Dejah Thoris in Westeros

by Sploot

Summary

“I raised my hands to a blue planet in the night sky, where I believed that John Carter had gone, and wished to be there. That is how John Carter said he came to Barsoom.”

“The rest of your story is true?”
“Yes. I came to seek my husband, John Carter. I was not always so good at killing people, but a princess of my people is trained to fight. I am somehow stronger and faster than I was on Barsoom. I have no explanation for this. Or I could be a farmer’s wife who has lost her mind. Do you still wish to be my sister?”

“That’s not subject to change.”

Now complete. Note: The only fic on this site to kill off Ed Sheeran.
Chapter One

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If people were paid for writing rot such as I read in some of those magazines then I could write stories just as rotten.
- Edgar Rice Burroughs

And I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends. . . . They are now and then mothers and daughters. But almost without exception they are shown in their relation to men.
- Virginia Woolf

George R.R. Martin and Edgar Rice Burroughs created these worlds and characters.

Chapter One

The adventure began like every other on Barsoom: with a disappearance. For once, I had not been kidnapped. Instead, my husband John Carter had disappeared, and not for the first time.

Like a good princess, I waited patiently while my grandfather, Tardos Mors, and my father, Mors Kajak, dispatched our city’s forces to search for John Carter. The Protective Force searched the streets and slums of Helium and its satellite cities for my husband or his corpse, though they tried to hide the latter objective from me. The Navy sent out its air scouts to patrol the deserts around Helium, and the Diplomatic Corps’ agents strained to find word of his arrival in other cities or abduction by a foreign power.

After three years, the long years of Barsoom, I had grown tired of waiting for John Carter to return. I knew another way to find him.

I am Dejah Thoris. Princess of Helium, Regent of the Royal Helium Academy of Science, and wife of John Carter. I missed him. But while my own emotions could be held in check – for that is what a princess does – my nation needed him back as well. Helium is the most powerful state of Barsoom, the planet John Carter’s people know as Mars, but has long faced pressure from multiple rivals eager to supplant us. My grandfather, the Jeddak of Helium and my father, Jed of Lesser Helium, already had to deal with rumblings from other nations of Barsoom claiming that John Carter was dead. Like me, my family knew he still lived, but had only the sure knowledge of their hearts as evidence.

I do not believe that John Carter ever understood how vital he was to the delicate balance of power politics on Barsoom: through his marriage to me, he had ended the succession crisis in Helium. I would one day rule as Jeddara in my own right, with the greatest military mind my planet had ever seen at my side. No longer did my grandfather and father have to consider granting my hand to some Jeddak of another nation, thereby offending all of the others. The Warlord of Barsoom had become a force for peace.

I did not share all of my misgivings with my father and grandfather or with my mother, Princess Heru. I am skilled at screening my thoughts, to the extent of allowing some to be read while keeping others hidden as though they do not even exist. I feared that John Carter had tired of me and had left
on his own to return to his own planet and his own people. And find a woman of his own people.

And so I stood on the balcony of our palace in Helium, high above my beloved city. I looked down on the glittering city lights, highlighted by passing airships. The moons Cluros and Thuria raced across the open desert toward the horizon. I came from a beautiful planet, filled with noble people. I loved my city, my family. And I would abandon all of it to find my love again, and rebuild what I had thought we once had.

I turned away from my city to stare up at the tiny blue planet floating overhead. I wished to go there. I wished to go there and find John Carter. John Carter had told me how he came from his planet, known to us as Jasoom and to its inhabitants as Dirt, to our own Barsoom. He had raised his hands to the red planet he saw in the night sky, and been drawn through space and possibly time to appear on its surface.

I now did the same, raising my hands to the night sky as I stared at the glittering blue jewel above, begging for the same interplanetary leap that had brought John Carter to me. I gave no thought to leaving my planet and city, or my family. I had journeyed down the River Iss into what I then believed to be the land of the dead, in search of John Carter. Once one has taunted death itself, deep space holds few terrors. I would find John Carter no matter what perils must be overcome.

A wave of . . . something . . . passed through me. I had never felt its like. I could only see bands of intense color as I collapsed. Yet I felt no floor beneath me. I could stand it no longer. Everything became black and then my mind went black as well.

I awoke knowing that time had passed. How much time, I could not say. I lay on my back, looking upward. The first thing I saw were the trees, trees unlike any I had ever seen or read of on Barsoom: tall, with heavy branches holding up thousands of green leaves on each. The green overwhelmed my senses. Small flying animals flitted among the branches of these huge trees, while others apparently incapable of flight skittered swiftly up and down the trunks of the trees.

And it was cold, much like the nights in the dry ocean bottoms of my home planet. I seemed unaffected by the temperature, but more than likely I would soon need furs, food and fire.

Matching the eeriness of the green plant life, through the trees I could see the sky, a bright, azure blue rather than the comforting pink of Barsoom. Puffy white shapes could also be made out above. The colors stunned me and I felt terribly dizzy. I remained on my back and carefully looked upward, trying to acclimate myself to this disturbing new world.

Was this Jasoom? John Carter had spoken of blue skies and great forests of green-leaved trees. The place where I had awoken seemed to hold no special properties: an opening among the trees, covered with brown leaves that I surmised had died and fallen from their branches. A number of plants of Barsoom similarly discard their leaves as part of the cycle of life. I rolled to my side and scratched some leaves aside to lay bare the dirt of Dirt. It was a dark brown, riddled with rotting plant life and tiny, crawling creatures. In this sense it was little different from Barsoom; while my planet is very red when seen from afar its soil is black or brown, at least in the fertile zones. I looked closely at the tiny creatures: they had six legs, like most animals of Barsoom. Perhaps I had not left my home planet? Many regions are little known to us.

But no, the light was unlike any I had ever experienced. Yellowish, and intense. Looking upward again, I found the sun near the eastern horizon. It was much larger than it appeared from Barsoom; Jasoom orbited closer to our common home star. These observations could not have occurred anywhere on my own planet. I had come to a different world.

I could not sprawl on the leaves forever. Carefully I stood. John Carter had proudly explained to me
to me, Barsoom’s leading physicist – the theory of gravity, in what over time I came to understand was a compulsion among the males of Jasoom to explain the world to females, whether the male actually had knowledge of the subject on which he held forth or not.

My beloved warrior believed that his planet had much greater gravity than that of Barsoom, accounting for his superior strength and leaping ability. This was, of course, utterly silly to any mind of even the slightest scientific bent. His body, though beautifully muscled, was proportioned exactly as those of our own Red people of Barsoom. And his touch never destroyed that which he grasped. By his description, he had learned to walk normally very quickly, and I never observed any anomalies in his stride.

On the contrary, such strength must be some side effect of interplanetary teleportation. Therefore, did I also possess this ability? I must know this. I stretched my arms and legs; they seemed normal, but I did indeed seem to have a great deal of energy. I stepped off toward the closest tree, springing as hard as I could, and swiftly flew across the clearing. Prepared for this event, I landed with my feet spread and my knees flexed as I had seen John Carter do.

I could leap like John Carter, though not nearly as powerfully. This planet had much greater gravity than that of Barsoom. I could feel my weight. I walked back across the clearing carefully. The increase in strength and energy more than compensated. I would have to adjust my stride to avoid stumbling forward.

I had become stronger, but how strong? I placed my hands against the large tree trunk, almost larger than my arms could encircle, and shoved it. The tree groaned and shook. I lowered my shoulder and pushed harder until it toppled over with a resounding crash. Many of the small flying creatures fled upwards, giving voice to their anger at the destruction of their homes. I silently begged their forgiveness, but smiled in satisfaction. I had become very strong.

Looking down, I saw that my harness and ornamentation had not made the journey to Jasoom. I now wore nothing. I examined my own body closely, and found it in excellent condition. In fact, its condition was far too good. Though I am a scientist, not a warrior, I am of Barsoom and have seen more than my share of fighting with sword and dagger. I am skilled with a blade, but even the most skilled swordswoman will suffer wounds. I seemed to have no scars on my now-flawless copper-red skin: the light-colored old cuts along my ribs were gone, as well as the ugly puckered mark under my left breast that had almost ended my life long ago. A still-healing injury to my right foot, inflicted by a zitidar’s misplaced step, now gave no pain no matter how hard I pressed my weight on it.

If this were my body, it had been perfected in transit. More likely, I hypothesized, my actual body lay seemingly lifeless on a balcony in Helium. I hoped the palace staff would give it proper care and that my father Mors Kajak would realize that it must not be burned. I regretted not leaving instructions before reaching out to the blue planet. I am a scientist, and as much as I love John Carter and hope to restore his love for me, I am a rational thinker both by my nature and my training. I had been a fool. Yet if my body remained in Helium, were my experiences here real at all? I shoved that thought aside. Later I might wish to present a paper on the metaphysics of interplanetary teleportation to the Royal Academy of Science in Helium. For now, I would treat my presence here as real.

Clearly, John Carter was not to be found by standing in the forest. I would need information. One direction looked as good as another, so I began to walk toward the rising sun. Eventually, I reasoned, I would come upon some sign of civilization. If any existed on this planet.

This forest had far thicker undergrowth than I expected, and I found that I needed my enhanced strength to force my way past the vines and small trees. My perfect new body acquired a number of small scratches, proving that it was not immune to damage or pain. As I ripped apart a particularly
stubborn vine, I heard faint sounds of clashing steel. I moved toward them and began to pick up the thoughts of the combatants. There were but two, each broadcasting extremely conflicted emotions.

All people of Barsoom are telepathic to some extent; those of royal lineage, like me, are bred to be much stronger in this regard than are commoners. Allowing such strong and unfiltered thoughts to stream out is a sign not only of extreme rudeness, but of mental illness. Such people are immediately quarantined in isolated facilities and put under medical care.

I needed all of my mental discipline to even approach the two warriors. It is not vain of me to say that their emotional outbursts would have overwhelmed a weaker telepath. I could make little sense of their feelings, and even less of any coherent thoughts. Anger, lust, love, betrayal – all the most powerful themes came through.

After pushing through plants and vines I reached a place where I could see the fighters through a gap in the undergrowth. They occupied a wide clearing in the forest, an opening with very little undergrowth, only a carpet of dead leaves. They were alone except for two large animals that they had apparently ridden to this place – both of the beasts wore what I recognized as saddles on their backs.

Both fighters wore very full armor, but no head coverings. One was clad in white, the other in bronze-colored armor that had seen a great deal of scuffing that revealed gray steel beneath.

Following polite practice, I attempted to contact each of them telepathically. Neither responded, nor did they even acknowledge my presence. I saw that I could climb from my observation post onto a large rock that jutted into the clearing and watch from there, and this I proceeded to do. I crossed my legs beneath me and watched the warriors battle, yet still they took not notice.

Both had pale white skin and yellow hair; they looked much like the Therns of Barsoom. They fought with long, straight swords. The warrior in white held his sword in his left hand, trailing the other behind him. He was a handsome man, and probably had been beautiful at one time. Age or maybe stress lines around his eyes and mouth had taken much of that away. A broken shield lay on the ground nearby and I assumed that this had been his.

His opponent, who appeared to be female, fought with sword in one hand and a shield affixed to the other. I am taller than most women of Barsoom, but this warrior was much larger than I. By contrast, she had never been beautiful, and bore a number of scars visible even at a distance.

Neither showed a great deal of maneuver, instead trading blows and attempting to sneak their blade inside the guard of the other. The greater strength of the female warrior – I had decided to label her thus – steadily began to tell, as it also became obvious that the male warrior had but one hand, with a metal facsimile in place of his right hand. A rather brutal strike from the shield to his face brought him to his knees and broke his nose, and the woman continued to rain down blows until his sword snapped into several pieces.

The female warrior stood over him, breathing hard, then cast her shield to the ground to raise her sword over her head with both hands and bring down the killing strike. Tears flowed down her face and she sobbed out a series of words. I had never heard such a language, and struggled to recall John Carter’s examples of his own native speech. Her words were harsh and guttural, nothing like our own musical tones.

The woman’s powerful emotions made it hard to follow her thoughts, but it seemed that she loved this man yet felt bound by some sort of duty to slay him. I believe she told him that she loved him and wished she did not have to kill him, or something similar. If she did not kill him, others would die for some reason.
The man said nothing, finally stating that he only cared for a woman named Cersei. He radiated a deep contempt for the woman warrior, fear for his own life, and revulsion at her declaration of love. He also loved another that he could not have; I had the impression that he found this similarity shameful and that this feeling fueled his contempt but I may have read too much into his emotions – I had a difficult time picking out coherent thoughts.

The woman shook her head, dropped the sword and stared at the forest floor, continuing to sob. I could read thoughts of deep, suicidal despair. This man was not the first she had loved in vain. She felt worthless and foolish. She hoped he would kill her and thereby end her agony.

Did this little scene before me foreshadow my own fate? Did I also pursue a man who did not want me? I had abandoned my city and my family, both of them inexpressibly dear to me. Perhaps I was equally worthless and foolish, but I was not yet ready to end my life. Neither should this woman.

I wanted to call out to her, to stop her from giving up her life so easily. I knew none of their story but could tell that he was not worthy of such a sacrifice. But I could not form any of their words, and she showed no reaction at all to my attempts to contact her by telepathy. I thought of simply running into the clearing to stop her but held back; I feared being cut down by an errant or surprised sword. My lack of valor shamed me.

The man rose gingerly to his feet and picked up her sword. She looked up at him, and he slowly placed its tip at the center of her chest. “Jaime,” she said, apparently the man’s name, and again declared her love. She spoke a few more words that I believe implored him to take her life and save his own. She both feared and embraced her impending death. He stared at her silently, his thoughts continuing to radiate contempt. I understood his words clearly, for the first time.

“I never loved you.”

He thrust the blade between her breasts with a shriek of metal against metal, leaning into the sword to put his weight behind it. It clove through her heavy armor and broke through her back plate. “Jaime,” she breathed again as she sank to her knees and then rolled to her side, the sword still impaling her.

The man stared down at her now still form for a time, and then finally noticed me where I still sat on the rock watching. He stared at me, and began to speak loudly and angrily, gesturing to the dying woman and the sword. The rush of emotion again made it difficult to follow his words, but he seemed to believe me to be either an illusion or some kind of vengeful spirit come to torment him. He believed that he might have been driven mad.

Pointing to me, he clumsily reached to each shoulder with his one good hand to undo what appeared to be clasps holding his chest-protecting armor plate in place. It fell to the ground with a clatter. He stalked across the clearing, still glaring at me, to where their beasts of burden had been tethered to a small plant. Taking up a white cloak that had lain across the saddle of one animal, he wiped away the blood now flowing freely from the wreckage of his nose, and then threw it onto the ground. I was welcome to the cloak, the armor and the sword, all of which apparently had a great deal of symbolic value to him. He climbed clumsily into the saddle and rode away, never looking back.

I decided to learn what I could from this strange little scene before moving on. I rolled the female warrior onto her back and easily extracted the blade from her chest. As her life drained from her I felt the last of her thoughts, a vision of herself – a much softer, idealized version – lying amid a pile of silks and furs and cradling a very small child to her breast, while an equally idealized version of the man who had just slain her stood over her and smiled gently. She wanted this to have been real so badly that I held her hand and wept for this stranger, but the vision grew dimmer. And then she thought no more.
The peoples of Barsoom rarely shed tears. Perhaps I was overcome by the waves of emotion I felt from both of these combatants; while my own people are capable of equally intense passion our telepathic abilities have also taught us to keep it within our own minds. Whatever the reason, I promised myself that should I come across the one-handed man again during my search for John Carter, I would kill him and his lover Cersei as well.

I thought about her vision. She imagined giving live birth or, more correctly, having just given birth that I assumed to be live – she did not picture the actual event. We of Barsoom hatch our young from eggs, and they emerge far more developed than the small one I saw in her thoughts. I had seen offspring of our people that looked similar to that she held in her dream, but only when an egg had been damaged or dissected – they are not viable outside the egg at that stage.

John Carter had told me a little of childbirth among his people, and this vision seemed to match his descriptions. I wanted to learn more: this concept had been a major point of contention in the science of Barsoom for centuries. The women of Barsoom, other than the six-limbed green race, have breasts including the glands necessary to secrete a nutritious fluid when properly stimulated.

Why is this? We do not suckle our young, as the woman seemed about to do in her fantasy. Do they serve only for sex play? Or did we once have more use for them?

Not long before my sudden departure, I had approved for publication, in my role as Regent of the Royal Academy of Science, a paper that was sure to ignite planet-wide controversy. It detailed a theory that the four-limbed races – we Red Barsoomians, the yellow Okar people of the northern polar regions, the black-skinned people known as the First Born and the white-skinned Therns and related peoples – are artificially adapted to Barsoom and not actually native to our planet. Would I find evidence for this theory in my sojourn here? I admit that I felt the thrill of inquiry.

I stopped that line of thought. I know that I am obsessed with learning for its own sake, and that I at times lose track of time and my sense of the world around me in my ponderings. I was in a strange place and could well be in danger. I needed to concentrate and gain practical knowledge as quickly as possible.

I next examined her sword. I had never seen such metallurgy; none of Barsoom are capable of forging its like. I could easily balance the very light-weight blade on the tip of one finger. An odd pattern marked the blade, red ripples in its dark-gray metal. The pommel had been shaped to resemble a beast of some sort – perhaps a favored house pet? With my enhanced strength I easily drove the sword cleanly through the largest trees around the clearing, yet its edge remained as keen as ever.

On my home planet we regard swords as interchangeable tools; one might have a favored type, but outside of a few specific contexts the sword itself has little meaning. There are ceremonial uses of swords – one throws a sword at the feet of a leader to signify loyalty, and conversely a leader gives a sword to a follower to connote trust. Yet I felt myself oddly drawn to this sword. I stroked the blade and felt an almost sexual thrill from its warm metal. I hefted it and felt perfect balance in my hand; it could have been made specifically for me. It was not quite perfect: I found the decorations hideous, and I would have preferred a longer hilt to make it easier to wield with two hands. Even so, I wanted this sword. I would keep this sword.

Turning back to the fallen warrior, I studied her yellow hair; it indeed grew out of the skin covering her skull and was not a wig. She was, therefore, not a Thern after all. Stripping the warrior, I found her to be wearing heavy steel plate, of far less advanced metallurgy than her blade. Underneath she wore a quilted tunic of some sort, now soaked in her blood – red blood, as her killer had also shed, like that of Jasoom rather than blue like ours. The tunic probably had been meant to help cushion
heavy blows against her armor. Beneath that she wore still more layers of clothing.

She had bled profusely from her wound and died rather quickly. John Carter had said that his heart lay in the center of his chest, and perhaps it was the same for these people. When she lay naked I saw that she was definitely not of Barsoom, with female organs very different from those of our women, differences perhaps necessary for live birth. She had breasts as we do, though much smaller than mine, and no obvious means of extruding her eggs. Otherwise she looked much like a woman of Barsoom, though at the very high end of the spectrum for size and musculature.

Her body and her face in particular bore many scars; she obviously had fought in a great number of battles. So why had she allowed the male warrior to kill her so easily? Solely out of unrequited love? It made no sense, but I am the alien here, and knew that something need not make sense to me for it to fit the logic of this place.

Was this Jasoom? The planet John Carter knew as Dirt? I decided to proceed as though it were. John Carter had said that his people buried their dead in the ground, and so I did the same with this fallen warrior after arranging her many layers of clothing on her as best I could. I found a useful folding digging tool attached to her mount and with my new-found speed and strength I soon had a pit dug.

I surely had left Barsoom: as a princess, I had never had cause to dig holes in the dirt. I found it fulfilling, once I figured out how to plunge the tool into the soil at the proper angle to scoop up dirt without overloading the broad blade. My first few attempts either scraped ineffectively across the surface or dug at too sharp of an angle to turn up any dirt. Soon I had mastered the rhythm and the hole deepened. I could tell that the loads of soil were much heavier than they would have been on Barsoom, even accounting for their much damper nature, but my enhanced strength more than compensated. I reveled in my possibly new body and its abilities.

And then I recalled why I was digging the hole, and sobered. Unsure what scavengers might be about, I made the hole as deep as my head, and gently placed the woman’s corpse at the bottom of the pit. After filling the hole, I stacked the female’s armor plus that cast aside by her opponent on top of the mound, in case any of her people came looking for her. I kept the blade and the ornate matching scabbard from the female warrior’s back as well as several smaller blades I found strapped to her arm and both legs. None of these were of the same wondrous metal as the sword. I also took her armored gloves, which fit my somewhat large hands very well.

After I buried her body, I turned to the remaining animal tethered in the clearing and calmly chewing leaves. Her mount greatly resembled the creature John Carter had called a “horse.” John Carter loved horses, and often said that they were the only aspect of life on Jasoom/Dirt that he truly missed. He had painted and drawn them, showing a very deft hand with a brush that almost equaled his skill with a sword. This creature looked exactly like those in my love’s art. The saddle and other tack were not exactly as he had drawn; it was more similar to those we place on our thoats of Barsoom with a higher cantle and much wider pommel.

