no idea about dragon husbandry. But, with Dany here now, they would work it all out together. They would learn to bond properly and learn to fly together. A weight lifted from his shoulders now he had someone else who understood the process.

Meanwhile, night gathered. Drogon, the largest of Dany's hatchlings, was identifiable only by his red eyes smouldering in the thickening shadows. And they had a banquet get to which, no doubt, would see the six dragons feeding even more. It was the thought of Sanya, fully grown, that excited him more than anything.

"How did you know you were bonded to Drogon?" he asked. "I think I'm bonded to Sanya, named for my sisters. I thought that was it, at first. But it's more than that."

"I just knew," she said, calling her brood back to her. "It was always Drogon. I love them all equally, but Drogon and I understand each other. Drogon wouldn't leave me, he wouldn't let anyone near me that he didn't like."

He called his girls back to him as they made their way inside. Sanya once more trying to fit along his shoulders, rather like a clawed snake. But she managed it. In the throne room, the guests were already assembling: virtually every lord in the land had been summoned. Robert's hunting tapestries had been taken down and replaced with old Valyrian scenes. The doom and the Dance of the Dragons, all the key events of their shared history, once again adorned the red keep's walls.

However, among the dragons, the wolves still prowled. The Stark banners still hung from the rafters in the throne room, alternating with the three-headed dragon. Ghost, Nymeria, Lady and now Summer all took positions near the hearths of the hall and only left their favourite spots as their owners appeared for the feast. The feast that began in earnest as Jon and Daenerys took their seats at the high table, alongside Margaery and Lyanna.

On the table before them, whole roast hogs glazed in honey were laid out. A whole peacock, still in its plumage and all manner of game and fowl. He went to send a fish dish down to his father, only he just glimpsed Lord Stark slipping out of a side door with Prince Oberyn. The Hand of the King would be changing faces soon, he felt sure of that. Passing the fish to Arya instead, he leaned in toward Margaery.

"Once this is done," he said. "The next big event will be our wedding."

If he had his wish, it would have been a small affair with just family and their friends. In reality, it was never going to be like that. It was going to be the Sept of Baelor, public processions and celebrations. Free wine flowing from conduits in the streets and seventy-course feasts for the nobility inside the castle. Intimacy was the thing Jon missed most from his old life. Intimacy and the freedom to kiss his bride at will, without people whispering behind their hands.

In an act of flagrant free will, he kissed her at that moment. Their eyes met and they knew what was going to happen without saying anything. The kiss was sweet and tender. Come morning, there would be rumours the kiss had gotten her pregnant. That was how the court rumour mill worked and it made him laugh, sometimes. He was smiling now as they drew apart once more.
"Don't worry about the wedding, there's time yet," she assured him. "And I don't mind waiting."

At the end of the table, Mace Tyrell watched them hawk-like. He looked as though he did mind waiting and Jon knew he fully expected to be made Hand of the King. But, behind that pompous front, Mace was a good man and proud as punch his fairest rose had made the best match a lady could make. Which was lucky for Jon since the crown was poor and Mace was not. His father by law was footing the wedding bill.

"I know your parents want everything from winged horses drawing your wedding carriage, to actual angels blowing on celestial trumpets as they descend from the heavens," he said. "But what do we want? What do we really want?"

"Each other," she answered without hesitation. "A septon and a witness. Anything after that's a bonus."

It occurred to him that they could leave the city tomorrow, find a sept and just get married. Daenerys could be their witness and Lyanna wouldn't mind, either. It would be just as valid as their marrying in the Great Sept of Baelor. But, as the thought crossed his mind, the desserts were brought out. He helped himself to iced blueberries in cream – a favourite from his childhood in the north – and insisted on feeding a few to Margaery. Meanwhile, the musicians were playing already. Lovers were canoodling in discreet corners and one or two dancers were finding a little space to themselves. It was all well done. Easily the most decadent thing he'd organised in his life. The food had been opulent, the cutlery and glassware still glittered in the light of a thousand candles. It felt royal; it felt flushed with success. He leaned back in his seat upon the dais, his hand in Margaery's, and watched the lovers dance.

He turned to the left, where Daenerys was now deep in conversation with Robb and smiled approvingly. Her Dothraki handmaids were to the side, watching everything happening around them with blank-eyed boredom. Even the music seemed lost on them. Music that petered out as the back doors of the hall opened to reveal Lord Stark, Prince Oberyn and an old man. A fourth man was close behind them, his features hard to make out from a distance and in poor light. However, he could tell easily that the old man was truly old. So frail that Lord Stark and Oberyn were holding him up as they guided him slowly down the aisle of the hall.

"Who is this?" he asked his mother.

Lyanna broke off the conversation she had been having with Jaime Lannister and looked at Jon startled. Not for the first time, he wondered at the true nature of their friendship.

"I really don't know," she said. "A Maester, by the looks of it."

Jon could make out the chain now. The music had died down and he could hear the metal links clinking softly as the wizened old man hobbled forwards. Both his hands gripped the tunics of the men assisting him. Struck by so unexpected a sight, it was Margaery who regained herself first.

"Someone find a chair," she said. "Quickly."