Upon the horse I found a pair of oddly-shaped saddlebags, containing what appeared to be two round loaves of some sort of bread. Suddenly hungry, I ate them before realizing that these might not be compatible with my biology. I found a rather thin sleeping fur, what was likely a cooking pot and tools for making fire. She also had some extras of the unusual underclothes she had worn packed with some long thick strips of cloth, several more small blades, a skin bag filled with water and a few other items. I found no firearms, nor any signs that the female warrior had had them. She had a small clay jar of a whitish powder that I later learned was for cleaning one’s teeth and a bar of what turned out to be soap.

John Carter had said that he only truly felt at ease when on horseback, communing with his horse by
nearly telepathic means. Reaching out to the horse’s mind, I saw that it was intelligent as far as beasts go, and very receptive to my mind. Immediately it began to respond with simple impulses: it wanted food and rest, and wished its saddle removed so it could roll on the ground. I told it we had to travel first. It did not object.

Without the leather leggings that we wear when riding thoats, I would need some protection for my skin in order to ride her horse. I took two sets of the woman’s large and thick undergarments and arranged them around the lower part of my body as best I could. I knew that I looked ridiculous to anyone of Barsoom, but I did not fancy the chafing that would come without this safeguard.

I swung into the saddle from the left side, as the horse advised me, and the beast made what its mind revealed was a satisfied sound, what John Carter had called a “nicker.” The horse had leather lines for directing its course, reins I recalled, but it seemed clear that it would go where I asked. I removed the leather contraption covering its head as well as the piece of metal jammed into its mouth. The horse nickered again.

I fixed the sword to the saddle in leather loops that appeared to be intended for that purpose and rode in the direction taken by the one-handed man, Jaime. I hoped to arrive at some sort of road or path soon. The horse sure-footedly picked her way between the trees, and soon enough we reached a rutted dirt track heading north and south through the forest. The horse had no opinion on the choice, and so I turned north. We continued to plod along as I marveled at the richness of life among the trees.

About Dejah Thoris

Dejah Thoris is the title character in Edgar Rice Burroughs’ A Princess of Mars, a pulp novel that’s spawned over a century’s worth of imitators. She is the original fantasy princess, at times a damsel to be rescued, at others a fierce warrior, and at still others an innovative scientist – Burroughs is not consistent in his depiction, and she eventually fades into the background of the novels.

She’s a Red Martian, third in line to the throne of Helium, the most powerful empire of Mars, a planet known to its peoples as Barsoom. Red Martians are telepathic, but again Burroughs is not consistent so I’ve chosen to resolve this by making those of select royal birth (like Dejah) more powerful than commoners. Her breeding has also resulted in greater size, strength, intelligence and beauty. And she has been taught many skills in her long life (Red Martians can live 1,800 years or more), including swordplay. Burroughs never reveals Dejah’s age but she is no hatchling. She’s tall (about six feet), copper-skinned with jet-black hair.

John Carter, Dejah’s eventual husband and the hero of the early Barsoom novels, is a Confederate cavalry officer mystically transported to Mars when he raises his hands to the planet. He finds himself much stronger than the locals, which he attributes to Earth’s greater gravity, but there are many hints that he has instead received a perfected body (this is made clear in a later volume, when a dying Earthman, this time with legs shattered in the trenches of the Great War, arrives on Mars healthy and whole). Dejah’s similar interplanetary journey has done the same for her, though the effects are not as profound – she is much smarter than Carter and can do more with less. Physical perfection, however, has not cured her deep-seated anxiety or lack of self-esteem.
Characters, Canon and Continuity
The story picks up at the end of the last book, and its background incorporates a few elements from the TV show; where these conflicted I picked the one I liked better. Dejah Thoris is not a reliable narrator in all respects; though she tries to tell the story accurately sometimes she misunderstands this new world around her (or refuses to acknowledge the possibility of magic).

As for the Martin characters, Jeyne Poole, Beth Cassel and Sansa Stark have been aged slightly and are all about 20 years old. Gendry Waters and Ned Dayne have likewise received a few more years. I’ve tried to avoid original characters, though many of the lead characters in this story receive few if any lines in the original works. And since George isn’t around, plot armor just doesn’t offer the same protection.
Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

In which Dejah Thoris encounters bad men and an undead woman, and first learns of her destiny in this strange world.

Chapter Two

I heard the riders approach before I could sense their thoughts, and halted at a spot where the trees grew particularly thick and close to the road. The closeness of the trees and their abundant life felt very heavy on my mind, but in this position I would not be flanked should the encounter prove hostile. Soon I could feel the thoughts of three men, which revealed that they sought the woman warrior I had seen slain earlier in the day. They wished her dead, but feared her fighting skills.

When they came within sight, one of them swiftly nocked an arrow to a bow then slowly lowered it to point at the ground upon realizing I was female and, in his eyes and thoughts, no threat. I had never seen such an ancient weapon outside of historical records and the wall paintings of abandoned cities. Did these people truly not know firearms?

Their apparent leader, a supremely ugly man wearing a yellow cloth over a suit of steel-plate armor, rode forward a few paces and addressed me. His words asked my name and business, but his thoughts dwelt on my breasts and images of forcible mating. He was a disgusting calot – a foul creature of my planet – and I considered killing him on the spot.

I gave him my name, and told him I wished to see his leader. Needing to extract the words from his thoughts, I spoke slowly and haltingly, which irritated him. After the third attempt his thoughts indicated that he understood my words, though they remained poorly spoken. On Barsoom we communicate many basic parts of speech – pronouns and tenses, for example – by telepathy. Giving voice to the proper words, even in very rough form, took a great deal of concentration. I saw yet another paper for the Royal Academy, but swiftly pushed that thought aside.

The warrior pressed again for my business, slowly moving his horse forward, and he continued to broadcast foul notions. Similar ideas also came from his archer friend and the third man, an older warrior with a bald head and hideous green beard. The intensity of their undisciplined thoughts threatened to overwhelm me, but I was learning more words from them and I used John Carter’s name for my planet.

“I am from Mars. Take me to your leader.”

“What makes you think I’m not the leader here?” the one in yellow demanded, adding what I understood to be a string of epithets reserved for females.

I knew from John Carter that his people could not read minds, and I suspected the same of the people of this planet, were it not indeed Jasoom. The man in white armor had not been able to even determine if I were real, while his opponent had ignored the powerful thought impulses I had sent in my vain attempt to dissuade her from suicide at his hands.

Had any of them known anything of telepathy, even of its existence, they would not have broadcast
their thoughts and emotions so heedlessly. I decided not to reveal my abilities, though I thought it likely that all three of these men would prove too stupid to comprehend telepathy. Distasteful as I found their minds, reading them made it steadily easier to form sentences in their rough language.

“A leader employs polite address with a stranger.”

“We’ll ain’t you the fancy-speaking noble bitch?” I had succeeded in enraging him. That had not been my intent but I found it difficult to care. The images of forcible mating grew in intensity as he turned to address his fellows.

“Let’s just rape this diaper-wearing Dornish bitch, open her throat and be off.”

I quickly drew my new sword and placed it at his neck before he could turn back toward me.

“You may wish to reconsider.”

The archer started to raise his bow. I looked at him.

“You will drop that weapon now, or I will kill you all.”

He hesitated. The green-bearded one shouted and rode forward.

“That’s the big ugly bitch’s sword. And her horse, too.”

He had recognized the woman warrior’s blade. He thought to kill me and forcibly mate with my corpse. He reached for his sword. The man in yellow urinated in fear but did not move other than to back his horse. The archer raised his bow as I asked my own horse to keep the yellow man between us and the archer. As my sword drank the yellow man’s life an arrow struck him in the ribs. I spun the blade rightward to slash across the belly of the approaching green-bearded man. The wondrous edge cleft through his armor of steel rings as though it were cloth.

I leapt from my horse and bounced from the ground to the archer as another arrow flew through the space I had just occupied. I reached him before he could raise his bow again with its freshly-nocked arrow; he was very fast. Not fast enough. I slashed the weapon in half and put my sword’s point to his throat. Behind me, the bodies of two men slid off their horses and onto the ground.

I grabbed a handful of the archer’s loose clothing and yanked him down from his own mount. He sprawled before me, his eyes very wide. He appeared much younger than the other two, and had scars on his face that appeared to be from a skin condition or disease.

“You will take me to your leader now. Or you will die as well.”

His thoughts still lingered on my breasts.

“Those tits” – I took the word from his mind – “will be your last sight if you do not do exactly as I say.”

“Yes. Please don’t kill me. Who are you? What are you?”

“You will be silent.” He obeyed. A coil of rope had been affixed to his saddle, and I used it to tie him securely and then had another thought. I pulled at his leggings.

“Remove these.”

“What?”
“Remove the clothing from your legs.”

“You . . . you want me?”

He hoped that I wished to mate with him. I considered running him through as he lay on the ground, but refrained so that he would not foul the leggings with his waste as he died. Instead I pulled again at his leggings.

“I want your clothing. You will give this to me or you will die and I will take them anyway.”

“Yes, my lady.”

He pulled on a knot holding a cord around his waist; his leggings loosened when the knot came free. I pulled them off his legs. I sensed embarrassment over the exposure of his sex organ, and in my anger I taunted him.

“You hoped to put that tiny cock into me?” I again took the word from his mind. It was shaped like that of John Carter, but was indeed considerably smaller. And, as I would realize when I knew more of their language, denoted by an exceedingly stupid word.

“I . . . I’m sorry.”

Having removed his leggings, I pulled him upright by the front of his tunic and easily tossed him back atop his horse; he was very thin. I telepathically asked his horse to remain in place until I was ready to leave; the beast seemed willing and I could detect a deep hatred of its rider. The archer whimpered, but did not speak. I pulled on the leggings and tied the drawstring; they were tight around my loins and scratchy on my skin, and terribly unattractive. Still, they would protect my legs better than my previous solution. If that afflicted the archer with unwelcome chafing, then perhaps he should not have tried to shoot me with his arrows.

I walked back to where his comrades lay dying, their final thoughts as unpleasant as those they’d had in life. The yellow man thought of roughly mating with a pale-skinned, red-haired woman; the green man rapidly imagined a series of foul deeds – murder, forcible mating, setting what appeared to be small homes afire, robbing poor people—that he had committed in his life. I thought to question them, but felt myself becoming physically ill from my contact with their diseased minds.

Instead, I examined the yellow man’s armor and found the clasps that held it in place. It was even more roughly made than that of the female warrior. Underneath he was filthy; in places his underclothing seemed to be actually rotting. As he died he voided his waste, adding even more smells to his already foul odor. I noted that these people released far more, and far damper, waste than the peoples of Barsoom. Yet another paper for the Royal Academy.

Determined to learn more, I sliced open his chest with a single sword-cut down to his waist. I spread his abdominal cavity open with my hands, then wiped them on his yellow cloak. He had ribs much like John Carter or I, but his heart and lungs were smaller than those of a Red Barsoomian and his heart was centered rather than offset. This explained why Jaime’s sword-thrust had been fatal to the female warrior; I still did not know her name. He had but one stomach. His reproductive organ was not as tiny as the archer’s but still far smaller than that of John Carter. I surmised that if not one of John Carter’s people he was closely related, but he was definitely not of Barsoom.

The green-bearded man was not yet dead, and had switched from memories of his own deeds to renewed wishes of inflicting harm upon me. His sword had fallen back into its scabbard and he struggled to draw the blade but had little strength left. I walked over to where he lay and despite his coat of metal rings I easily slid my sword through his heart, now that I knew its location. His vile
thoughts receded. I decided to leave the bodies for whatever scavengers might be desperate enough to feast on their foul remains.

I asked their horses to stay in place while I looked through their saddlebags. They had more round loaves of bread and skin bags of water; the green-bearded one had a bag of some reddish, mildly alcoholic drink as well. I ate the loaves and some dried meat I found, and drank the alcohol. The yellow man had some incredibly filthy undergarments that I used to clean my new sword before tossing them atop his corpse.

The green-bearded one had several scrolls made from what appeared to be some sort of animal skin, with characters written on them. These made no sense to me, nor did they resemble the letters of Jasoom that John Carter had shown me. I tossed these aside as well. He did have a flat, gray stone wrapped in a soft cloth along with a small flask of oil. I recognized these as a sharpening set for his sword, and kept them though my new blade seemed not to need sharpening. He also had a dozen round red fruits; I gave one to each of the horses and ate the rest myself while I sifted through their belongings.

Each man also had a small drawstring bag tucked inside their clothing with coins inside; I poured the contents into one bag and kept that. They were round rather than the ovals we use on Barsoom, but their function was clear. The yellow man had a helmet forged in the shape of a snarling animal. If this was the fiercest beast Jasoom had to offer, I was not impressed. I threw the helmet against a tree to test its metal and it readily crumpled. I left it where it lay, but I took the swords of both dead men.

The archer, still terrified, watched me approach.

“Will you kill me now?”

“Perhaps. I will ask you questions. You will answer.”

“Yes,” he said, then added, “my lady.”

“Is this Virginia?”

“What is Virginia?”

“Is this land Virginia?”

“I have never heard of Virginia. These are the River Lands.”

Either this man was quite stupid, which seemed possible, or these were a people of little imagination.

“So there is a river near here?”

“Yes, my lady.”

So much water on this planet that it flowed across the surface.

“Who rules these lands?”

“No one really knows. The land is at war and everything’s confused.”

I am of course rendering his words as I understood them with a great deal of telepathic help. The archer had no education and spoke what I believe was a very rough peasant dialect.

“So there is war in the land?”
“The great war has ended but fighting continues. Many men have separated from their armies and now wander the land killing and looting and raping.”

“Including yourselves.”

“No. We defend the weak. We are a brotherhood.”

“Truly? Your friend spoke of raping,” their word for forcible mating, “and murdering me, and insulted my clothing.”

“We seek vengeance against,” he named two names, apparently powerful families in this land. “My companions were hard men.”

“And now they are dead men.”

“And now they are dead men,” he agreed. “Will I join them?”

As he spoke, he seemed to recover from his shock and became steadily angrier. He imagined shooting me with arrows while I cried out in pain, he imagined raping me while I both shed tears and begged for more, and he thought of stabbing me during the act with the knife I had neglected to take from him. A foolish and almost deadly oversight.

I now searched him, finding a small bag of copper coins which I added to those I’d taken from his friends. I also took the knife from inside his clothing and studied it. I found it badly made, with a wooden handle nearly falling apart. It struck me that every item I had examined since my arrival on this planet appeared to have been made by hand. I cast the knife deep among the trees. I also took the bundle of arrows from his ornate quiver and snapped them in half.

“Show me your hand.”

“Why?”

“Show me your right hand.”

He held it out tentatively; it remained tightly bound at the wrist to his left. I saw hard calluses on his first and second fingers. I tapped them.

“You pull the bowstring with these?”

He did not answer, but his mind agreed. I drew the long knife I had taken from the woman’s corpse and traced a shallow cut around the base of each finger, enough to keep him from easily using a bow until they healed.

“Should you attempt to harm me, you will never shoot another arrow.”

“I’ll bleed to death!”

“I have not yet cut you deeply.”

I had slipped and given a hint that I could read his mind, but he did not notice. His thoughts now altered between pain, fear and hatred. I could accept that.

“Do you know a man named Jaime?”

“Who?”
“His name was Jaime. He had a metal hand. He wore white armor. He slew the woman who owned this horse and sword before me.”

“The Kingslayer. So the big ugly bitch found him after all and he killed her. Good. That was our mission.”

This “king” who had been slain was apparently their equivalent of a jeddak.

“He killed your ruler?”

“Yes, long ago. Now he’s known as a man without honor.”

“I can understand that. The woman was disarmed. Why did he kill her anyway?”

“I don’t know. She was in our camp, badly injured, and cried out his name in her sleep while she healed. We believed that she loved him. Our leader ordered her to kill him, or she would kill the woman warrior’s friends.”

Again, I can only transcribe his words as I understood them – I am certain they were actually of a much baser sort. And mine as I wished to speak them; I am equally certain that my command of the language was and remains imperfect.

“Your leader is a woman?”

“She used to be.”

“What does that mean?”

“She was married to the ruler of the northern lands. The new king had him killed. Then the king’s family had her son and many others murdered during a wedding feast. They killed her as well.”

Apparently this was a well-known crime, offending even this criminal.

“She was dead, but now lives?”

“Something like that. She seeks vengeance. We help her find it.”

Ras Thavas, one of Barsoom’s greatest scientists though somewhat mentally disturbed, had devised means to revive the dead, provided their bodies had been preserved. Perhaps this technique was known here as well? These people did not seem very scientifically advanced but Barsoom has inhabitants as ignorant and stupid as my captive.

“I wish to meet your leader. You will take me there.”

He suggested that I visit a place inhabited by demons instead.

“You are wearing no pants, and I have a very sharp sword.”

“You’re no better than we.”

“Perhaps. But I have not raped you.”

His twisted mind provided him with far worse threats than I could have imagined, much less voiced. He feared me, and at the same time felt shame for fearing a woman. I thought myself a person of high morals, but perhaps he was right. This place was already changing me.
“Again, tell me of the war in the land.”

“There are rumors of war. To the north and to the south. It is not clear who is left to fight. Many of the great houses have been broken.”

“We will find out.”

He thought of grabbing the leather lines that guided the horses and riding away. I cut them from his mount’s head, since the horse would go where I asked. I removed the saddles and other tack from the horses of the two dead men, and telepathically told the animals to go where they wished. They chose to follow me. I leapt onto my own horse, and started up the road with the three other horses following.

I missed John Carter. I hoped I could rekindle our love, but I could also have used his knowledge. He had told me much of Jasoom/Dirt, but I wished that I had asked more questions. To find him, were he even on this planet, I would need to learn much more. This was a planet riven by war, and John Carter would make his mark here no less than he had on Barsoom. I merely had to follow the tales of miraculous deeds of battle: where there is war, there will be John Carter. But would he still be my John Carter?

We rode along the road for a time, until the archer’s thoughts indicated that we approached a lookout post. I could detect no one where he thought a guard should be watching, but I turned my horse onto the narrow path that my prisoner’s mind recalled as the route to his brotherhood’s encampment.

He became more and more agitated as we rode deeper into the forest, hoping that his friends would ambush me, but still I detected no one watching for us. Finally I began to pick up a cluster of people ahead of us, highly excited about some event taking place. They paid little attention to me or my prisoner.

Dismounting, I entered a forest clearing filled with about 200 people of all ages, both men and women. The rush of undisciplined thoughts poured into my mind, threatening to overwhelm my defenses. They thought of food, they resented others for their slightly-less-filthy clothing, they hoped to see someone killed, they wished they were mating.

A wide flat stone served as a speaker’s platform, where a hooded figure stood with an armed man beside her. The figure held one hand to its throat and made hissing noises, which the man translated for the crowd. I took the sword and scabbard from the saddle and held it, still sheathed, in my hands.

I could not easily follow the individual words; the crowd’s ocean of thought made it difficult to pick out separate strands. The hooded figure, who the man on the platform now called the stone-hearted woman, pointed to four people standing below a pair of heavy tree branches, two below each branch. Ropes had been looped over the branches, with nooses tied around the necks of those below, who stood on what appeared to be pieces of wood.

The stone-heart’s translator said that these four had helped an enemy family known as the Lannisters. The two males had been comrades of a woman named Brienne; I realized that this must be the name of the large woman warrior I had seen willingly killed. She had proven herself a friend of Jaime Lannister and run away with him, leaving her friends to die in her place. And so now they would meet their deserved deaths.

The two females apparently ran an inn and had given food and drink to the Lannisters. The woman named Brienne had fought to save them from lawless marauders, making them associates of Brienne in the eyes of the stone-heart. Later, the taller of the two females had tended the wounds of Brienne
here in this camp. For this crime, the stone-hearted woman demanded their deaths. The smaller female cried while the larger cursed the stone-hearted one, saying that she and her sister had done nothing wrong.

I could not let this happen. I had no wish to become involved in the affairs of this place, but these young women and their friends were about to be killed. Murdered. I stepped into the clearing and shouted.

“Stop. The woman Brienne did not join the Lannister. He killed her before my eyes.”

The crowd’s thoughts said that my appearance shocked them: a copper-skinned woman wearing only a dirty set of leggings over her loins. My exposed breasts offended some and excited others. The stone-hearted woman pulled back her hood to stare at me. It was an awful sight. The archer had not lied: this woman had obviously been dead. Her flesh was decayed, and she had long scars running down her face. The cause of her death was obvious; her throat had been cut.

She pointed at me and screamed. No one needed her translator; a score of people or more rushed to attack me with their bare hands. Far from every person followed her order, but it was plenty.

They crashed into me like a herd of crazed wild thoats, knocking me to my knees. I bent my head forward instinctively to protect my face and eyes. Fists began hitting me on the arms, back and head. At least five hands roughly grasped my breasts. But like John Carter, while I lived, I would fight.