Robb gave up his seat but Lord Stark and Prince Oberyn came to a halt before the dais. Still positioned precariously between them, the old man stared about the hall through white, cloudy eyes. He was blind as well as ancient. Garbed in the black robes of the Night's Watch, pity stirred in Jon. A man of his age should be by the hearth, living out what few days remained to him in comfort, not stuck in the frozen wastes of the North.
Beside him, Lyanna drew a deep breath as she remembered something. But as she leaned in to talk to Jon, Lord Stark announced the newcomer.

"Your Grace, Princess Daenerys. May we present Maester Aemon of Castle Black. Formerly Prince Aemon of the House Targaryen. Your great-great uncle."

Jon and Dany were on their feet instantly. They rounded the table together, moving quickly to get their elder safely seated. All this time and no one had mentioned him. No one remembered him. Perhaps, given all that had happened, it had been for the best. Nor was this the time to remonstrate with anyone about the matter as Jon and Dany descended on him, guiding him to a chair at a vacant trestle table.

"Uncle," they said together.

Maester Aemon's breaths were shallow and ragged, his sightless eyes looking right through them both. He managed to bring his trembling hands to their faces, feeling their features gently and probing with his fingers.

"He sees with his hands, your grace," the Night's Watchman with the sack explained. The sack seemed to twitch, but Jon put it down to a trick of the flickering candlelight.

Jon had figured what Aemon was doing but said nothing and wondered whether his uncle could speak. So far, he had remained silent. However, before much longer, he wheezed a choking sob and said: "I never thought to see this day of restoration … and the dragons. They told us of the dragons."

Without wasting another second, Jon signalled to Sanya. Perched upon the eaves, she came swooping down to him. Drogon, too, came over to see what all the fuss was about.

"Here, uncle," said Jon. "This one is Sanya."  

He went to guide Sanya to the old man's lap. But, as if sensing the old blood of the dragon, she took to Aemon immediately. They both took to him. The other four tried to come over, but Jon and Dany held them off, fearing their elderly relative would be overwhelmed if they all came bounding over at once.

"This is Drogon," said Dany, placing the dragon where the old man could touch him. "He's mine."

The old man gasped as he made physical contact with them, running his hands down their long necks and rubbing the underside of their chins. He felt the ridges along their backs, all the way down to the tips of their tails. Sanya shrieked a greeting, curling her tail around the old man's delicate wrist.

"Dragons," the old man repeated, his blind eyes closed and his voice heavy with emotion. "The dragons reborn. Never had I dreamed of such a thing."

"We're glad you like them, Uncle," said Daenerys. "Our House will be restored to its former glory, I swear it."

Jon was about to add his voice to hers when Aemon spoke again.

"You don't understand," he said. "They are small. They are only infants. But they are the best hope we have."

Jon frowned, his brow knitting as he tried to guess at some deeper meaning. "I don't understand, Uncle."
"Ser Alliser here was about to set out for King's Landing when we heard about the dragons," Aemon explained. "And I knew I had to come with him. I had to know for myself that they were reborn. That the dragons were back." He paused, turning instinctively to where his brother of the watch still stood. "Show them, Ser Alliser, show them what you have."

The sack slid down from over Ser Alliser's shoulder, whereupon he upended the contents onto the stone floor. Jon stifled a gasp of shock at the sight of the disembodied arm. Cut off at the elbow, the dead white flesh was blackening at the edges. Ugly and monstrous, it lay on the floor twitching of its own volition. In silence, a crowd gathered and watched as it made a fist and flexed its fingers again.

"What is that?" Margaery asked, looking appalled.

Lyanna was at her side, more dismayed than sickened – unlike the others. Jon thought she had the look of a person who had expected this while praying it would never happen.

"Wight," she murmured and turned to her brother. "Ned, it's a wight."

But that's an old fairy tale, Jon thought to himself. Sharply, he turned to his father expecting Lord Stark to brusquely dismiss such a notion. But he stood there pale and tense, regarding the animated limb.

"Who was it?" asked Lord Stark. "Do you know?"

Daenerys stifled a gasp. "That was once a real person?"

"Jafer Flowers," replied the knight.

"A man of the Reach," said Margaery, gripping Jon's arm for support.

"He went North with Benjen Stark and came back," Alliser continued. "He came back … like this."

Lyanna made a choking sound but Jaime Lannister caught her fall and held her steady until she was safely seated again. Even Lord Stark was glassy eyed now. Sanya and Drogon reared and shrieked at the offending limb. Unprompted, two brief jets of flame shot out of their jaws and reduced the rotting arm to ash. Unsure of what to say or do, Jon shrank back.

"If there are wights," said Lord Stark. "Then something must be bringing them back."

"White walkers, Lord Stark," said Maester Aemon, searching out the spot where the Lord stood. "After thousands of years, the white walkers have returned and we are in more danger now than we have ever been."

Jon tried to speak and found his mouth dry. He looked at the windows, showing him the outside the world. Beyond the mullions, away from the warmth of the hearths, night gathered and winter is coming.

~The End.~

Chapter End Notes

And that's the end of the story. Thank you to everyone who read, left kudos and bookmarked this story. Thank you, especially, for all the comments and support you've
given me (and for being very patient while I kept neglecting this story here). It all means a lot. Take care.

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