Several fingers stuffed themselves into my mouth. I bit them off easily and spat them out. Someone screamed. I placed my new sword on the ground between my knees to fight with both hands. With my left hand I pulled men off of me, with my right I delivered the short, sharp punches with folded fingers that we learn in the hand-to-hand combat style of Helium. I looked for the soft areas – throats and groins – but struck whatever target presented itself in my desperate need to escape.

Steadily I reduced the number of enemies and the weight on my back eased. Fewer punches and kicks struck me; as yet, no one had drawn a weapon. I shrugged off the last man sprawled across my shoulders, rose to my feet and kicked him soundly in the face. He stopped moving. Around me fourteen men and one woman sprawled on the ground in various poses. Some moaned; most did not move at all. While I had not thought to kill anyone, neither had I held back my enhanced speed and strength. They had wished to kill me, and several had wished to rape me. I did not grieve for their deaths or their injuries.

Other men now circled me warily. Some drew swords while others picked up rocks and pieces of wood. The creature who led them continued to hiss angrily; the hatred streaming from her mind was almost physically overpowering. She hated me, but more than that, she hated those who had taken her life, and she hated those unworthy souls who still drew breath. Her followers were but tools to carry out her program of murder and hate. When she had taken her vengeance on those who had wronged her, she would kill these followers as well and make them into creatures like her.

I drew my sword and faced my enemies, turning as they moved to encircle me. When they continued to hesitate, their undead leader hissed even more loudly.

“Kill her!” the man standing with her shouted. “The stone-heart commands you. Kill the red bitch!”

This time, ready for my abilities and with weapons in hand, they might succeed. I decided to strike first, bending my legs at the knees and leaping across the clearing to land right before the stone-hearted woman. With my left hand I back-handed her translator, who lost his sword and fell to the ground. Then I plunged my own sword into her heart; it went easily into her rotting flesh up to the hilt.
As I drew it out of her chest, flames burst out all along the blade. She caught fire as well, first her gray, dry flesh and then her hooded clothing. She emitted a high-pitched, piercing squeal, sinking first to her knees and then collapsing downward upon herself. In the flicker of an eye, only a circle of smoking ash remained.

A stocky, bald man in faded red robes pushed his way through the crowd.

“Behold the Red God’s Chosen!” he shouted. “She is Azor Ahai returned! She is the Princess Who Was Promised!”

He began to preach a prophecy that these people seemed to have heard before. He was obviously some kind of priest. Some now looked at me in awe, others in hatred. I did not detect anyone ready to attack me, at least not right away.

Some of these people – the ones who did not wish me dead – wished me to lead them. But even more of them hated me for killing the stone-heart, while others feared me for the same reason. I did not want to lead these people or be their red savior; I wished to be on my way with my sword and my horses, in search of John Carter. These lost and frightened souls had little hope and believed that nothing but death and pain awaited them. They needed a real leader in place of the murderous monster who had risen from the dead.

As for the Red Priest’s ramblings, I knew not what to make of these.

About half of the assembled people went to one knee and looked up expectantly at me; the others milled about uncertainly behind them while muttering angrily. I had a much more difficult time picking out thoughts in such a crowd than I had when dealing with only two or three people at once and the strong emotions of the moment made their thoughts even more tangled.

I did perceive that the kneeling motion was their equivalent of throwing their swords at my feet – those who knelt offered to serve me and asked for my protection. I was under no illusions as to their sudden love for me; they knelt because the Red Priest told them to do so.

It appeared that I had killed the translator; that had not been my intent. Too many people were dying. Suddenly, I remembered the four figures dangling from nearby trees.

“Cut those people down!” I shouted in my best command voice. Several of the kneelers got up and ran to do so.

“Are they alive?” I asked.

Two young men left the bodies and approached me where I stood alone a scant distance from the smoldering ashes of their leader. One youth was quite thin with long hair and a regal bearing, the other large with blue eyes, shaggy black hair and broad shoulders – he could have been John Carter’s forgotten son. Maybe, I mused, he was – I knew that interplanetary teleportation created strange time effects. Both seemed discomfited by the sight of my breasts, but neither evidenced the desires for rape and violence that I had already encountered far too often during my brief time on their planet. I felt somewhat better about the people of this place.

“No, my lady,” said the thin young man, his thoughts grieving. I struggled for the proper words to express sorrow.

“I share your feelings,” I finally said. “Had I been faster, they might have lived.”

“Had we also been faster,” said his larger friend, “they might have lived. We knew what Lady Stone Heart was but we did nothing to stop her. Walking away is never enough in the face of evil.”
Now many began to argue angrily with him, expressing their love for the stone-heart and their hopes to obtain vengeance for her. Others complained of the stone-heart’s murder of the four hanged people. Three of those killed were apparently very young and blameless of any crime; no one seemed to miss the fourth, a rather plain-looking brown-haired man in warrior’s garb.

“Hold!” I cried, holding aloft my still-flaming sword. “Do you wish to fight me again? Then be silent.”

A couple of men fingered their weapons, but none raised them. I wished my sword would stop burning, and so it did. It appeared clean so I sheathed it; I would ponder this phenomenon later.

I walked over to the bodies, the Red Priest by my side. In Helium and other great cities of Barsoom, the Protective Force includes specialists who can gather the final thoughts of the recently dead, which linger for a little less than what this planet deems an “hour” and can sometimes help determine who killed them. Because of this, assassins usually destroy the victim’s brain with an explosive bullet or a blunt object.

I had no training in this procedure; the final thoughts of the dying are clouded with pain and with a vast assortment of memories, some real and some false. The hanged warrior actually thought of the slain Brienne, apparently wishing that he had married her or at least shared his feelings for her. He had died without telling her directly, fearing that they were not returned. The youth, apparently a battlefield servant to Brienne, also thought of her; his last fading musings alternated between despair that he had not served her properly and anger that she had not saved him from this fate.

The two young females showed other signs of violence. Their rough clothing had been torn, and both had blood on their bare legs. The smaller one’s last thoughts had centered on small furry animals that she loved, and a great deal of pain. But the larger one had remembered very clearly that she had been raped in multiple orifices. It had been agonizing, and my knees buckled with the force of her outrage. She pictured the faces of those who had forced themselves on her despite her screams, as well as the stone-heart looking on without a word, implying approval.

There is no equivalent of rape on Barsoom. John Carter had often feared that sexual crimes would be committed against me while I was held captive, but until this moment I had never understood why the very possibility traumatized him. Crimes of passion occur on Barsoom, and include murder, but our physiology does not allow for an assault with a sex organ, not in the ways these girls had been raped – male sex organs repeatedly and forcibly thrust not only into their own sex receptacle but into the orifice used for excretion, amid immense pain and humiliation. They had begged and they had screamed. No one came. That was the worst part. No one came.

I had never encountered anything like this. For some moments, I feared for my sanity. Our religion, in which I no longer believe, does have a concept of Hell, a place of eternal suffering. In my years of pious belief I had never imagined such a thing could exist even in Hell.

“They were raped,” I finally said, my voice unsteady.

“I didn’t know,” the Red Priest said softly.

“You should have.”

I turned back to the crowd.

“Who raped these small women?”

They moved uneasily, but one man made as if to run. A tall, red-haired woman stepped in front of
him.

“It was you,” she said. “I know it.”

His thoughts confirmed it.

“Bring him here.”

Several men dragged him forward and threw him at my feet.

“Who helped you?”

He said nothing, but thought of two other men. I looked over the crowd, and saw each one.

“Bring that one, and that one.”

Other men dragged them forward. Several women kicked them as they passed. I picked up the proper word. Girls. They were only girls.

“You raped these girls?”

“No, not me,” one of them gasped. He was very dirty and missing many teeth. “I had nothing to do with it.”

“You took your turn just like we did.”

I did not think long.

“Hang them so that they know they are dying.”

Two of the men remained silent, the third cried and repeated “no, no, no” as all three were slowly raised into the air from ropes looped over tree branches, the same ropes that had ended the lives of their victims. Their legs began to kick wildly.

“Kill her!” the archer screamed again. Someone had helped him down off the horse and untied him, but he remained bare below the waist. He stood on the speaker’s stone. “The bitch mutilated me! She murdered Lem and Greenbeard! She sliced open their bodies and did . . . things to them! And she stole my pants! She’s a red-eyed demon!”

I began to think that leaving the criminals’ bodies in the middle of the road, with one of them thoroughly dissected, might not have been the best decision. I hoped the scavengers would help conceal the signs of my anatomical investigations. Meanwhile, the broad-shouldered youth took a few steps to where the archer stood and punched him in the face. I was more pleased than I should have been, but I had already come to greatly dislike this word “bitch.”

“We should hang you too. I can guess what you three tried to do to a lady you found in the woods on her own.”

“Enough,” I said. “I will speak with you two,” I indicated the two young men, “and the Red Priest. It is time I learned more of this land.”

I followed where they led, sensing no deception from any of the three. Behind us, other men looped the fourth rope around the neck of the archer and began to raise him off the ground as well. They thought to please me. His crimes had taken place solely within his mind, at least as far as I knew. Still, I did not stop them.
Was I any better than the stone-heart, ordering the painful deaths of those who offended my sense of justice? The dark-haired girl would never know she had been avenged; her pain would not be sated by the deaths of her rapists. I had ordered men killed, and other men had gladly obeyed. I did not regret their deaths. The stone-heart had ordered the killings of those she believed guilty of unspeakable crimes, and thought it justice. Was I not also a monster?

I am a daughter of Barsoom, and Barsoom is a planet of great violence. John Carter reveled in the wars he fought on behalf of Helium, and in the battles he waged both as commander and as an individual fighter. He adapted well to Barsoom; his violent nature suited that of his adopted planet. I know that he loves me, or at least I once believed this to be true, yet I’ve always known that he tries to wish away the real nature of Dejah Thoris. He continues to believe that the exquisitely beautiful Tern priestess Phaidor threw herself off an airship to atone for her acts of jealousy, willfully overlooking my dagger slipping under her perfect left breast before her plunge into the rocky canyon below. John Carter has seen me kill many foes, and he knows that I am far more likely to die of a sword through my heart than of old age, yet still he treats me as a breakable precious object to be protected.

I am well familiar with death, and with killing. I seemed to be finding it much easier here on Jasoom.
Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

In which Dejah Thoris adjusts to this strange new world, and kills a deer.

Chapter Three

The slender young man led us into a cave that opened into a complex of many tunnels centered around a large central cavern with the bottom part of trees, known as roots, intruding into its walls. We entered one of the smaller caves that had been furnished with wall hangings, a wooden table and chairs. All four of us settled into them and soon a woman brought us food – simple bread and roasted meat – and a mildly alcoholic golden-brown drink. I gave them my name and a brief description of my encounter with Jaime and Brienne. I ate while the Red Priest introduced his companions and explained what I had just seen.

He was smugly self-satisfied to learn that I was indeed a princess. His eyes widened at my name; he was also named Thoris. I did not believe him at first but his thoughts and those of the others confirmed this to be true. He did not believe us to be related, but was sure that this must have some mystical importance. Only much later when I had learned to read their language did we clarify that our names were not exactly the same; I was Thoris and he was Thoros. The coincidence still strikes me as odd.

The stout youth was Gendry, a blacksmith, and the other young man was a noble known as the Lord of the Fallen Star; his actual name was Ned Dayne but I liked the poetry of “Lord of the Fallen Star.” These two last named had apparently just returned to the group, having left over a disagreement with the Stone Heart. They came back when they heard that the dark-haired girl – her name was Long Jeyne – was to be hanged. As Gendry had said, they were too late to save her.

Almost two years before, a force of warriors set out at the command of the King’s First Minister to hunt down a band of criminals. I have never firmly determined the length of the years here, which seems to shift at times, so the timeline may not be accurate. They apparently were defeated and then the King and First Minister were both murdered by the faction supporting the outlaws as part of what sounded like an overthrow of the government. So now the hunters became the hunted. The Red Priest was second in command of the group (while still serving as a priest), and the Lord of the Fallen Star was battlefield servant to the force’s commander. At least I think that was the explanation. I could not follow Gendry’s reasons for joining but it seemed that he arrived later.

They declared themselves the “Brotherhood” and forsook any lords, instead fighting to defend the “small people” as the Red Priest described them – workers, peasants and the unemployed poor, I determined with a few questions.

“Those looked like small people dangling from ropes outside,” I observed.

“Mistakes have been made.”

I pondered that while the serving woman brought another platter of roasted meat and more of the excellent golden drink, known as “ale.” The food here was much tastier than that of Barsoom. Though I wondered why I saw no men doing such serving work. I was following tangents again. I
decided to listen some more and resumed eating.

The Brotherhood continued to fight those who burned and robbed and raped, and as its original soldiers fell in battle they gained new recruits. Some of these were criminals themselves and continued their old ways. I had met and killed some of them already. I detected disgust for the criminal element in all three men, and so I decided to be honest with them.

“The archer did not lie,” I said. “I killed his companions.”

“You?” Ned asked “A woman alone?”

“I am very good at killing people. But I did not mean for the archer to die.”

“You didn’t kill him,” Gendry said. “I suppose that was my doing.”

“You did not order him hanged.”

“Neither did you.”

Gendry and Ned explained that the Brotherhood had become divided in purpose. Some wished to continue their former leader’s goal of helping and protecting the small people. Others rallied to the Stone Heart’s cause, helping her seek vengeance against the families that had murdered her and her family. The men I had killed on the road, and the archer, had often enforced her will; this apparently is why they had been sent to murder the woman warrior Brienne.

“When you killed the other two,” Gendry said. “You left him alone. Plenty of folk wanted to see him swing, mostly for what his friends had done in Stone Heart’s name. Once Lady Stone Heart died, it was only a matter of time for him.”

“Don’t blame yourself for it,” Ned added. “You’ll notice none of us tried to stop the hanging, either.”

I also noticed that Thoros the priest had nothing to say on the matter; his thoughts revealed shame for having allowed the Stone Heart to so easily take over leadership of the Brotherhood and indecision over whether the archer deserved his fate. A craving for alcohol confused his thoughts; I had encountered this pattern on Barsoom among the most devoted alcoholics. I realized that I had fallen silent and was expected to speak.

“Thank you,” I told Ned Dayne, returning my mind to the subject of the archer though I remained unsure of my feelings. He had wished me to feel the same pain and humiliation I had read in the two hanged girls’ final thoughts, thoughts that still evoked barely-suppressed horror within me. Yet I had no right to take his life; he was not a subject of Helium. That others had wished him dead, and had performed the deed, offered little absolution. I would have to consider this further.

“Please continue with your story.”

Thoros resumed his tale. The Brotherhood’s commander was killed fighting a gigantic warrior called The Mountain, and the Red Priest brought him back to life through the power of his god. The commander died several more times before handing off his power of restored life to the Stone Heart and finally dying for good.

Thoros clearly intended this to have an impact, but his tale did not impress me.

“I do not believe in any gods.”

“You’ve already felt their power. They brought you to us.”
“I have met my goddess,” I said. “It did not go well.”

“You have walked with the gods? What blessings did she bestow?”

“She had me placed in a . . . a small space that I could not leave.”

“A cell? A goddess put you in prison?”

“Yes, a prison cell. She was not a very good goddess. She was also quite ugly. So my husband killed her. This pleased me.”

John Carter always claimed that he did not kill Issus, he merely revealed her mortality and then her followers ripped her to pieces. Yet he was responsible for her death, just as I was responsible for the archer’s. I suspect that his dissembling in this matter was due to his reluctance to kill women. I had no similar compunction.

“There is only one god,” Thoros preached, “and he cannot be killed by a mortal or anyone else.”

“All things die. Including those who claim to be gods.”

The Red Priest clearly disagreed, but moved on.

“Despite your lack of belief, the one true god has chosen you as his instrument.”

He proceeded to tell a tale of an ancient hero named Azor Ahai, who wielded a flaming sword and used it to defeat terrible undead creatures from the frozen lands to the north. Just how he accomplished this, the story left unstated.

The sword gained its power when he thrust it between the willing breasts of his beloved. Azor Ahai would be reborn one day “when the red star bleeds and the darkness gathers.” The Red Priest believed I was that hero, brought here for divine purpose. Were my red eyes, unique in this land, not sufficient proof? And my flaming sword? I was an instrument of his red god; I was glad he did not know that I came from a red planet – what would seem, were this Jasoom, a red star in the night sky.

“I do not think the Stone Heart’s breasts were willing,” I said. “And she was not my beloved.”

“By your description of her death,” he countered, “Brienne was willing.”

“She was not the Lannister’s beloved. His cruel words made clear that she was anything but. And I never knew her while she lived.

“Further, I was not born amid smoke and salt,” I had not been born at all, but hatched. “And I have woken no mythical beasts.”

“You can’t take the old prophecies literally,” Thoros said. “They have a deeper meaning than that.”

“I am familiar with this style of argument,” I answered. “You wish the meaning of your holy words to be literal when that suits you, figurative when it does not.”

“You cannot deny that your sword burst into flame,” Thoros argued. “I have also wielded a flaming sword. I make it burn by coating it in a special oil and setting it alight when no one is watching. I know what a false flaming sword looks like. Yours was real.”

“Of course it was real. It surprised me as well. But I serve no god. No true god allows what I have seen in one long day.”
“Be that as it may. You have a destiny to fulfill.”

“That is true. I am here to find my husband, John Carter. I am trying to find his home country, a place known as Virginia.”

None of these men had ever heard of John Carter, or Virginia. The Red Priest asked after my own home country. He thought that it could not be on the Eastern Continent, but might be on the Southern Continent.

“I am from the South.”

“From Dorne?” asked the Lord of the Fallen Star. “Your skin is close in shade to many of our people, but I have never heard your name.”

“No, the Southern Continent.” None of them seemed to know anything of those lands. I was lucky. “My city is called Helium, and I am its princess.”

The Red Priest believed me insane. I could not say that he was wrong.

“How did you get here?”

I could think of no plausible lie. So I used the truth, however implausible.

“I do not know. I suddenly appeared in a clearing in the forest, with no clothing, weapons or anything else. I took the sword from the heart of a woman warrior killed by a man she loved who did not love her, and I stole the archer’s pants. He spoke truly in this regard.”

I had told the priest something even more insane, and just as quickly he fully believed me.

“That was the work of the one true god. I have seen this in visions. You arrived exactly where he meant you to arrive. You were meant to find that sword, as Brienne was meant to sacrifice herself by having it thrust between her willing breasts. Her sacrifice gave it the power to ignite and to kill Lady Stone Heart. You are the wielder of the flaming sword, who will save mankind from its most bitter enemy.”

He seemed to know more of the encounter in the forest than should be possible, but I could not recall if I had described exactly how Brienne came to be slain by Jaime. His thoughts said he had recounted the Azor Ahai legend accurately, at least he believed he had, so he had probably not crafted it to match the circumstances of my arrival and Brienne’s death.

Thoros believed me the savior of his world. Ned concentrated on not staring at my breasts. Gendry wondered if he had done the right thing by encouraging the hangings, and hoped that in choosing to support me he had chosen someone less evil than the Stone Heart.

I had no time to save their world. I did not know how to express how imperative it was that I find John Carter. Because John Carter forgets. Red Barsoomians can live for well over 1,000 of our planet’s years, and our minds retain memories for that entire span. John Carter never asked my age. I have lived for 441 years and I can remember breaking out of my egg, though it is a hazy memory, and I well remember playing with my father Tardos Mors in the gardens of Helium as a child.

My husband has no idea of his own age, but believes himself to be quite old – he has possibly lived for thousands of years. Ras Thavas, Barsoom’s foremost expert on the mind, believed that John Carter’s Jasoomian brain is not adapted to that long a span of years. When it becomes overloaded with memories, it wipes them clean to protect John Carter from the madness of too many lifetimes crashing into his consciousness.
John Carter feared losing his memories of me and of our life together. And so he kept a written journal of his adventures, his friends and his family. I strongly suspected that the transition from Jasoom to Barsoom had begun the steady erasure of his earlier memories: his life in Virginia, which he described so colorfully to me soon after we first met, had become much vaguer in later years even as memories of his adventures with Tars Tarkas and Kantos Kan remained vivid. Had he already started to forget falling in love with me? Is that why he left me? And would his memory loss grow even deeper now that he had teleported between planets once more? Would he remember me at all?

I was now very tired. Ned promised to care for my horses, and showed me a small rock chamber deep in the cave complex where he said I could sleep. One of the serving women came along, apparently so that no one would think he and I were mating, and Ned insisted that she find more clothing for me. She said she had no extras, which was not true, and finally went to the kitchens and returned with a shapeless tunic with no sleeves than draped down to my knees. She also brought a large bag made of some unfortunate animal’s stomach and filled with drinking water.

The rock chamber had a wooden door with brackets to either side and a wooden bar to allow someone inside to lock it; Ned thought this would keep me safe from would-be rapists and Stone Heart supporters. The serving woman regretted that it would also keep her and her friends from beating me with sticks while I slept. She planned to gather them and beat another woman they disliked instead.

Ned spared few thoughts for me, other than the continued embarrassment at seeing my breasts. He worried that he had not done enough to save Long Jeyne, and regretted that this made him a failure as a future lord. He felt a great deal of horror, shame and sadness over the rape and murder of the two girls and worked hard to keep from breaking into tears. Adult men in this culture, as in mine, did not let others see them cry.

They left me alone in the chamber. Though I was very tired, leftover adrenalin and the pressure on my mind of so many unbridled thoughts so close by kept me awake for some time. Ned had left me a burning candle and a holder for it, and I looked at my new lodgings. A crack in the rock provided fresh air, and I saw no evidence of large vermin. The sleeping platform consisted of a large sack filled with what appeared to be leaves and a thin cloth that I later learned was called a “blanket.”

When I lay on the sack the leaves poked through it and into my skin. I spread the cloth on top of it, as I did not feel cold, and stared at the rock ceiling of the chamber. Though many people had now fallen asleep, I still had to concentrate to force away their thoughts. Several women had joined the serving woman to discuss the beating they planned for a woman who had mated, or might have mated, with their husbands. A man sharpened his sword and thought about placing his sex organ inside me, imagining that I gasped and cried out, apparently in pleasure. Several men played a gambling game of some sort.

Ned believed it shameful for a man to cry, and it is no different for a princess. Even so, I did. I had done foolish things before, but nothing could compare to this. I had abandoned my family and my city, who love me, to search for a man who probably does not – and apparently had managed to land on the wrong planet. I felt very lonely, and very sorry for myself. I was alone in a savage world, with no means by which to return home, and no idea if John Carter had even come here, or if he would welcome my presence if he had.

At some point I fell asleep, to endure a series of nightmares – some prompted by my own misery, some the influence of others’ thoughts I absorbed in my sleep.

I awoke some time later, unsure how I had come to be in this small rock chamber now lit with a very
dim gray light coming through a single small crack. I had been trapped in a strange dream, but as I became oriented to my surroundings I realized that I was trapped in a strange reality.

I found a piece of rope under the sack of leaves and used it to make a very primitive shoulder harness for my new sword. I strapped one of Brienne’s larger blades to my thigh using the band she had worn. I put on the dreadful tunic and looped my sword over my shoulder, then unbarred the door and wandered through the caves. The people inside looked at me, but most barely acknowledged my presence. I had become very hungry, and finally found several women standing around a large vat of some kind of boiled grain.

“You want to eat, you have to pay,” said one of them, the serving woman from the previous night. Her spite-filled thoughts regretted having to speak with me at all.

I dug through the small bag of coins and found a small copper one. I handed it to her and she gave me a large wooden bowl of the boiled grain and a wooden spoon.

“Take it outside,” she said. “Don’t need your kind in here.”

She angered me and I considered putting her in her place with a sound slap across the face, the correct answer for a servant speaking impudently to a princess, but I realized that would be unwise in a new and strange environment and decided to eat instead.

I did not like this place. Yet I would need to be familiar with my weapon, my horses, this planet’s gravity and its language before I could set out to find my husband. And I knew nothing of its society and politics, ignorance that could easily prove fatal.

Outside the sun had risen some time before and it was now mid-morning. I found a large rock to sit upon and eat my boiled grain, and watched the people go about their work, play and mostly their general laziness. If these were revolutionaries, the king would remain on his throne until he died a natural death.

I finished my grain and placed the bowl and spoon with others in a large bin I saw near the entrance to the caves. And then I set out to find Gendry, who worked with metal. It only took a few moments to detect his thoughts, and I followed them around the rocky hill with its smattering of large trees to his workshop nestled among the rocks. I hoped he could modify my new sword.

John Carter had written and illustrated a very popular book on Barsoom, titled *Swords of Jasoom*. He had included a blade very similar to this one, called a “long sword.” He had licensed its manufacture, though it was not as popular as the slightly curved “saber” that he favored. I liked my new sword very much. With its light weight and perfect balance it acted as an extension of my arm. Most swords of Barsoom have a blade of unequal width that can be awkward when making intricate moves; they are purposefully designed to reward expertise and punish novices. I suspected that this blade might be difficult to handle were it not made of this wonderfully strong, lightweight form of steel unknown to me.

When I was sure I was alone – I scanned carefully using my telepathy – I ordered the sword to flame on again. It did nothing. I thought the command at it, I spoke the command. Nothing happened. Perhaps the Red Priest was right, and the flames were somehow connected to Brienne’s willing death. I did not see how this could be true, but the facts did meet his bizarre claim. Surely there were more facts involved that I did not yet possess.

Gendry’s workshop, known as a “smithy,” included a forge in which he worked with hot metal, a large anvil on which he pounded the softened metal, and a “slack tub,” a large water-filled container built of mortared stones in which the hot metal would be cooled.
Unlike the other people I had so far encountered, Gendry was pleased to see me.

“How do you find your new lodgings, Princess?”

“I am grateful for the place to sleep,” I said, truthfully. “But many of the people seem to wish I was elsewhere.”

He laughed.

“You really are a princess, trained to speak carefully, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Well, I don’t like them much either. Makes me glad the smithy’s on this side of the hill.”

“Why are they so hostile?”

“They’ve lost a great deal: their homes, close family members, their way of life. Lady Stone Heart promised them vengeance. You took that away when you killed her.”

“She was evil.”


“But you came here to ask me something. What can I do for you?”

“It is my sword. I would like some changes made to it, to remove these ridiculous jewels and decorations, to extend the grip so that I can easily fight with two hands and wrap it with simple leather.”

“Easy enough. Anything else?”

“I would like to replace this absurd golden beast on the pommel with a red orb.”

“Even easier. I can make one out of reddish bronze that will look really fine. Put your hands over here.”

He pointed to a flat white rock nearby. I lay my hands on it and he outlined them using a piece of burned wood.

“This’ll help me make the grip fit your hands exactly.”

I hopped atop a large pillar of rock next to his forge and folded my legs under me as I looked down on the bed of hot charcoal on which he worked. I already knew that electricity was unknown here, but did these people have no better fuels?

“You enjoy this.”

He seemed amused by my taking the raised perch, but pleased to talk about his work.

“Very much. I was taught by the man who made this sword. This is his mark here. It’s a pleasure to work with it.”

“What is this strange metal?”
“It’s called Valyrian steel. It was forged long ago in a land that has since been destroyed. Some say magic was involved, and some say dragons, but no one knows how to produce such steel today or anything like it. My teacher was one of the very few who could even re-forge Valyrian steel.”

“Are all swords made by . . . special workers?”

“Blacksmiths.”

“All special workers are blacksmiths?”

“Blacksmiths work with metal, armorers are blacksmiths who work with weapons and armor. Workers with one specialty – metalwork, weaving cloth, whatever – are craftsmen.”

“It takes a great deal of training to make a sword.”

“It does. Each one is an individual work of art, or at least it should be. A sword has its own personality, and so a notable sword has a name. Will you rename this sword?”

“No, that is not our way. A sword is a tool for killing. One should not make that seem . . .”

“Romantic?”

“Yes.”

“I agree. I hate the killing. Yet there’s an art to making weapons that calls to me. So I understand that there’s an art to using them that calls to some as well. It’s hard to balance these feelings.”

John Carter definitely felt that call; he killed with a passion that sometimes struck jealousy into my heart. I knew that made him monstrous in the eyes of some. Actually, it did so in the eyes of many. I killed without feeling anything at all. That made me far worse.

“You are a complicated man, Gendry.” I pronounced it “Gen-Dree,” after the fashion of Helium.

“Gendry. It’s pronounced Gendry.”

“Gendry. Can you also find me a simple . . . sword holder?”

“A scabbard? Yes, I can make one without these jewels and filigree. You wish to draw it over your shoulder?”

“Yes.”

“It will take me a day or so to finish the work.”

“Thank you. I will be back.”

I left Gendry to pound his hot metal, and walked back around the hill. Gendry genuinely liked me and wanted to help. That raised my spirits.

I decided to visit my horses and explore the area around the caves. The area immediately around the hill had been cleared and thoroughly trampled into dust by hundreds of feet over hundreds of days. Around that zone lay a belt of thick forest, rarely entered by most of the people judging by their vague underlying fear of the trees. It did contain a large pen bordered by a fence of wooden rails stacked on one another, and my horses wandered within it along with at least one hundred more. They came toward me as soon as they felt my thoughts, happy to see me.
They nuzzled me and I petted them; the contact made me feel much better. The large female horse, what is called a “mare,” that had once belonged to Brienne led me to a large, rickety wooden building inside the pen that had a number of living trees incorporated into its structure as supports. Inside were saddles and tack, and after some searching I found the saddle and saddlebags that my horse had worn. All seemed intact.

I found a gate in the ramshackle fence, climbed onto my mare and rode her through the woods for a time without a saddle; I enjoyed the contact with my horse and the feel of her beneath me. We came to an empty, open clearing covered in small green plants with spike-like leaves. She wanted to eat them, so I dismounted and let her graze.

I pulled off my hideous coverings and began my set of exercises. I felt my muscles start to relax as I went through the motions, and my mind began to clear. I continued to move my arms and legs, taking up the poses and renewing my mental and physical energy. The exercises of Helium work their magic on this planet as well as Barsoom.

I then lay on my back among the soft green plants, looking up at the blue sky. I found this bizarre coloring disorienting, and knew I had to become acclimated if I were to function here. It was beautiful, in its own way, but strange all the same.

As I lay contemplating the skies, I felt the thoughts of a panicked animal rapidly approaching. Behind it came the thoughts of three men in pursuit. I rose, but the animal did not consider me a threat; it apparently relied on sense of smell and I did not register as an enemy. It was brown in color with a white underside and it had horns on its head; it had been struck in the flank by an arrow which still protruded from its side.

As it sped across the clearing, I made up my mind. I sprang after it, judging the point where I could intercept it, and tackled it as I drew the blade strapped to my thigh. I slashed it across the throat and pinned it to the ground as it died. As I rose, the men approached at a slow trot.

“We don’t want no fight,” the first one said, raising his hands. He recognized me from the previous afternoon’s altercation.

“Equal shares?” one of his friends offered. “A quarter each?”

“If you cook it,” I said. “And I want the skin.”

“Deal,” their leader answered. “We never would’ve caught up to it.” He knelt by the animal and drew his own knife, cutting it along the belly as I watched.

“You hunt like that and never seen a deer field-dressed?” he asked, curious.

“No,” I answered. “I really am a princess.”

“So I see. Well, watch and learn.”

All three men described their actions as they removed the deer’s organs and cut up the meat to be carried. They admired my breasts and loins with what they thought were discreet glances, but had no thoughts of assaulting me. All of them feared me to some extent, having seen me kill many of their number bare-handed, and I apparently looked fearsome with a knife in my hand and a thick smear of deer’s blood across my chest. Even so, they enjoyed explaining the task to a woman. As I knew nothing of dressing animals of this planet I gladly listened, all the while understanding that had I been expert in this field, the explanation would have continued regardless.

“Here,” the third man said, holding out a rag. “Keep it.”
I cleaned my knife and sheathed it, and wiped the blood off my skin. The man who had given me the rag noted approvingly that I cleaned my weapon first.

As they finished and rose to their feet, the leader looked at me again.

“So, um, you want to hunt again, you’re welcome any time.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I would like that.”
Chapter Four

Chapter Summary

In which Dejah has a propitious meeting, and burns her pants.

Chapter Four

I was not sure of the route back to the camp, but my mare knew so I let her pick the path. I enjoyed the ride through the forest, despite the green life covering everything like an infestation. Perhaps I need not be miserable in this place; Gendry showed the will to be my friend, and if the hunters feared me they did not seek to harm me, either.

I put my mare back into the pen and using the tools I found in the shed I brushed her as she wished. Then I pulled on the hideous tunic and leggings. I did not like wearing clothing, but I knew from the reactions of the hunters and the cooking women that I would find a great deal of unnecessary trouble if I went naked like a civilized person.

Judging by the hunters’ words, they should have finished cooking the deer meat by now. I had become hungry again and looked forward to my share. As I walked down the path leading to the caves, I picked up the thoughts of a woman running toward me. She was frightened, and pursued by six other women, all of whom carried sticks. I could not read her thoughts clearly, but I could read theirs: she had mated with a man desired by one of the women, apparently not for the first time. They intended to harm or kill her.

I recognized her as she approached: the tall woman with reddish-brown hair who had stopped the rapist from fleeing on the previous night. I held out my arm to stop her flight. She halted and bent over slightly, panting from the exertion.

“Wait,” I said. “They will not harm you.”

She tried to answer but was breathing too hard to form words. I could only read fear and anger in her thoughts. I stepped forward as the women pursuing her drew closer.

“Stop,” I said. “You will not harm this woman.”

“It’s none of your business,” one of them said, the same woman who had insulted me over a bowl of boiled grain. “That slut fucked my man, for money.”

From her thoughts I understood “fuck” to mean “have sex with,” and to be a word of great power. “Slut” was one of their insults reserved for women; this language appeared to have many of these words.

“He paid her willingly?” I asked.

“That’s not the point.”

“You are married to him?”

“That’s not the point, neither.”
“Then perhaps you are simply not attractive to him.”

She was a stout woman and not, to my eyes, very attractive with small eyes, curly hair of indeterminate yellow-brown-gray color, pale skin and a large nose. Part of me knew that I was simply reacting to an innate prejudice against ugly people, women in particular, an unfair one given that I had done nothing to earn my own beauty beyond being hatched out of a royal egg.

“Get out of my way,” she said, intending to push past me. I grabbed the front of her clothing; she wore many layers and I was able to twist a thick knot of them into my hand. I used it to lift her off her feet. She whimpered.

“You will leave my friend alone,” I said. “If you attempt to harm her again, I will kill you and all of your friends. You know that I am capable. And you now know that I do not care if you live or die.”

I tossed her to the ground, where she landed on her back, and put on my best arrogant-princess attitude.

“Do not test my patience,” I said, as I picked up a flicker of thought from the woman behind me and decided to use the phrase. “Scurry back into your holes before I become angry.”

They ran away, leaving their sticks behind, and I turned to meet my new friend. I did not yet know it, but in that moment, my life changed.

“Hello,” I said. “My name is Dejah Thoris.”

I considered my companion. She broadcast none of the hatred or fear of the other women in the camp, but her thoughts were far from open. She was used to guarding her feelings.

“What is your name?”

“They call me Tansy. It’s a small yellow flower that some consider a weed.”

“Unidentified people call you a weed. That is not what I asked. What is your name?”

“Tanith. But please call me Tansy.”

“Tan-See.”

“No, Tansy. Like this. Tansy.”

I suddenly realized that I had been mangling every name I spoke.

“Tansy. I am Dejah to my friends. I hope you will be one of them. None of the other women seem willing to speak with me.”

Despite her closed mind – I could read the meaning behind her words when she spoke, but little more – I liked this woman. She looked familiar in some way. She was almost as tall as I, with very pale white skin and reddish-brown hair. She was slender but with well-made shoulders and arms and long legs, yet seemed very graceful. She was, under the dirt and the bulky, drab clothing, beautiful.

“You just offered to kill six of them,” she said. “That doesn’t usually lead to friendship.”

“I am very hungry,” I said. “I killed an animal known as a deer and some hunters have cooked part of it. Would you share it with me?”

We walked back to the camp together. Tansy said nothing and I could not think of anything to say,
either. I tried to read her thoughts but could pick up little. This also meant that her thoughts did not intrude upon mine. I found it much easier to be in her presence than I did other people of this planet.

I located the hunters by telepathy; they had already roasted the deer and shared out their portions, but had placed my share on a large wooden platter under a white cloth to keep the insects away. They had skinned the deer and prepared its hide; one of the men showed me where it had been stretched on a rack to dry.

“You’ll want some bread and wine with it,” their leader said, eyeing my new friend Tansy. He apparently had mated with her at some point or had wished to; his thoughts were not clear but at least he made no crude comments. He handed me a skin bag and a large loaf of freshly-baked bread. It was very roughly made, with bits of leftover plant sticking out of it and burned places on the bottom, but I appreciated the gesture.

“Take these,” he said. “I hope we’ll see you again.”

I understood from his thoughts that they found it difficult to bring down a deer with their arrows, which apparently did not have a great deal of range or striking power. I thanked him and turned to Tansy.

“Is there a place where we can eat this?”

“Up there,” she pointed to the top of the hill. We climbed and found a large flat rock on the summit, with no one else present. I laid down the platter and pulled off the cloth; the meat smelled wonderful. I sat cross-legged next to the food and beckoned to Tansy to join me. She tentatively sat as well.

I sliced some meat and placed it on her side of the platter, then cut some for myself. I liked the sharp taste and the rich fat within the meat.

“Thank you for joining me,” I said. “I have felt very . . . alone here.”

“You did kill their leader,” she said. “That made you a few friends and many enemies.”

“I could not let her kill those people,” I said. “But I failed. She killed them anyway.”

“Is it true that you killed Lemoncloak and Greenbeard?”

Now I knew why she seemed familiar. This was the woman who had occupied the yellow man’s last thoughts. He remembered her somewhat differently than the reality, with better teeth and fewer blemishes on her skin, flesher with even larger breasts and bright green eyes rather than the large, deep blue ones that now regarded me carefully. But this was the same woman. My answer could well end our brief friendship.

“Yes.”

“They were very experienced fighters.”

A non-committal response, probing for a fuller answer.

“So am I.”

“And you seek out new enemies to fight?”

Her thoughts gave no advice. I simply told the truth.

“No. I do not like to fight, or to kill. Not unless they wish to kill me,” I hesitated, then added, “Or
rape me.”

“I thought so. I’m glad you killed them.”

“You knew them?”

“They were customers of mine.”

The word “customers” took some halting explaining. Tansy had been a “whore,” a woman paid to mate – “to have sex” was their phrase – with a few women and many men, including the three I’d met on the road. Tansy did not enjoy it. They apparently did. I decided not to tell her how much the yellow man had enjoyed her.

“Do you still wish me to be your friend?”

I knew the answer, and it surprised me. While illicit sex does not carry the same stigma on Barsoom that it apparently did with these people - sex and procreation are separate biological functions for us – we have those who sell their bodies for pleasure, and it does carry a great social stain. Curiously, I found that I did not care.

“I am a princess in my own land, with a deeply ancient family history. A few days ago I would have instantly said no. I might have even struck you for daring to speak to me.”

“And now?”

“And now I very much want to be your friend, and for you to be mine.”

“Even if I am still a whore?”

“Are you?”

“Sometimes. I have to eat. Even here, I have nothing else with which to pay for my keep.”

“Do you wish to be a whore?”

“By all seven hells no.”

“Then you will stay with me, and will no longer be a whore. I have money, gold and jewels.”

“You took it from the men you killed?”

“They had no need of it. And now it will bring us what we need.”

“What if we run out of gold?”

“Then I will kill some more bad men. There seems to be no shortage of them.”

We had finished our food, though I had eaten most of it. We remained on the rock to drink some of the wine, but kept the bread and the rest of the wine for Evening Meal.

“Can you help me find some things?” I asked. “I wish to set this clothing on fire.”

“Of course. You haven’t tried?”

“Yes. No. Not really.”

“Are you shy?” she asked, somewhat amused.
“Perhaps. I am a princess. I am not used to . . .” I struggled for the proper words, and to not offend.

“Dealing with common folk?”

“Yes. I am sorry.”

“Don’t be. We can’t help what we are.”

I appreciated that she wished me to feel better, but still I indulged in self-pity.

“The women here despise me. The men fear me.”

“They respect you.”

“Killing a large number of them will do that.”

“You’re making a joke, are you not?”

“I think so.”

“They’ll talk to the gold. What is it you need?”

“Some furs for sleeping. A leather harness to wear for battle.”

“You’re expecting to fight battles?”

“There are always battles. And if I must wear something that covers my breasts and loins, can it be less scratchy and ugly?”

“You must. Well, you don’t have to, but you’re going to have to kill more people if you don’t.”

“It is not my fault.”

“No, it’s not. But you’re a woman. So it is.”

She paused, drank some wine and looked into my eyes.

“You’re from very far away, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Everything here is strange to me.”

“I feel that way sometimes, and I grew up here.”

“Do you have needs?”

“Food. A warm place to sleep. A friend.”

“I know where to find those things.”

With Tansy’s help, we secured enough furs to fill the bed frame inside my, now our, small chamber. That created a sleeping platform similar to those of Barsoom. We dragged the sack of dead plants, what she called a “mattress,” outside and left it for whoever wished to claim it.

She traded the skin of the deer I had slain to a woman who worked with leather and promised to make me a fighting harness. I drew the harness for the woman, but Tansy added a short skirt and panels along the sides to cover more of my flesh. I promised to bring nine more deer skins to
complete the trade.

From another woman who dealt in clothing she purchased a pair of loose-fitting garments she called a “dress,” one for each of us, and a set of riding leggings for each of us as well. I threw the archer’s leggings and the serving woman’s hideous tunic into a fire as I had promised. A man sold us what Tansy said was a soldier’s tunic, that fell to my knees and had an emblem of an animal known as a wolf, and another man sold us open-topped shoes she called “sandals.”

“You are experienced in many things,” I observed.

“You mean besides fucking?” she said, but she smiled to show that she was not offended. “When you run a brothel, you have to see to everything. You’re still a whore, but also banker, manager, cook, guard, maid, spiritual advisor. But mostly, I can read people. You have to in my business, to survive. If you can’t see ahead of time who’s going to be violent or dangerous, people get hurt.”

“You do not mind speaking of it?”

“Sometimes. You don’t seem to judge me so I don’t mind talking to you.”

“I am very judgmental. That is what a princess does. But I like you.”

The words surprised me, even though they came from my mouth. But they were true.

“And I you. Today is a good day.”

Tansy also found a cleaning device known as a “broom,” and we swept the chamber clean including the walls and ceiling. We found more candles, a basin and pitcher for water, and I retrieved the handful of items formerly belonging to Brienne from my saddlebags.

“Do you need help to gather your things?” I asked Tansy.

“You’re looking at them all,” she said, raising her arms and turning in a circle. “Just the clothes on my back.”

I could not easily read her thoughts to find out what deeper meaning lay behind those words, and this was one reason that I liked her. She had a disciplined mind, and I was not assailed by random thoughts when in her presence.

We finished just as darkness fell, and I looked forward to sleeping in actual furs. I pulled the dress over my head and sat on the edge of the bed frame. Tansy remained standing and looked at me.

“Are you expecting me to . . . you know?”

“I do not know. Expecting what?”

“Sex.”

“You are my friend, not my lover. If we do become lovers it will have nothing to do with payment.”

“I think I knew that,” she said. “I’m just used to everything being an exchange. I haven’t had many friends.”

“I have,” I said. “You do things for them because you want them to be happy or have their needs filled, not because you expect something in return.”

“That will take some getting used to. I saw the one bed and just assumed.”
“Friends in my land, particularly women, often share a bed.”

“They do here as well, at least in the upper classes.”

“Then we shall be of the upper class.”

“All right.”

She pulled off her own dress. She was, as I had suspected, beautiful underneath it despite some soft flesh about her lower abdomen.

“Finest tits in Westeros,” she said, smiling as she touched her large, full breasts. She looked at mine. “At least they were.”

She sat next to me.

“Thank you. For everything. I was close to the edge.”

“The edge?”

“The edge of living, or seeing a point in living.”

“I also needed a friend. I had become very lonely.”

She lay down. I did as well.

“You’re really warm,” she said. “Are you ill?”

“No, this is my natural temperature.”

“Really. I could learn to like this.”

She rolled over and mumbled before falling hard asleep.

“Tomorrow you’ll tell me why you’re here.”

Morning came, and with it the hunt for food. Tansy proved much less shy than I, marching up to the women cooking boiled grain and demanding two bowls for us, including pieces of fruit tossed into the grain. She stood over them while they prepared it, and did not pay them. They hurled many insults at her in their thoughts, but said nothing aloud while keeping a frightened watch on me.

“I had to make sure they didn’t spit in it,” she said, handing me a bowl. “Let’s go back to our rock.”

Once again we had the flat rock to ourselves, underneath a clear blue sky with a few puffy white clouds. We have clouds on Barsoom, but they are far less beautiful than these. Rocks covered the top of the hill, with some scraggly plants jutting out from between them but no large trees. One could see the area around the hill, but the view from there did not extend above the tops of the large trees in the forest.

“So, why are you here?”

“To find my husband, John Carter.”

I told her the same story I had given Thoros, Ned and Gendry.

“You’re really a princess?”
“Yes, really. My city is called Helium. It is in Sothoryos. The land is very different from here.”

“No doubt. Do you love John Carter?”

“Why do you ask?”

“That’s more of an answer than ‘yes’ or ‘no’.”

“I do love John Carter. I am no longer sure that he loves me.”

“Ah. So you want to know if he left you.”

“Yes. He has many enemies; he could have been taken against his will. But I fear he went freely.”

“So you plan to find him?”

“Yes. First I must learn more of these lands and become used to my sword and my horses. But I hope to leave soon.”

We had finished our grain and fruit. Tansy stood and looked down over the side of the hill.

“The practice yard is down there,” she said, pointing to an area where a number of men stood about. “Maybe you should beat up a few of them to get ready to see your husband.”

“I will, but first I want to exercise. Will you come?”

“Of course.”

We walked to the horse pen, where I saddled one of my horses so Tansy could ride him, and mounted my mare bareback.

“Can you ride?” I thought to ask.

“No problem.” She mounted gracefully, and my mare led the way to the clearing we’d found on the previous day. I enjoyed riding with Tansy, who looked very comfortable in the saddle.

“I should have put on those pants we bought,” she said. “Dresses weren’t meant for riding.”

“How do women ride then?”

“The smart ones wear pants. The others ride like this.”

She twisted around to put both legs on the same side of the saddle. It looked terribly uncomfortable, and I said so.

“It is. I need to wear pants.”

“I will kill some more deer and we will ask the leather woman to make you some strong riding leggings.”

We reached the clearing, again finding it empty of people. I took a few moments to regard the plants, which Tansy said were called “grass,” and the trees. This planet was really lovely, once one got used to all of the blue and green and brown. Even so, I missed the sight of red rocks and red plants.

Then I showed her the forms of our exercises. We move slowly through them at first when we perform them on Barsoom, so teaching them is fairly simple. She caught on quickly.
“This is very relaxing.”

“It is meant to clear the mind, as well as strengthen the body.”

“So this is what made you strong?”

“A among other things. I was bred for intelligence, size, speed, strength and beauty.”

That was only partially true; I was bred for those qualities as are all royals. That only accounted for some of my strength and speed.

“Did you kill the deer with your bare hands?”

“With my knife.”

“You jumped on it and stabbed it?”

“Yes. I cut it across the throat.”

“You promised to deliver nine more deerskins for your battle-dress thing.”

“I will have to hunt them. They cannot smell me.”

“But they can smell me.”

“Yes.”

“So I need to stay away.”

“I will hunt them early in the morning. It is no trouble.”

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We rode back to the caves and returned the horses to the pen. Tansy showed me more of proper horse care: the importance of cooling down after exercise, of brushing, of picking small rocks out of their hooves. The horses had mentioned none of this; they did not like having their hooves cleaned and I realized that horses lie.

I found brushing the horses very relaxing, and I picked up from their thoughts that their prior masters had done little to care for them. I greatly enjoyed riding, and now understood John Carter’s love for horses.

Having finished with horse care we next visited Gendry, to see if he had finished with my sword.

“This is my friend, Tansy,” I said as he looked up from his work.

“Hello,” he nodded to her. “We’ve met,” he said to me.

I realized this embarrassed him.

“I am sorry.”

“No,” he said. “It’s fine. It was, um…”

“She knows,” Tansy said, and looked at me. “Some men brought Gendry to me for his first time.”

“With you?” I asked.
“You are blunt,” she said, but smiled. “No, with one of my girls.”

I did not understand.

“The girls who worked for me.”

I understood.

“I ran away first,” Gendry said. “It was a shameful moment.”

“Her loss,” Tansy said. “I’m sorry I laughed at you.”

“It’s alright,” he said. “I’ve gotten over it. And I have something for the princess.”

He fetched the sword from behind his forge and laid it on his work table; he had wrapped it in a soft, cured animal skin. He unrolled the wrappings to reveal a beautiful sword. The crossbar was dark gray steel, the grip wrapped in dark leather with a reddish orb at the pommel. I picked it up and tested its balance; it remained perfect. I stepped outside the work area and performed a few two-handed evolutions at slow speed; the new, longer grip was perfect.

“Thank you. This is wonderful. I have gold.”

“No, that’s not necessary. I enjoyed working with a real Valyrian blade. And I have more.”

He walked behind his forge and returned with a scabbard and belt. They matched the dark leather of the grip.

“I had to guess your height, but I think I got it right.”

I put the sword in its scabbard and slipped the belt over my shoulder; it fit perfectly, the grip jutting up exactly where I wanted it.

“And don’t forget this,” he said, handing me a small cloth bag. I hefted it; it rattled heavily.

“The gold and jewels I took off the sword and scabbard. Worth a good bit I’d guess.”

“This should feed us for a long time,” I told Tansy.

“You’re paying for food?” Gendry asked. “I’m sorry. We did nothing to settle you here after tossing you in a cave. There’s no organization with Lady Stone Heart dead. Permanently dead. Whatever you call it.”

“I bought some boiled grain. I killed a deer and some hunters cooked it for us. Tansy made the women give us more boiled grain with fruit and implied that I would kill them if they did not.”

“Would you have?”

“Possibly.”

“Please don’t. Let me bank the forge and we’ll go see Ned and make sure you’re fed and clothed. You’re our guest and should be sharing what we have like a guest.”

“My friend Tansy shares whatever I share.”

“I’ve no problem with that. Let me get to work.”
Gendry took a small tool with a broad, flat head known as a “shovel” and began to cover the glowing coals in the forge with a layer of ash. Tansy took my hand in two of her fingers and pulled me further from the forge.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

“You are my friend,” I said, equally quietly. “I need someone in this world I can trust.”

“So do I.”

When Gendry finished banking the forge, we followed him to a flat, dirt-covered area outside the caves he called the practice yard, the same spot Tansy had pointed out from the hilltop. I had hoped to learn more about the fighting styles of this planet, and looked forward to joining in the sword practice.

We found Ned Dayne on the edge of the fighting area, having just finished a round of sword-play. Gendry called him over to join us on a bench made of dead trees.

“Princess,” he greeted me. “I don’t think I know your friend.”

“Her name is Tansy,” I said. “She is named for a weed. She is my best friend.”

“I’m your only friend,” she whispered, too softly for the others to hear.

The Lord of the Fallen Star actually took her hand and kissed it. The courtesy pleased me.

“How can I help you?”

“We neglected to do anything for the princess beyond a sleeping chamber,” Gendry said. “Food, clothing. Anything. That’s not how a guest should be welcomed.”

“No, it’s not,” Ned agreed. “What we have is yours.”

“And Tansy as well.”

“Of course.”

“How long do you plan to stay with us?

“I would like to stay a few more days and become used to this land’s ways,” I said. “Then I must be off to find my husband.”

“You’re certainly welcome for as long as you wish,” Ned said. “Things are really disorganized following Lady Stone Heart’s death, not that she put effort into anything beyond murder.”

“I would like to practice with swords.”

“Of course. Pick up a practice blade and have at it.”

“I will watch first.”

Ned returned to the yard, facing a large, shirtless man with a large, two-handed sword. Gendry picked up a weapon called a war hammer, though this one had wooden caps on it to limit the damage it caused, and faced another large man, this one wearing a heavily-padded tunic. Their practice consisted of bashing each other with swords that had no edge until one or both of them dropped from
exhaustion or repeated blows. Ned had been “castle trained,” as he called it, and used a very formal style. It would see him killed someday; I could anticipate his moves even without reading his mind. Gendry tried to use his greater strength to simply overwhelm his opponent.

After watching, I took up an edgeless sword and joined them. Ned called a smaller man to face me. He was very young and obviously inexperienced. He also wore no shirt or tunic, so I pulled off my new soldier’s tunic to match his bare chest. He cringed.

“Watch the sword, not the tits,” a man sitting on a nearby rock called. “Look at that stance. She knows her business.”

The young man finally lunged wildly; I stepped aside and let him fall to the ground on his own, kicked the sword out of his hand, and placed the tip of mine at his throat.

“I have killed you,” I said. “Send another.”

The man sitting on the rock got up, pulled off his tunic and picked up a practice sword.

“Let’s see what you’ve got,” he said.

I took up the standard opening stance, and awaited his attack. He lunged directly for the center of my chest; I hooked his blade and disarmed him, then tapped him on the center of his chest.

“Dead. Send another.”

“No one is that fast.”

“Send another.”

The large man who had sparred with Ned held up his hand to the Lord of the Fallen Star, and walked across to face me. He was an attractive man, with a muscled chest and shoulders and long, shaggy brown hair. He wished to engage in sex with me; I would not have minded but my husband, unlike a man of Barsoom, objected to such recreation. My opponent raised his sword and nodded without a word. I fended off several strikes, and when he reached for a broad one-handed swing I spun inside his guard and laid the edge of my blade alongside his neck.

“I have killed you,” I whispered into his ear.

He looked down at my bare breasts pressed against his bare chest.

“It was worth it,” he whispered back. I felt him grow aroused and spun away.

“She’s too fast for me,” he said in a louder, but strained voice. His discomfort pleased me, though it should not have. “Two against one.”

He gestured to the large man who had fought Gendry, who pulled off his padded tunic to join him. They spread out and tried to attack from two sides; I blocked the man on my left and then attacked the man on the right, beating down his guard and turning back to tap the chest of the man on the left when he thought me distracted. He fell over with a loud, pretended groan of pain while I returned my attention to his comrade, parrying his attack and counter-thrusting to tap him as well. He also fell over, groaning.

I stuck the practice sword in the dirt and held out my hands; they took them and pulled themselves up, each slapping me gently on the shoulder.
“You’ll teach me that,” the first man said, not intending it as a question.

“Natural speed,” his friend said. “Don’t think that can be taught. But there’s a lot of technique there, too.”

“Watch my shoulders, not my breasts,” I said. “Every kill I have made has been in reaction to an attack, not one I initiated.”

They both nodded.

I sparred with a few more pairs, defeating them easily, and also beat three men at once. I believe that I could have done so even without telepathy and my enhanced speed. I tried not to show off, but I did not want to hold back either. I thanked them all for the exercise, put my tunic back on and sat down between Tansy and Ned, with Gendry on the other side of his friend.

“You made that look easy,” Tansy said.

“I am very quick, and have had a great deal of training.”

“Do you wear armor when you fight for real?” Gendry asked. “I could make some to fit you, but it would take some time.”

“No, we fight without any clothing at all,” I said. “I kept the leggings for the sake of modesty.”

“That was indeed very modest of you,” Tansy said.

“Thank you,” I said. It took a few more moments before I realized that she intended an ironic jest.

“I do prefer armor on my wrists, like so,” I told Gendry, indicating my forearms. “I do not know its name in your language.”

“Gauntlets,” Gendry said. “I’ll make you a set.”

“We wear heavy armor in battle,” Ned said, “with padding underneath it. Touching an opponent scores points on the practice yard, but it’s not going to harm an enemy in a real battle. To split their armor or inflict an injury by blunt force, the blow has to be very hard. And so we sacrifice style for power.”

“You still would have beaten everyone here,” Gendry added. “Just maybe not as easily.”

Ned nodded agreement.

“Do all women learn to fight in your land?” he asked.

“Among the nobility. Fewer women become soldiers than do men, but it remains a fair number. They are more common in ships’ crews. Is this not true here as well?”

“No. There are warrior women in the North, but you are only the second such that I have met.”

“The first was Brienne?”

“Yes.”

“I am not truly a warrior. A princess must learn to fight and help lead her nation’s armies in war. It is expected. We have privileges, and we earn these on the battlefield, sometimes by our death.”
“That’s true among us as well, only not for princesses.”

“If women do not learn to fight, what happens when they are threatened?”

“A knight must protect the defenseless, including women,” the Lord of the Fallen Star explained. Tansy made a snorting sound; I looked at her and she rolled her eyes, a gesture we share on Barsoom. I smiled at her and she smiled back.

“Why do I only see women doing the menial tasks here?” I continued. “They cook, they wash, they serve food.”

“That’s a woman’s place.”

“To do the hard work while you play with swords.”

“But a woman can’t wield a sword.”

“Truly?” I spun the blunt point of the practice sword on my finger tip, a trick John Carter had taught me that neither youth could master. “Has any sword touched me yet?”

“You’re not like other women.”

“This is true. So the man plays with swords and the woman works. This does not seem right or fair.”

“Among the nobles the men fight and the women do not work,” Ned answered. “Among the other classes everyone works. Someone has to do the work. And women must be protected.”

John Carter had felt this way as well. He always feared for me when I fought, and more than once I had stood back so as not to distract him during battle. Once he even asked that I sing inspirational songs while he fought, but even a princess has limits to the public humiliation she will endure. And no one has ever asked Dejah Thoris to sing a second time.

“And who protects women from their protectors?” Tansy asked.

“It’s . . .” Ned started, then stopped. “I don’t know. Real life hasn’t turned out to be the way I was taught it should be.”

“You!” I called to one of the practicing fighters. “Brace the blade with your off hand or he will smash it back into your chest. That is why it has no edge near the cross-guard.” He nodded and acted out the motion. I nodded in turn and he continued, now using both hands. They did not yet fully respect me, but none now questioned my skill with a sword.

“Why are noble women so precious?” I asked.

I had wondered about this long before I came to their planet; I would not claim that women are fully equal in my society but John Carter at times acted as though I were made of the delicate glassine crystals from which our artists craft intricate shapes. And while I would not have said that I was good at killing people on Barsoom, I had survived in a very violent culture.

“They bear the burden of childbirth, and the raising of children. ‘A woman’s battle is in the birthing bed,’ they say.”

“Do not working women do so also?”

“Yes, but that’s different.”
Probing their minds, I found that they thought a great deal about sex, but knew practically nothing about childbirth. I would have to ask Tansy.

“Have you had sex with a woman?”

Both young men turned very red. Tansy burst into laughter.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t do that.”


“You would like to?”

“Which?”

“Either.”

“I will wait to, uh, lay with a woman. But I would like to marry.”

He thought of what I believed was a rather young girl, with dark hair and gray eyes. She swung a narrow-bladed sword.

“You love a woman?”

“I think so. Her father knew my aunt and I think he loved her, but he killed my uncle. So I don’t know how my family would feel. And the war has destroyed their house.”

“And you, Gendry?” Tansy asked.

“Ned will have his marriage arranged by his family because he’s a lord. I have more choice, but some girls are forbidden to me even as a knight.”

“You are a knight?” This surprised me; from what I had gleaned of Ned’s thoughts and words I had concluded that knights were nobles, not blacksmiths.

“Yes, Lord Beric knighted me. But I was born a bastard so the knighthood doesn’t erase all of that.”

“Who were your parents?”

He started, and I realized I had offended him.

“She does that,” Tansy interjected. “You saw it this morning. There’s no filter on our princess.”

“I am sorry,” I said. “I do not wish to offend.”

“It’s alright,” Gendry said, not really meaning it. “It’s not something people ask.”

“Polite people, anyway,” Tansy added, but she smiled and rubbed my back to show that she was being playful, then looked at Gendry and leaned across me to put her hand on his brawny forearm. “Don’t be upset. She doesn’t mean anything by it.”

He nodded, partially mollified.

“I don’t really know who my parents were,” Gendry said; his thoughts said he lied. “I grew up in Flea Bottom, in King’s Landing. My mother was a tavern wench, my father a customer I suppose.”

He suspected that his father had been King Robert but had no proof.
“Gendry,” Tansy said softly. “If I can see your father in you, anyone who knew him can.”

“How did you know him?” I asked her, catching myself before I said “the king” aloud.

“He was my customer, too.”

“Are you Gendry’s mother?”

“No,” she said, startled by the question; I had forgotten that these people remained children far longer than we of Barsoom, making Tansy too young to have birthed Gendry. “But I would be very proud if I were.”

“My own wasn’t,” Gendry said. “I never really knew her, either. I remember a woman with yellow hair who I’ve always thought of as my mother. She probably worked in the palace, at least people from the palace paid my master to take me on as an apprentice and came to check on me.”

“But you are a knight now,” I said, “yet you cannot marry who you choose?”

“Not having a family isn’t all bad,” he said. “I don’t mean as a child; that was really bad. But now, no one will try to make a marriage alliance using me as a game piece. I do get some choice, but it’s limited.”

“And you have made a choice?”

“Yes, but she’s forbidden to me.”

He pictured a very similar girl to that dreamed of by Ned. Perhaps the same one? It seemed that no one on this planet ever found love with the one they desired.

“I hope that can happen for you,” I said. “I married one who was forbidden to me.”

“How did that come about?” Tansy asked.

“He fought for me and won the right. In our lands that carries a great deal of . . .”

“Weight?”

“Yes, weight. Not as much weight as I told him it did, but I did not wish him to stop pursuing my hand. He had no status but was a great fighter and skilled in the command of armies and fleets. Now he leads the combined forces of my city and our allies. Men and women gladly follow him, and die for him. It also helped that my grandfather loves me and wanted my happiness.”

“Families here,” Gendry said, “almost always choose to place the game of thrones above their children’s happiness. Noble families, that is. The others just suffer for it.”

“What is the game of thrones?”

Gendry looked to Ned.

“Noble houses seek status, and an opportunity to gain greater status than their neighbors and rivals. They do so through marriage or through obtaining offices.”

“Do they seek to rule?”

“Sometimes. There’s only been one successful rebellion in the past three hundred years, and that was not long ago. Mostly they struggle for position beneath the king, not for the chance to replace him.”
“This happens in our land as well. But it rarely causes as much death and destruction as I have heard of here. Perhaps some nobles die, but not working people in huge numbers.”

“That’s how it was here too, or so I’m told. I think the tension built up for a very long time, and when it was released, the world just caught fire.”
Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

In which Dejah discovers rain and bacon, and agrees to battle a pig.

Chapter Five

Over the next several days I fell into a routine, hunting in the early morning to redeem my promise of
deer skins, exercising with Tansy in the clearing before bathing in a nearby stream, and riding horses
together through the forest. The hunters gave me several javelins that they called throwing spears. I
sought deer telepathically, climbed a tree to wait for them to pass underneath, and killed them with a
javelin thrown from above. So many farms had been abandoned that the deer population had
expanded exponentially, and I soon had enough skins to pay for my fighting garb as well as boots
and a similar outfit for Tansy. And a great deal of meat. The hunters were pleased.

I also experienced rain: water that fell from the sky. We have rain on Barsoom, but it is exceedingly
rare in the region around Helium, where all water has long been carefully conserved and directed for
use in agriculture and for personal consumption. We control our weather as we do the atmosphere,
and simply allowing water to drip from the clouds is considered highly wasteful. I had seen rain over
the vast Toolian Marshes, but never at my own city, and I had never directly experienced its fall.

Here, no one considered it a miracle; it was simply an annoyance to be avoided. People huddled in
the caves or in makeshift shelters under the trees. I stood under the falling rain and spread my arms,
feeling the droplets smack into my flesh – in this heavier gravity they hit with some force, though not
enough to be painful. I pulled off my tunic to better feel the rain, and eventually climbed to the top of
the hill to sprawl on my back atop our flat rock while the drops of rain played across my body.

I had never felt anything like this and loved the sensation on my skin. It was a cold rain, but I did not
care. Tansy found me there as the rain subsided, amused at my love of rain but concerned that I
would make myself ill. She could not explain why cold water falling on my skin would sicken me,
but I put my tunic back on and went inside the caves to ease her concern.

I also visited the practice yard every afternoon. I showed the fighters some of the techniques of
Barsoom, and they taught me theirs. Over the days that followed more fighters from the camp came
to watch, and some challenged me with their dull swords. I defeated them easily, and to make things
more interesting I began to fight them in larger groups. I became much more at ease with the sword,
though I declined their offers to learn to use the heavy lance with which they fought from horseback
or to fight with sword and shield.

I suspected that my reactions had become much faster than on Barsoom, and I asked a number of the
men to throw stones at me while I batted them away. I became very adept at this game. I also had the
fighters loose blunted arrows at me, and found that I could knock most of them away with a practice
sword. Most, but not all. I found that my enhanced abilities did not include a resistance to pain. I
would need to avoid arrows.

Many of the men admired my body in their thoughts, but their words generally remained respectful.
A few went to private places around the caves and thought about me, or about Tansy and I together,
while they stroked their sex organ; since they did not do this around others I came to understand that this was a private act and considered somewhat shameful. I did not wish to intrude, even in the silence of telepathy, yet I remained intensely curious about their sexual practices and learned a great deal. The men often fantasized of placing their sex organs within women, while the women only sometimes fantasized of receiving them. I began to suspect that John Carter would never have been able to find sexual satisfaction with me, for I could not receive his sex organ.

Some of the people went to one knee when I approached, a gesture which I found very strange. I let them know that this made me uncomfortable, that a simple nod and greeting would suffice. They usually called me “my princess,” which made me smile – I had once told John Carter that this was a term reserved only for lovers among my people. Since I actually was a princess, the people of Helium had called me that many times every day. If he had ever noticed, he said nothing.

As the men came to respect – and fear – my fighting skills, it became safer for Tansy to walk among them alone. I did not openly threaten anyone, but most understood that I would kill anyone who attempted to harm her. Many of the women and some of the men continued to despise both of us, but no longer dared give voice to their hatred.

Thoros the priest came to the horse pens and rode with me one day in place of Tansy, who did not feel well, calling it a period of the moon. Thoros wanted to talk about his prophecy, and I tried to divert him by asking about his homeland.

“You are from the Eastern Continents?”

“Yes, a city called Myr. I was given to the priesthood as a boy, and eventually sent here to convert the former ruler and the rest of the heathens. I stayed on with the next ruler, drinking and fighting by his side. And then I ended up here.”

“What is it like there?”

“Essos, as we call the Eastern Continent? Much drier than here. There is desert in the interior and huge stretches of dry grassland. There are sophisticated cities along the coastline, with a much higher level of civilization than this continent, Westeros.”

“Who lives in the interior?”

“Barbarians. They ride horses in huge hordes, fighting one another and sometimes attacking civilized folk. They decide all questions by single combat.”

This sounded very familiar.

“Are they green-skinned? With tusks?”

“What? No. They have skins of a light brown color but otherwise look like any other men. There are large men with tusks as well as long arms and flat noses on the Southern Continent, but I suppose you know that.”

He doubted my origin story, but not enough to say so out loud. He only cared for my destiny; I really could have come from another planet and he would not mind.

“I had rarely traveled before my arrival here.”

“It is said to be a wild place, Sothoryos, with all manner of deadly creatures from killer fish up to giant apes many times the size of a man.”
“Truly? Giant apes many times the size of a man. Are they white-skinned?”

“That I don’t know. You’ve never heard of them?”

“Oh yes. All of these creatures sound very familiar to one from my land.”

We rode on some time before I resumed my queries.

“You lived in the capital before your exile here?”

“Yes. I was boon companion to the king. And then he died, and here I am.”

“It is a great city?”

“Massive. Half a million souls, possibly more. The greatest on this continent.”

That would make a respectable but small city on Barsoom, far smaller than Helium or even Lesser Helium.

“Is it a center of learning?”

“Not much. The real center of learning is Oldtown, on the western coast.”

“Oldtown is the oldest town here?”

“Of course.”

“What learning goes on there?”

“It’s home to the Citadel, where the maesters train their novices and study all manner of, well, study. The natural world, magic, history, medical arts. Everything.”

“Where else are these things studied?”

“Nowhere. At least not in Westeros. There are some scholarly orders in Essos, also.”

“Who can become a maester?”

“Men only. They select applicants very carefully, then train them for years. They take vows including celibacy, and their loyalty is only to the Order. Most noble houses have a maester that serves them.”

“But the maester serves his Order first.”

“Exactly.”

Curious. So science, or what passed for science, was held as a monopoly by a tiny insular order, following its own agenda, and with influential agents at the elbow of every significant political leader and many insignificant ones as well. Was this Citadel the seat of true power in Westeros? And what was its agenda? I was reminded of the Therns of my home planet.

Other distinct echoes of Barsoom intrigued me as well: the barbarian hordes (brown and riding horses rather than green and riding thoats), the giant apes, the tusked men. I desperately wanted to learn more of these parallels; they would make a fascinating study. Was this some form of convergent evolution? But I had to concentrate on the task before me.
“You plan to leave us?” the priest asked.

“Soon.”

“These people depend on you.”

“No they do not. Some fear me, some think me a great fighter. They need a real leader. You have failed to be that leader.”

“That’s not really fair.”

“Of course it is fair. You were second to the dead Lightning Lord. You did not step into his place. You let the Stone Heart push you aside and warp your mission.”

“So who should lead them? Ned? He’s all of seven-and-ten.”

“Yes. He is young but of good heart. You will support him.”

“I’ll think about your suggestion.”

“It was not a suggestion.”

On a night with clear skies I took the largest fur in our chamber and climbed up to the flat rock on top of the hill to seek out Barsoom. Tansy came along, and we lay on the fur and looked up at the night sky. Like Jasoom, this planet had a single very large moon. But that was where the similarities ended.

None of the constellations were familiar, and this bothered me. I knew we were in the northern hemisphere of this planet, since the Red Priest had spoken of frozen lands to the north. If this were Jasoom, the stars should be similar to those of Barsoom’s northern hemisphere, as both planets circled the same star. Unless, of course, I had also travelled a great span through time and the stars had shifted. I knew from John Carter’s travels and those of the other Jasoomian I had met, Ulysses Paxton, that interplanetary teleportation did odd things to the flow of time that even I did not yet understand. I had presented papers on the mathematical structure of time to the Royal Academy, and could see that this question merited more study. But not now.

As I looked above I saw no familiar stars, and no red planet. I kept a close watch for any obvious planetary movements, and chatted with Tansy as we looked upward. She described the constellations and told a little of the myths behind them; we have these as well for our stars as do John Carter’s people. I asked about stars that moved; she looked for a while and finally pointed out a blue one. Another one, this time green, would rise late at night, she explained and finally a white one as morning neared. She knew of no red moving star.

“Some think they are other worlds, worlds like ours. But most learned men believe the world to be flat, which would rule out that theory.”

“The world is not flat.”

“And you know this because . . . ?”

“Have you ever climbed to a tall height, a hill or tree?”

“A castle tower?”

“Yes. Could you see farther from there than you could from the ground?”
“Of course.”

“Because?”

“Because . . . you’re seeing around the curve of the world!”

“Exactly. How do you know so much about the stars?”

“I had a noble’s education as a girl. Lord Whent believed that girls should be educated the same as boys.”

“They usually are not?”

“No, girls are taught to sew and to prepare to be married. Boys are taught to fight but also about history and the natural world.”

This explained why she seemed to speak differently than the other women in the camp, at least when she was with me. At other times she mimicked their rougher speech patterns.

“Girls and women do not study . . . the natural world?” Tansy’s people did not appear to have a word for science.

“That belongs to the maesters, a body of men who keep the study all to themselves. They swear an oath to take no wives and take no part in war.”

“No women at all?”

“No women at all.”

“In my lands, both women and men study the natural world, but mostly women.”

“I think I’d like your lands much better than these.”

“Thoros the priest spoke of the maesters. They allow no one else to study the natural world?”

“I’ve never heard of them stopping anyone. Then again, I’ve never heard of anyone else trying to study it.”

My curiosity grew regarding these maesters. Were they deliberately trying to retard science and development?

“You have met maesters?”

“Well, I’ve fucked them, which isn’t exactly the same thing. They’re men like any other: swear one thing, do another.”

“You did this as a whore?”

“I sure wouldn’t fuck one for fun.”

“How did you come to be a whore?”

“You’re direct, I’ll give you that,” she said, but turned to me and smiled before looking up again. “My mother was a whore, but my father was Hoster Tully, the lord of the River Lands. He placed me with his wife’s noble house and the Whents raised me until I was on the verge of womanhood. It’s not unusual for noble children, including bastards, to be sent to live with other families.
When his older, true-born daughter was to be betrothed at a huge tournament held at the castle where I lived, she pitched a fit and insisted that my father send me away. She would not have a bastard there on her special day to ruin things. I was sent back to my mother.”

“Pitched a fit?”

“She became very upset, screaming and throwing things. She threatened to tell everyone at the tournament that her father, my father, was a whoremonger.”

“What is a tournament?”

“Knights pretend to fight for the amusement of one another and noble ladies. There is usually feasting, music and other entertainment as well. This was a famous tournament, with the King and most of the high lords in attendance. Many things that happened there shaped the next nineteen years.”

“She took you away from the family you had known? That was cruel of her.”

“Yes. I’ve heard that even as a grown woman, she was cruel to her husband’s bastard son as well. Yet her own mother was never anything but kind to me.”

“Gendry said he is also a bastard. What does that mean?”

“A bastard is a child whose parents were not married, but at least one of them was a noble. They have much lower social standing than a true-born noble child. They do not carry their father’s name. I’m a noble’s bastard so my full name isn’t Tanith Tully but Tanith Rivers, because I was born in the River Lands. Gendry’s a noble bastard too, so he’s Gendry Waters because he was born in the lands near the sea.”

“And bastards are not liked?”

“Many of the poor people in cities are bastards, and so are peasants. No one cares or even calls them bastards – that’s reserved for a noble’s child. Marriages are rarely even recorded among them. But among the noble classes, including even the small landowners, bastards are hated. The stain can carry on for generations.”

Since our reproduction is tightly regulated by our Breeding Councils, there is never any question of parentage on Barsoom, at least among the civilized peoples. A woman without a husband may apply to have an egg fertilized, but the offspring is never considered a lesser person. And even some married couples will apply for genetically superior eggs or sperm rather than attempt to gain approval to use their own. But laws regarding succession and inheritance are apparently very different in Westeros than those of Barsoom, as one would expect given our far greater lifespans. It saddened me that my friends would suffer for such supposed flaws.

“But you and Gendry are such good people.”

“That’s nice of you, but it doesn’t matter to many nobles, especially to noble women. They fear that bastard children will take the place of their own offspring and inherit their father’s property. Some fear they will take a father or husband’s love from a true-born child.”

“A bastard child cannot inherit?”

“Not unless the king makes them legitimate. That means they have the same standing as a true-born child and take their father’s name.”
“And a bastard child is not loved?”

“Often not. Many fathers simply forget their bastard children.”

“And your father?”

“I don’t think he loved me, I think he felt guilty because of me. After I was sent back to my mother, he bought the brothel where she worked and gave it to my mother. I inherited it from her when she died.”

“Brothel?”

“A house where whores live and work.”

“So your father made you a whore?”

“You could say that, but it was my mother who sold my maidenhood when she saw that I was becoming beautiful. She put me to work; I don’t know that my father wanted that or even cared one way or the other. I was a whore with a good living, thanks to my father, while the brothel existed.”

“Maidenhood?”

“A girl loses it the first time she’s penetrated. You know, when you bleed. Some men will pay a great deal to break one.”

I did not know, but I nodded as though I did.

“What happened to the brothel?”

“Soldiers burned it, and the town where it stood. I believe they did it on purpose.”

“Why?”

“The older of my father’s two true-born daughters, the one who hated me so, married the lord of the North, Ned Stark. His soldiers burned the brothel and killed most of my people. They said they were only following orders. I believe those were her orders.”

“Soldiers of every land use that excuse.”

“Perhaps. But I believe they meant it. And that’s why I came here.”

“I do not understand.”

“I wanted to kill that woman for what she did to me, for what her soldiers did to the whores and cooks and laundry girls and stable boys who worked for me.”

“I am very good at killing people. I will help you do this.”

“There’s no need. You already have.”

I had to think about that for a moment. I had killed many men here but only two women, including the one I punched over the heart during the fight when I first arrived. The other fit her story much better though.

“I already killed her? The Stone Heart was your sister?”
“She was my father’s other daughter. You are my sister.”

She rolled over to lay her head on my shoulder.

“Now you have my real story. Soon you’ll tell me yours. Your real story, not the one about some make-believe city in Sothoryos.”

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I felt more comfortable with my sword and my horses, and when I entered the practice yard one afternoon Ned Dayne awaited with a proposal. We sat on the nearby rocks. I listened while I played with a practice sword, balancing it on the back of my hand and flipping it into the air to catch it.

“You’re the best fighter any of us have ever seen,” he began, wishing that I would put down the sword. I spun it instead.

“Who do you wish me to fight?” I asked, gleaning his purpose from his thoughts.

“You know that we have very little food stored here.”

“It has seemed adequate. Are you saying I should earn my share?”

“I would not object if you wished to do so, but that wasn’t my point. I was about to ask it as a favor. You see, we do have enough food for our day-to-day needs. But I’ve been looking through the stockpiles since Lady Stark’s death. Apparently she did no planning for the future.”

“The food will run out?”

“Winter is coming. And we have three to four months’ supply laid in under the hollow hill.”

I did some calculations. Perhaps 90 to 120 days. That seemed tight, but not enough to cause the level of worry I felt from the Lord of the Fallen Star. I knew nothing of this planet’s seasons but their years seemed roughly the same length as those of Dirt, from what I had picked out of their thoughts and conversations.

“So you need to secure perhaps another 30 to 60 days’ supply?”

“No. I have heard that this will be a severe winter. We need to be prepared to stay under the hill for at least five years.”

“Five years? Here?”

“Normally people go to holdfasts prepared by their lords, fortified places with stocks of food and fuel behind secure walls. The people here have no lords, and would be killed if they attempted to enter one of the Lannister castles or holdfasts.”

“I cannot believe that a winter here lasts for years.”

The claim was patently ridiculous. Food would not last for five years on dry Barsoom, even less in this damper climate. I did not think it likely that they possessed some homespun method to preserve biological items of which Helium’s science knew nothing. And even if they could feed themselves, they would mow down massive swathes of the surrounding forests for firewood.

Perhaps they could place themselves in some kind of suspended state, in which they did not need food or warmth? Some plants and animals of Barsoom can do this, waiting for water to return to their environment. But were this true, then they would not need such huge supplies of food, a need which implied that the people remained awake and active.
“They don’t in Dorne, my homeland; it gets cooler but we still have harvests. I suppose your land is even farther to the south and you have no problems. But it’s different here. If we don’t secure food for these people, they will starve.”

“What do you propose to do?”

“Intercept a Lannister wagon convoy loaded with grain.”

“Do you know where to find one?”

“They run regularly to the south. The Lannisters are stripping the River Lands to stock King’s Landing for winter. A farmer came in yesterday with his family, the Lannisters had taken all of his grain. They loaded it in wagons headed south.”

“The convoys are guarded.”

“Yes.”

“How many?”

“In this convoy? Six to ten wagons, a driver for each, three to four mounted guards.”

Given the size of King’s Landing, as described by Thoros, it would take more than 20,000 such wagon trains to feed the city for five years. Again, this seemed unlikely to me, yet Ned clearly believed this to be true. I returned to the subject.

“You would seem to have enough fighters already.”

“None who can stand up to the Lannister men-at-arms. We had them once; most are dead now.”

From what I had seen of the fighters at practice, I knew him to be correct.

“They have confidence in you,” he went on. “They’ll be more willing to fight if they know you’re with us.”

“You are not much of a revolutionary army if you need an outsider to fight for you.”

“I don’t know what we are,” Ned conceded. “Outlaws? Rebels? The lost and forgotten? But I do know that we need more food.”

I thought on that last.

“The wagon drivers fight as well?”

“No. They’re farmers forced to serve, usually highly unwilling.”

“So they would join us?”

“I don’t know. But they probably wouldn’t fight us.”

“I will fight the Lannisters for you.”

“Thank you.”

“There are conditions. You must have a plan of attack, and I will approve it. You must gather more information and know precisely where and when this attack will take place. You must have scouting
reports on the place of attack and keep it under watch so that we are not ourselves surprised.”

“We haven’t done anything like that since before Lord Beric was killed. The first time.”

“Planning saves lives. I will not throw mine away stupidly. Nor should you.”

“I knew that. I simply forgot. Thank you again.”

“I am a true princess, Ned. I was trained to lead, as were you. You cannot afford to forget again.”

“I won’t.”

Even with proper planning, this would be no more than minor banditry, unlikely to improve the outlook for the people living under the hill. I had gone from princess to outlaw in just a few days. Yet I had to earn my keep, and what else did I have to offer? I had killed a few deer and taught some swordplay. Was that enough? I would not let Tansy return to whoring, nor do so myself.

She did not approve of the idea when I told her.

“You could be hurt. Killed. For nothing.”

“I am very good at killing people.”

“Which won’t stop you from being killed yourself.”

“These people took me in.”

“Because they’re afraid of you, so they feed you. They’re not afraid of me, so they fuck me.”

“That will never happen again.”

“It will if something happens to you.”

“It is all I have to repay them. I will do as I promised.”

“Then I’m coming with you. I won’t stay here to be fucked again if you don’t come back.”

I assented. Truly, I worried what would happen to her if I left my friend alone in the camp.

We spent an uneasy night bundled in our box of furs; I knew Tansy was unhappy with my decision. In the morning, I put on my wolf’s-head tunic and leggings and slung my sword over my shoulder. I walked out to the horse pen with Tansy; we did not speak as we mounted up and rode out to our clearing, nor was anything said during our exercises or bathing.

“Dejah,” Tansy finally said as she prepared to mount her horse. I walked over to her and stood before her.

“Dejah,” she repeated. “I’m afraid. For you. For me if anything happens to you.”

“You will have money. Leave this place and never come back.”

“But I’d be alone. Again.”

“We are sisters now,” I said. “I will not abandon you. Come, let us return.”

I had called my mare over to me and now swung onto her back; if I were to ride long distances, I would need a saddle.
We found the Lord of the Fallen Star sitting alone on a large stone before a fire, frying something in a pan. I took up the stone next to him and folded my legs beneath me. Tansy did the same on the opposite side of him. He shared this “bacon” with us, thin strips of cured meat from an animal known as a pig. I had seen pigs kept in pens in the forest nearby; disgusting creatures of no apparent use beyond consuming the camp’s garbage, which they did with enthusiasm. I had no idea of their true worth. Barsoom has nothing to rival bacon: the taste, the crunch, the oily texture. I do not believe in any gods, but the existence of bacon makes me question this non-belief.

We sat there for some time in companionable silence, eating bacon. It remains one of the favorite moments of my life. We were still sharing bacon when two of the mounted perimeter guards approached with a rider between them. The man had a sack over his head. They told us he had been found wandering the nearby roads calling out for the Brotherhood, claiming he had a message to deliver.

We stood. The Lord of the Fallen Star nodded, and one of the guards removed the sack. The rider shook his head and then slowly pulled from his clothing a piece of the animal skin these people use for written words, careful that it not be mistaken for a weapon. He began to read from it.

The flowery language was difficult to follow, and the rider’s thoughts gave no help at all; he had not written the message and knew nothing of its contents until he unrolled it to read. Without the aid of telepathy, I discovered that I was less prepared to handle this language than I had assumed. Puzzled, I turned to the Lord of the Fallen Star.

“I understand exactly nothing of what this messenger demands. Please explain.”

“He represents a minor leader known as the Mighty Pig.”

“Truly?” I held up my piece of bacon. “The Mighty Pig?”

“Those aren’t the exact words. He is known as Strong Boar. Strong means, well, strong.” I nodded. “And a boar is a dangerous and large male pig that lives in the wild. Nobles hunt them for sport, but the very largest and strongest will kill a man easily. One of them even killed the former king. They fight with no regard for their own safety.”

“So he is a powerful warrior. The name is not a jest.”

“That’s correct. But I like the idea of calling him The Mighty Pig. It will anger him.”

“What else does the message say?”

“He believes that we’re led by a great but elderly warrior known as the Black Fish.”

“Do all of your leaders choose such strange names?”

“It’s a long story having to do with his house’s symbol. The Black Fish stayed here a short while but was never part of the Brotherhood and left long ago. The Strong Boar challenges the Black Fish to fight him in what we call single combat.”

“We know this as well. And what will come of the single combat?”

“In reality nothing. But the side whose champion is killed will lose some of their will to fight, and the winner’s side will grow more eager for battle. It is a way for a fighter to gain renown as well.”

“The fight is to the death?”
“Yes. A fighter may yield and become a prisoner, but that only happens when his friends and family will pay money for his release. Both sides know that will not happen here.”

“I understand. I will fight the Mighty Pig.”

Tansy looked unhappy, but said nothing.

“You don’t have to,’ Ned said. “He’s said to be one of the strongest and fiercest fighters on this continent. At least among those still living.”

“I feel an obligation. You have no other fighter whose skills approach mine.”

The Lord of the Fallen Star nodded.

“Should I be killed, you will care for Tansy as though she were your own sister, with no regard for her birth or occupation. You will defend her with your life, as I would.”

He took both of her hands in his.

“I swear it, on whatever honor is left to me. Starfall will be your home as long as you wish.”

She nodded; I could tell she tried not to cry. Ned turned back to me.

“We’ll give Crakehall your answer, but he may refuse to fight a woman.”

“Then we will tell both our fighters and his that he feared to fight a woman, and gain much of the same benefit as though he had actually been defeated.”

“You’ve done this before.”

“Not exactly,” I answered. “But this is not my first rodeo.”

He looked blankly at me, not recognizing one of John Carter’s favorite phrases.

“It means that yes, I have done similar things.”

We sent the messenger back to his lord, naming me as the Brotherhood’s champion and noting the time, place and weapons of my choice. The messenger wrote down our response but showed personal indifference to the details; he had little interest in the quarrels of his masters. His thoughts revealed that he had been chosen for this duty because he was one of the few in their small force who could read and write. We could both drop dead and he would not care.

Ned’s thoughts turned to guilt as soon as the Brotherhood’s guards took the messenger to release him well away from the camp. He had been impressed by my quickness, but knew that many fighters who impress on the practice yard die easily on the battlefield. It is the same on Barsoom. Many thought the Mighty Pig to be the strongest warrior in Westeros, and Ned feared he had led me to my death.

I had no second thoughts; I rarely do in such circumstances. One does not survive as Princess of Helium without learning how to fight. I had indeed faced enemies in single combat, both during war and when the loathsome Sab Than forced me to fight his former betrothed in the arena of Zodanga. I never told John Carter that I had slain the princess; I had not wished to kill anyone for the twisted pleasure of Sab Than. But she was determined to end my life so I put my sword through her heart as thousands cheered. I knew they would have roared even more loudly had her sword plunged into my breast instead.
Chapter Six

Chapter Summary

In which Dejah battles a pig and humiliates a squire.

Chapter Six

On the next morning we rode out to the meeting place, an open field Ned and Gendry knew well. When we camped in the woods that night Tansy held me tightly under our sleeping fur, but did not voice any more objections. I knew she was frightened, both for me and for her fate should things go wrong, but she had grown much calmer. I suspected that either Gendry or Ned had told her that I needed to feel confident when fighting the Mighty Pig.

As the sun rose on the next day we approached what Ned called without irony “the field of honor” by way of a narrow trail through heavy forest, and I paused my friends before we came into view. I pretended to fuss with the lacings on my boots, but actually wanted a moment to scan the nearby forest with my telepathy. After hearing about the Lannister and his allies I did not trust this Mighty Pig not to lay an ambush for us, but I only detected four people. Satisfied, I indicated that we could ride on.

We entered the field under the terms laid down by the Lord of the Fallen Star at my direction. My opponent rode forward accompanied by three men and dismounted. I did the same, followed by Ned, Tansy and Gendry.

My friends had explained that such combat usually begins on horseback, but as I had been challenged I had the right to set the terms and I preferred to fight on foot with swords since pistols were not an option. Gendry would serve as my “squire,” and he explained that a young warrior-in-training accompanies a knight to help adjust the armor, supply replacement weapons, tend to the war horse and so on. I had need of little of this, but it pleased him to continue the tradition. The Lord of the Fallen Star would take the role of “herald,” while Tansy would tend to any wounds I suffered. It all followed long-accepted practice and I did not wish to cause my friends distress.

Under a rather unattractive violet-colored cloak Ned had lent me I wore the leather fighting harness and skirt that the leather-working woman had made, with my sword slung over my back and a dagger at each hip. Gendry had made a set of armored gauntlets that covered my forearms, and crafted a bronze image of Barsoom to decorate each; I had told him, truthfully, that the red orb was the symbol of my house. That was the only protection I wore.

I also had a new set of leather riding leggings, very soft and comfortable, and fine deer-skin leather boots as well, laced up to just below my knees. Tansy had pulled my long black hair into what she called a “ponytail” to keep it out of my eyes and tied it with a bright blue ribbon, but otherwise I wore no headgear. I was very pleased with my look, a princess both dangerous and beautiful. I shrugged off the cloak and handed it to Gendry.

Tansy placed her hand alongside my face. “I finally found a sister. Don’t take her away.”

I kissed the palm of her hand.
“Do not worry. I will be fine.”

Tansy looked at Gendry. He shrugged his broad shoulders.

“I’m not worried.”

“Dejah Thoris, Princess of Helium, accepts the challenge of Ser Lyle Crakehall,” the Lord of the Fallen Star announced in a voice surprisingly powerful for his slender build. “Combat shall take place on foot, with swords and daggers the weapons of choice. It shall continue until one combatant yields or is dead. Is this agreed?”

“Is this some sort of jest?” asked one of the men opposing us. “We agreed to extend you rabble the same courtesy as true-born nobles, and this is your response?”

“Silence,” snapped the Mighty Pig, a broad-shouldered and dark-haired man of indeterminate age. He was very large, considerably taller than I and of at least twice my weight, possibly much more. “With the Black Fish gone they can choose whomever they please. If she fights as good as she looks this will be a fine morning.”

While his friends resented my presence, my opponent took me seriously and studied me closely, noting that I seemed relaxed. He was not taking me for granted, and suspected that I must be some sort of assassin or pit fighter from a far-away land hired by the Brotherhood. He was wrong, but it was not a bad guess. I continued to be surprised at the similarities between this planet’s Eastern Continent and Barsoom.

The Mighty Pig gestured to one of the men to hand him his helmet. Pulling it over his head, he ordered his attendants to back away. My friends did so as well.

“Whenever you’re ready, my lovely.”

I drew my sword over my shoulder, reaching back with my left hand to pull the scabbard downward – video heroes always pull one-handed over their shoulder, but it takes both in the real world else the blade will become stuck halfway out. The Mighty Pig started in surprise.

“Oath Keeper,” he said. “That’s Lannister’s family sword.”

“No longer,” I answered, assuming a standard fighting stance.

“A water dancer with big tits and a Valyrian steel blade. You don’t see that combination every day.”

He carried a long and wide sword in his right hand and a large shield on his left arm. I knew that type of sword from John Carter’s book – a “great sword” – and knew that it was meant for piercing or hacking through armor. My opponent’s thoughts showed that he recognized the fighting style of Helium as very similar to one from some city on this planet. I would have much less of an advantage than I had hoped.

I tested his guard with a quick strike, which he parried easily. He was fast, but he already knew he was in trouble. I struck at him several more times, each blow coming quicker than the last. He tried to strike me with his shield but I leaned into it, only allowing him to push me harmlessly away. I flew several feet backwards, but landed in a crouch on the balls of my feet. I snarled in the way of a fighting woman of Helium, twirled the sword and circled for another round of strikes. He had never seen such, and it unsettled him even more than the failure of his shield strike, apparently a favorite move of his to exploit his great strength.

“Hold!” the Mighty Pig called, extending his sword and shield to either side of his body. The Lord of
the Fallen Star’s thoughts indicated some surprise that my opponent asked for a pause so early in the
fight, but it apparently was within his rights. Reluctantly, I backed away.

Tansy gave me some small fruits candied in a sweet, sticky substance and a drink of water. Gendry
looked briefly at my sword and nodded; it had not a mark on it. The Mighty Pig pulled off his helmet
and stacked his shield on top of it, and proceeded to remove pieces of armor from his legs and his
upper arms with the help of two of his friends, both of them apparently squires. He drank a great deal
of water; he was already sweating profusely. We do not sweat on Barsoom.

“You’re too fast for an armored knight,” he said. “And that blade would cut through steel anyway
were you strong enough to put real force behind it.”

“You’re not here to flirt,” said his third friend, who stood with his arms folded and glared at me.
“Hurry up and kill the bitch. We have meat and wine awaiting us.”

“This is why I fight and you talk,” the Mighty Pig replied. “I don’t know where in the seven hells
they found her, but she’s a professional. She might be faster than Lannister was before the
amputation. So shut your mouth and watch a real fight.”

“All I see is the vaunted Ser Lyle Crakehall scared to fight a half-naked foreign bitch.”

The Mighty Pig struck him across the face with the back of his hand and then walked out to face me
again without looking back. I did not like his dark-haired friend; his narrow face and pointed nose
with dark whiskers under it reminded me of an ulsio, the vermin who live in tunnels under our cities.
But I kept my attention focused on my opponent.

“How did you come by Jaime Lannister’s sword?”

“He left it stuck through the heart of a large woman warrior.”

“So he killed the big ugly bitch?”

“Do not call her that. Her name was Brienne. She was foolish in love but she had honor in battle.”

Actually she was fairly foolish in battle as well, willing the Lannister to slay her, but I did not tell this
part to the Mighty Pig.

“As you will, my lady. That was ill-said on my part. And where is Lannister?”

“I do not know. He rode away before I thought to kill him.”

“He never was very good with the ladies. So you stole his sword?”

“He is welcome to try to take it back from me.”

“That would be my task today. Shall we resume?”

This time I held my sword at guard and waited for him to strike, wanting to test his speed without the
cumbersome armor and shield. He now fought two-handed, and his thoughts revealed that he hoped
to use his longer reach to his advantage. It felt somewhat dishonorable to read his mind during the
fight when he could not do the same, yet I had no wish to die this day. And without my enhanced
speed and strength as well as my telepathy, he would surely cut me in half with that monstrous
sword.

Monitoring the thoughts of an experienced, instinctual fighter like the Mighty Pig only provided a
slight advantage. I knew his strategy for the fight, and received some early warning of moves he planned. But most of his sword-work came without thinking, in the way of a true master. I had to rely on my own instincts, honed in hundreds of battles and tens of thousands of practice sessions over a lifespan many times the length of his.

He was tremendously strong; I could not have fought off even a single strike without my own new strength. I lacked his mass, and would have been hard-pressed to defend myself had he chosen to use that edge rather than rely on his blade speed. But he considered himself a master swordsman, and against another opponent his choice to depend on that skill would probably have been correct.

Our swords clashed for some time before I saw an opening. I darted forward and smashed my sword’s cross-guard into his face. Stunned, he backed up. I chopped down on his blade as hard as I could, given the short radius, and knocked it free from his hands. The blow probably broke both of his wrists. I kicked him in his side, sending him sprawling onto his back with multiple broken ribs.

“That’s not part of the water dance,” he gasped. Blood streamed from his nose, now a broken match for that of his lord and that of his ulsio-faced friend.

I stood over him, slowly twirling my sword. The fight was to the death. But I had already won. I hesitated to take his life.

“Tell my father I died well,” he called to his friends. He looked up at me. “Do it quickly,” he said in a whisper. *And do it bare-breasted*, he added silently.

A few moments from death and these were his thoughts. I still do not know why, but this amused me and I paused long enough to realize that I did not want my new-found sister to see me kill a helpless man.

“You fought well, Mighty Pig. Go back to your lord and leave this place.”

I stuck my foot under his sword and flipped it up into my hand. It had an ornate basket guard and was decorated with many jewels. My friends had approached and I tossed the Mighty Pig’s blade to Gendry, who plucked it out of the air and studied it with fascination.

“I will keep this to remember you. I will leave you your life to remember me. Now go.”

I leapt onto my mare's back straight from the ground, while The Mighty Pig’s friend began to shout insults at me, declaring me a whore just like Tansy. I turned back and pointed my sword directly at his vermin-like face. His nose twitched. It still bled from the Mighty Pig’s blow.

“I take no joy in killing an honorable foe. You, I will enjoy killing. You should leave while you are able.”

We rode away, Gendry and the Lord of the Fallen Star in front, and Tansy and I behind. She reached over to take my hand and squeeze it.

“I’m glad you weren’t hurt.”

“Thank you,” I said. Slowly, I was learning the courtesies of this place.

“You know, you really can’t keep taking people’s swords,” Gendry leaned back in his saddle to call to me. “It’s not considered polite.”
“I should have searched him for money.”

“That’s even worse. It’s just not done among the high-born.”

“In our lands, when you kill an enemy in single combat, you take his or her possessions including any servants. In some lands nearby you even take his or her name.”

“I have a hard time imagining you as a pig.”

“Thank you, Gendry.”

“The people will want to celebrate this victory,” said the Lord of the Fallen Star. “This will help bring the Brotherhood back together.”

“No,” I answered.

“No?”

“The Lannister’s men know we are within one or two days’ ride of here. The ugly man with the pointed nose may be stupid, but the Mighty Pig is not. They will have scouts searching for us. We need to be searching for those scouts and killing them as far from our caves as possible.”

“Thoros said we could hide in the caves.”

“Thoros is a fool, caring only for his wine and his god, in that order. You think you can hide the smoke, the trees cut for firewood, the pig yard, the tracks of horses? And the pits filled with . . .”

“Shit?”

“Yes, shit. The caves are fine shelter, but they will not hide you from anyone on the ground.”

They would hide them from air scouts, but I had seen no evidence that these people had any form of flight.

“You’re right. I’ll organize search teams and put everyone on alert.”

“Only a small number of search teams. Keep most of your fighters close by. We have had many people leave the camp. I have heard their words.”

Actually, I had read their thoughts, but I still did not want to share knowledge of my ability with my friends.

“They were angry that I killed the Stone Heart, or that I killed the rapists or their friends. Some are even angrier that I wore no clothes and still show too much flesh for their liking. Others think I have sex with Tansy and call us an abomination, or resent my protection of my sister. Soon some of them will be captured and forced to tell our location, or will do so willingly. Either way I have brought you your doom.”

“Our doom came long ago. You freed us from Lady Stone Heart, and you fought for us. I’m glad to know you.”

“And I you.”

I slept well that night, with Tansy curled beside me under our sleeping fur. The next morning, as we rode out on the last segment of our journey back to the caves I told the Lord of the Fallen Star that I
would join the scouting expeditions. I wanted to see more of this place. Tansy said she would ride with me.

Many relationships among these people are different than those of Barsoom, some very different, but sisterhood is one that I understood. Thuvia has been my sister for many decades, though we come from different families. I found the same bond growing with Tansy.

“I’m sorry I was so upset before,” Tansy said as we set out on our scouting mission, just the two of us. “I should have trusted your instincts. You know how to fight.”

“I was bred and trained for it, among other things,” I said. “But that does not mean it is not dangerous. He was a very good fighter and could have killed me.”

“I’ve never seen anyone move so fast as you did in that fight.”

“Have you seen such battles before?”

“Not a formal fight between knights or whatever that was yesterday. There was a battle during Robert’s Rebellion in the town where my mother had her brothel; King Robert hid in the brothel when the fighting started and ran out the front door to join in when his friends arrived. I saw some men killed, but it happened very quickly. That was when I first met the king, but I wasn’t working yet. I just brought him wine.”

“Tansy,” I said, trying to sound very serious. “You have now seen that I am a very experienced fighter. I promise you, I will never take a foolish risk with my life unless you or I are in great danger.”

“You would risk your life for me?”

“Of course I would. You are my sister.”

“No one has ever felt that way about me. Not even my mother. Everything anyone ever did for me had a price attached to it.”

“That was the past.”

We rode for some time, seeing no one. Eventually a lone rider nosed his horse out of the trees and blocked the path ahead of us. He wore a coat of armored rings and had a shield strapped to his back. He pointed his sword at us and started to say something; his thoughts said he would demand our money and horses and then rape us.

I did not let him finish. I pulled out one of the daggers from my harness and threw it; it lodged deeply in his throat. He dropped the sword and made some retching sounds; we rode past and left him slumped in the saddle. I pulled my dagger out of his throat as we passed and began to clean it with a rag I kept tucked in the back of my skirt.

“You’re not going to take his sword?”

“It is not a very good sword. And you can see he has not eaten in days. That means he has no money.”

I knew he had no money because that lack had been in his thoughts.

“What about his horse?”
"You are right."

I rode back to where he continued to bleed and drew the large working knife I usually kept strapped to my thigh to cut the straps holding his saddle in place. He fell onto the ground, saddle and all. I removed the fittings – the bridle – from the horse’s head and the bit from its mouth. I told it telepathically to go where it would. I saw his sword on the ground, and decided it should not remain there for any new bandit to take up. I dismounted, picked up the sword and drove it deeply into a thick tree.

Then we rode on, turning onto a narrow path that ran through the woods and my mare believed would loop around a hill and lead us back to the road to begin our return journey. Horses know directions very well. Shortly afterwards I detected thoughts ahead. I slipped off my horse and motioned to Tansy to follow. I wished to move silently, but kept stepping on small pieces of wood that broke with popping noises that seemed as loud as gunshots. If this planet had gunshots. Still the people ahead gave no sign of noticing me; they were intently focused on something I could not identify.

Coming closer, I saw why they had not reacted. A young man lay on top of a young woman, his hands on the ground on either side of her shoulders while he thrust his reproductive organ into her matching orifice. He grunted each time. She lay back with her knees raised and did not speak or move. Their clothing was strewn about the small clearing and both were naked.

I had telepathically spied on the sex act, but had not observed it myself. It looked awkward, and while I understood that this was what John Carter desired to do with me I could not see its attraction. The woman’s lack of participation implied that she had been forced to receive his sex organ, but rather than the pain and humiliation suffered by Jeyne and Willow her thoughts sleepily considered whether she should wash her underclothing when they returned to their camp and imagined the Lannister thrusting into her instead of this youth. I was not sure what to make of this, but decided that I needed to respond.

I drew my sword and walked up behind the man, prepared to kill this rapist in the act. Tansy placed her hand gently on my sword arm and said, “Wait.” Instead I placed my sword on the man’s shoulder so that he could see its point. He stopped thrusting. I turned to Tansy.

“Is this not rape?”

“No, this appears to be willing sex.”

“But she is not enjoying herself.”

“That’s because he’s not very good at it.”

The young man started to stammer.

“Ser . . . Ser Jaime?”

“No,” I said.

“But you have his sword.”

“Wait,” Tansy said again. “I know these two. This is Peck, Jaime Lannister’s squire. And he’s fucking Pretty Pia out here in the woods. She grew up in the same castle I did. What in the seven hells happened to your teeth, girl?”

She shook her head, too terrified to speak.
“Where is the Lannister?” I demanded sharply.

“I . . . I don’t know,” the youth said. “He rode off weeks ago with the big ugly bitch and hasn’t been seen since.”

That word again. He yelped as I accidentally cut him on the shoulder. It truly was an accident. At least I think it was.

“So you figured you could get in a quick fuck while your master was gone?” Tansy asked. His thoughts confirmed that this was exactly what he had planned.

“Ser Jaime didn’t care what we did. Black Walder won’t let us share a tent in camp.”

“What of the Mighty Pig?”

“Strong Boar Crakehall,” Tansy clarified.

“They brought him into camp this morning. Strong Boar fought a strange foreign woman who busted him up badly. He said she was a great fighter. Black Walder said the Strong Boar was simply weak.”

“So why did Black Walder not fight this heroic woman?”

“He said she ran away rather than face him.”

“And you believed him?”

“He’s afraid of her. That’s obvious. But anyone should be afraid of someone who can do that to Strong Boar. Can I pull out now?”

“No. This Black Walder leads you now?”

“Yes.”

He pictured the man who had insulted us after the single combat with the Mighty Pig.

“A man with black hair and a pointed face like a small ugly animal?”

“A weasel,” Tansy supplied.

“Yes.”

“And he sent you to find this most powerful woman warrior?”

“No. He wants to head back to River Run as soon as the Strong Boar can be moved.”

“It’s the name of the great castle in this region,” Tansy added. “The home of Hoster Tully.”

So the weasel-man’s name was Black Walder. I should have killed him after the fight with the Mighty Pig. I would correct that error if I encountered him again, if only for slandering me. Yet we benefitted greatly from his stupidity; he had no scouts looking for our camp. Perhaps, I thought, I should leave him alive so he could continue his blundering.

“Where is the rest of the Lannister’s army?”

“I can’t tell you that.” He thought of their camp, but I could not tell where it might be.

“Don’t make her angry,” Tansy said.
“Please,” the girl, Pia, whispered, keeping her teeth hidden behind her lips. “Tell her what she wants to know.”

“They were camped between the tits when Ser Jaime left and they stayed there.”

“Do not make breast jokes. They make me angry.”

“It’s a pair of hills well north of here that horny men call The Tits,” Tansy explained. “Near a small town called Pennytree.”

“Horny?”

“Wishing to have sex. That is, even more than they do all the time. So anything sort of round looks like a breast to them.”

“Does the Lannister have any other soldiers nearby?”

“The Holy Hundred is at Harrenhal.”

“It’s a gigantic castle maybe a few days from here,” Tansy again explained, “mostly ruined. I was raised there; so was Pia. But even mostly ruined leaves a lot of usable castle.”

“Who are these Holy Hundred?”

“That, I don’t know,” Tansy said. “Squeal, squire.”

“There are only eighty-six of them now. They’ve taken vows to fight the enemies of the Faith, but the Faith doesn’t seem to want them. They pray a lot and practice their fancy drills on horseback. We don’t know if they can actually fight.”

He had a great deal of contempt for these holy warriors, apparently learned from his master.

“They are the only soldiers at this Harrenhal?”

“Yes. We took the old garrison of rapists and robbers away with us.”

“Don’t move,” I told him. They had but one horse; I removed its saddle and bridle, and told it to leave. It trotted off through the woods and was soon out of sight. The young man had a very fine sword; I of course kept it. I also took his coins and his clothing, and I kept his exceptional saddle and bridle.

“You can’t leave us like this.”

“I think we just did,” I said. “You may continue fucking.”

We waited until they could not hear us before we started laughing. We could be sure that these two would not admit that they had seen us in the forest.

“I like you, Dejah Thoris. Where did you get that attitude?”

“I was shy and retiring before I met you.”

“Can you read my thoughts as well as theirs?”

I stopped walking and put down the saddle. I had not thought that she knew.
"How did you know?"

"You knew who had raped Jeyne and Willow before anyone answered. You know the ideas behind names and other words but can’t get them exactly right, like calling Strong Boar the Mighty Pig. Just now you accepted that the Holy Hundred were the only other soldiers nearby, when we expected to hear about other patrols. You can be scatterbrained but you don’t make that sort of mistake when it comes to things that involve fighting."

"I allowed you to figure out my secret."

"I share your bed and your meals, and I have a curious nature. I’ve a great deal of experience in seeing through others, and that includes noticing when they change the subject. Can you read my thoughts?"

"You hide them well."

"I was a whore for a long time. It’s an acquired skill. But you really can read theirs?"

"Yes, I can read the thoughts of most people here. Do not tell them."

"Of course not. We’re sisters. Sisters keep each others’ secrets. You can’t read mine at all?"

"Enough to help me understand your speech, the concepts the involuntary part of your mind wants me to understand. I could probably discern more with some effort, but you would likely feel the intrusion."

We saw no one else before we met the first sentries outside the cave complex.

On the next morning, at least a dozen men and three women asked if I would teach them to fight. Slowly, I was gaining acceptance. I figured I only had to kill about twenty more of their enemies before all of them tolerated my presence.

I know myself prone to what the psychologists of Barsoom call “inner considering,” placing overweening importance on how others think of us and then wallowing in regrets and second thoughts over how one might have handled a situation differently. As a princess, I had automatically had the acceptance of others. They had no choice in the matter. And so I had learned to crave actual acceptance; though we of Barsoom can read thoughts, we also learn to shield them, and second- or third-order considerations like motive are among the easiest to mask from others. Deep probing of another’s thoughts is considered extremely rude; in polite company, one takes only what is offered. And a princess must never be rude.

My eagerness to accept Tansy’s offer of sisterhood clearly confirmed my desire. I did not need a sister in this place; while a cultural guide would prove useful in my search for John Carter I would be more effective if I focused on this task and did not become involved with any of this planet’s people or events.

I remained in the meadow after our morning exercises concluded.

"Are you alright?” my new sister asked, concern in her voice.

"My mind is filled with many conflicting thoughts,” I admitted. “I would like to exercise for a while longer to bring some order to them."

She nodded her head, stepped closer to me and looked into my eyes.
“I love you, Dejah,” she said. “I’m glad you’re safe.”

“I love you, too,” I said, reflexively. And I realized that I meant it.

“I’ve never said that to anyone,” she said, “not unless I expected to be paid for it.”

She hesitated.

“I want you to look into my thoughts and see that I mean it.”

“I do not have to, in order to know.”

“Please. It’s important to me. Making someone think they love you, pretending that you love them . . . oldest whore’s trick there is. I want you to know this is no game.”

I did as she asked. With any amount of practice she could have created a false emotion, but this did not seem to be the case. She started slightly when she felt me enter her thoughts. I touched her gently with my fingertips on the side of her face.

“I love you too, Tansy.”

She nodded, walked away and mounted her horse. I resumed the movements. I knew that John Carter had fallen impulsively in love with me, but it had not been mutual at first. We take our time to fall in love on Barsoom, but somehow I had done so here in a remarkably short time. In Helium I would never have spoken with someone like Tansy, much less come to call her sister – I spent nearly a year imprisoned alongside Thuvia of Ptarth before I thought of her as my sister, and she was a princess like me. But Tansy was becoming a part of me already, and I could not bear to think of parting from her.

I did not belong in this place; that was obvious from a brief glance at my skin or eyes. Yet I desperately wanted to belong. I had never truly belonged in Helium; my privilege kept me apart from the rest of my city. Here I had a chance to earn a place, to actually become part of a group. My royal birth meant nothing to these people; many of them doubted my story and some called me “princess” with intentional irony. If they accepted me, it would be because I deserved to be accepted.

Some would never do so, of course. Possibly most. Compared to the Brotherhood’s overall needs, the food Tansy and I ate and the space we occupied took up very little of their capacity. No one went cold or hungry because of our presence. Even so, I would feel better about leaving these people who had taken me in if I could leave them something in return. I may not be a paragon of honor like John Carter, but I have my own pride.

My thoughts returned to Ned Dayne’s proposed attack on the grain convoy. The Brotherhood had many non-combatants to feed, far more than in a comparable community of Barsoom: women here did not usually fight, and there were also children and old people. The people of this place, much as John Carter said of his own world, seemed to grow old and feeble at a much younger age than we of Barsoom.

Seizing a train of wagons would help, but a thought tickled at the edge of my mind. This had bothered me to such an extent that I had sent Tansy back to the caves without me. And then the pieces came together. I leapt atop my mare and headed back to the horse pens.
Chapter Seven

Chapter Summary

In which a singer makes a cameo appearance. Dejah is not a fan.

Chapter Seven

I found Tansy brushing our horses.

“I have an idea,” I told my sister, as I brushed my mare and put her into the pasture. “It will mean killing people, but it will settle our debts with the Brotherhood and strengthen Ned as their leader. He has been our friend and I wish to help him. And then it will be time to leave.”

I sought out the Lord of the Fallen Star. He had just finished sword practice with Gendry. The style of this planet, where they swung madly at one another until one or both tired. We walked some distance into the forest while he mopped his face with a cloth; Tansy trailed just behind us, curious as to what I had in mind.

“You wanted to bring the Brotherhood back together with a victory.”

“Yes, and I’d hoped that yours over the Strong Boar would do that.”

“To some of these people, I will never be one of you. They need a victory in which they can take part themselves, so that it is truly theirs.”

“I agree.”

“And you also need a great deal of food, for the winter you claim will last for years.”

“I agree with that as well. Winter truly is coming.”

“So you say. I know how to do both of these things at once, and settle my debt with your Brotherhood.”

“You’re our guest. There is no debt. Were there any, you more than paid it by fighting Crakehall. Anyone else would lie dead right now.”

And by anyone else, he meant himself, forced to fight Crakehall out of some childish sense of honor. He believed that I had saved his life; I agreed with this assessment.

“You and Gendry have shown me friendship, and you wish to protect these people. I will help you do that, but then I must move on.”

“Very well. What do you have in mind?”

I told him about finding Squire Peck and his information about Harrenhal, and how Tansy had been raised there. She could guide us inside.

“Is this so?” he asked Tansy.
“I’m hearing this for the first time, too,” she said. “But I think so. It’s been a long time since I was there.”

“The Holy Hundred number but 86,” I said. “Eighty-six men cannot hope to even watch, let alone hold, such a massive fortification. There will be many unguarded entrances. We will find one, enter, and hunt down the Holy Hundred like ulsios – the vermin who live in tunnels under the cities of my land.”

“Capture a garrisoned castle?”

“We know the strength of its garrison, and we have a guide. They will not expect either. And a castle holds a great deal of food, you once explained to me.”

“That’s usually true. It’s probably true at Harrenhal too,” he said. He looked at Tansy. “Can you get us inside, my lady?”

“You know I’m no lady.”

“It’s proper address for the sister of a princess.”

“Very well,” she said, clearly pleased. “And yes, I think so. Have you seen Harrenhal?”

“Only at a distance.”

“It’s even larger than it looks. Old King Harren the Black built his castle with a warren of tunnels and passages, and you know how children are. We played in them all. Dejah’s right. There will be many more than 86 men can watch. I can find one that’s not guarded.”

“Do you wish to do this?” he asked Tansy, something I should have done. I had assumed her participation without asking.

“Yes,” she said. “Dejah put her life on the line for the Brotherhood. I feel as though I should do something, too. I’ve really only ever thought about myself.

“I can’t say I like these people. There are some I wouldn’t mind watching starve. But Dejah believes in you, Ned. That you can make something better of them. I trust her judgement.”

“You do?” he asked, looking at me.

“I... It is true, but when did I say that?” I asked Tansy.

“You told me of your ride with Thoros,” she said. “It’s the words between the words that tell the real story.”


He paused, and nodded slowly.

“We’d need every wagon, driver and pack horse we can muster. We might be able to find a few more in the castle. And we’d need to sneak all of that past Lannister patrols.”

“I do not know enough about these lands to help with that,” I said.

“But you would come with us to invade the castle?”

“You will need Tansy to find the entrance. And I will not be separated from my sister.”
“Good. You’re worth a hundred men by yourself in a fight.”

“But I am not Holy.”

“So they will discover.”

The Lord of the Fallen Star divided the Brotherhood’s fighters into three groups. He selected 45 of the best for the attack on the castle. All were men, and all had trained with me in the practice yard. They would have confidence in my fighting abilities, at least, and could be trusted to obey my instructions during battle.

Another group would look after the train of wagons, pack horses and horses known as “mules” that had been cross-bred with a smaller related animal to create a beast of burden that was enormously strong but rather stupid and quite unpleasant. The third group of fighters would remain behind to protect the non-combatants. Thoros of Myr would look after the wagon train, and a man I did not know would see to the camp; Ned’s thoughts revealed a great deal of trust in him.

It pleased me to see Ned’s growing confidence, but I wondered about my sister.

“We are going to kill many people,” I said as we sat alone outside the caves following Ned’s description of his arrangements. “Are you prepared for this?”

“I’ve seen people killed,” she answered. “People I cared about.”

“I know, and I am sorry. But this is different. Instead you will see someone you care about kill others you do not know. It can be a disturbing sight.”

“I’m ready to do my part.”

“That does not include killing. I will not expose you to that, not willingly.”

“Dejah. I am very, very far from an innocent. I’ve not been one since I had 12 years.”

“Tansy. I have killed many people, some here and many more at home. They do not truly die. They stay with you. They...” I floundered for the word.

“Haunt you?”

“Exactly. And I would spare you that.”

“I’ll trust your judgement.”

I did not believe her.

“You have never had a sister before?”

She laughed, softly.

“You’re the one who can read thoughts. I’m supposed to be the one who can read people.”

“And I am the one who changes the subject when she is not comfortable.”

“No, I never have,” she admitted. “I can’t say I’ve loved anyone since I was sent away from the Whents.”
“And now you love me.”

“Yes, I do.”

“I am ignorant of much of these lands, and their ways. I am naïve about other things, whether here or at home. Yet some things I do know a great deal about. I would not have you harmed, in your body or your soul.”

“I know that.”

“Then trust me in this. I may do some terrible things in the days to come, so that you do not have to.”

“Sisters should share their burdens.”

“That does not mean they do the same things. Sisters protect each other. Let me protect you from this, free from worry for you.”

“All right. I trust you,” Tansy said, looking up at the sky. “I think it’s harder to say that to someone than I love you.”

“It is. And I trust you.”

I went over the fight with the Mighty Pig in my mind, and made some adjustments to my exercises and sword practice. I could not be complacent simply because I had won the fight – he had been a very good swordsman, and I had met him exactly where he wanted to meet me, relying on swordplay. My speed and technique had proven superior, but I had been foolish to ignore my own advantages.

Despite his size, I had been the stronger thanks to my mysterious enhancements. He had abandoned his shield strike when his first attempt failed to cause me any injury, and he probably should have tried harder to apply his much larger mass against me. The next time, I might not be so fortunate. Four hundred years of muscle memory would be difficult to un-learn, nor did I wish to do so. Even so, I had to make better use of my new-found physical strength. I had put the Mighty Pig out of action with a powerful kick, not a sword-thrust. It is a common move used by fighting women of Barsoom, and I would need to be mindful of this tactic and use it more often.

And so over the days that followed I slew many trees around our clearing, with kicks high and low and with powerful, level swings of my sword. I felt guilty for taking their lives without need, but rationalized their sacrifice as necessary to my survival. Tansy found my dedication amusing.

“You know you won that fight, right?”

“I did not use all of my strengths. The next time I might not be so fortunate.”

“It’s not the trees’ fault.”

“I am not angry with them,” I said, initially missing the irony. “I am not truly angry with myself, either, only disappointed. I should have kicked him earlier than I did.”

“With your nice soft doeskin boots? If you’re going to go around kicking the shit out of people we need to get you some hobnails.”

“Hobnails?”

“Little pieces of metal, pounded into the sole of a boot to give it strength. Also turns them into a hell
of a weapon. The doormen at taverns and brothels wear them to stomp unruly customers.”

“You can find me such things?”

“If no one has any, I’m sure Gendry could pound some out for you. Every blacksmith makes nails; it’s a simple little piece of metal.”

By the next morning, I was practicing knocking down trees with my new hobnailed boots. They felt a little odd when I walked; I preferred to wear no shoes at all, but that was a sign of my privilege. The stone and gravel of the vast deserts of Barsoom easily destroy one’s feet, and only those of the upper classes can allow their feet to live naturally, without coverings.

While I slaughtered defenseless trees, Tansy showed a great deal of energy as well, throwing herself into our preparations for the attack on Harrenhal. The children in the camp had a small play area filled with sand, in which they happily dug holes and built castles. Tansy constructed a similar sand box on a table within the cave complex, and built a model of Harrenhal upon it using blocks of wood for the buildings and walls. With little figures made of sticks she marked all of the likely guard posts, and explained which towers and buildings remained serviceable and which had been long burned out. Everyone studied the model for hours, and we played out the assault many times by moving the little figures. Ned assigned specific roles to every member of the assault force, and I approved.

I found her model fascinating, and Tansy showed me where she had lived and played as a child. I noted the high walls and concentric rings of defenses; Harrenhal had been built to withstand attack by a ground-based enemy, one without artillery or other high-yield weapons. It had also been built without regard to the third dimension, yet Tansy noted many destroyed or damaged buildings well within its perimeter.

“What happened to Harrenhal?” I asked her.

“Dragons,” she said. “King Harren refused to yield to Aegon the Conqueror, who melted the castle with his great dragon, Balerion the Dread.”

“A dragon?”

“A great winged beast, scaly like a reptile and breathing fire. You don’t have them in your make-believe kingdom?”

“My kingdom is real. I am less convinced of these mythical beasts.”

A flying animal, breathing fire hot enough to melt stone? Stone can be melted fairly easily, of course, but at temperatures as high as those of cutting torches used to shape metal – technology these people clearly did not have. How would a living being contain such heat, much less generate it? What could it possibly use for fuel?

“You don’t believe me.”

“I believe that you are accurately relaying what you have been told. I am less sure that what you were told is itself accurate.”

“You’ll see for yourself. Something melted the stones used to build the towers and walls. After they were in place, too – you can see where the dragonfire cut across different pieces of stone.”

My skepticism annoyed her.
“I do not doubt you,” I said, stroking her upper arm. “I merely prefer to see proof before accepting old stories.”

“There’s a long history of dragons in Westeros. That’s how Aegon conquered all seven kingdoms.”

“Truly?”

“Yes. The old kings kept their skulls in their throne room.”

“They are used as weapons of war?”

“They were. Now they’re dead.”

“All of them?”

“So they say. If Mad King Aerys had had a dragon, surely he would have used it.”

“The king overthrown in the rebellion?”

“That’s him.”

“So they are all dead. That is why Thoros said Azor Ahai would waken dragons.”

“I guess so. You planning to wake them up?”

“I did not even know what he meant by dragons.”

We studied many alternative assault plans, as we still did not know exactly which entrance we would find unguarded. If necessary, I would scale the walls near a gate, slaughter its guards and cut the heavy ropes that held the gate closed. Ned explained how these worked and I grasped the picture in his mind.

Still, we would need more information.

“They will surely have patrols outside the walls,” I told Ned after one session at the sand table. “I will capture a soldier from one and question him.”

“That’s quite risky, and he might not even talk.”

“I am very sneaky. And very persuasive.”

Reluctantly, he assented to my plan. I did not tell him that I would use my telepathy both to find an isolated soldier and to question him once he was in my hands.

The wagon train remained a weak point of the plan, but I saw no way to do otherwise if the raid were to net the supplies Ned said the Brotherhood needed. Otherwise our attack would be a simple act of terrorism, something I knew had value in such a low-intensity conflict, having fought against anti-royal rebels on my family’s behalf. But as far as I could tell the Brotherhood had no political message; while we could gain notoriety by the slaughter of the Holy Hundred, we would do nothing to advance our non-existent cause. For our actions to have purpose, we had to have the food.

As I had tried to tell Tansy, my role in this operation would likely involve my killing a great number of people. And I could not say that the people I killed were any worse than those in whose name I killed them. I had finally understood that John Carter and his comrades fighting for his “Confederacy” on Jasoom/Dirt emphasized their personal honor in order to avoid confronting the
evils of their larger cause. I was not John Carter; such absolution did not come so easily to me.

I could have taken Tansy and my horses and ridden away; no one could have stopped me, and likely no one would have even tried. Some would have been glad to see the last of us. I suppose I felt grateful that Ned and Gendry showed me friendship; neither truly believed me to be a princess. They liked me for my own sake. And so in my eagerness to be liked, I would slaughter their enemies.

We set out for Harrenhal fifteen days later, with the assault group remaining close to the wagon train in case we ran into enemies. The wagons had to travel by road, making them vulnerable, but fortunately Black Walder appeared to have removed the Lannister patrols from this part of the River Lands.

For several days we advanced toward Harrenhal along seldom-used roads, not encountering anyone. On the fourth day, when Ned said we would reach Harrenhal on the following afternoon, I was riding at the front of the column speaking with two of the scouts. Both had been among the deer hunters at the camp and knew these lands well. Tansy had remained with the main column.

I detected three riders approaching; by their thoughts, they were Lannister soldiers scouting for Black Walder Frey but were at the very limit of their assigned area. Two rode side-by-side, with the third a short distance behind. I decided to kill the first two and try to question the third, and told the scouts to remain behind me.

My mare raced around a curve in the narrow track, barely wide enough to allow a wagon to move. That forced the two Lannister riders close together. Brienne had trained this horse well; she shot between the horses of the enemy scouts without hesitation and I cut them down before they could react. The man on the right died with his throat slashed open by my sword held in my right hand; I stabbed his friend in the chest with a dagger I held in my left. He held a lightweight lance in his own left hand, its butt end in a small fitting attached to his stirrup. I left the dagger in his chest and snatched the lance from him.

The third rider spun his horse away and tried to escape; my attempts to contact the horse failed as panic had taken hold. Feeling excited by the chase, my own larger and stronger horse took after him and we steadily gained ground.

As one of royal breeding, I am fully capable of using either hand, and as we drew near I raised myself in the stirrups and hefted the lance I still held in my left hand. It was balanced for throwing, but probably too long for anyone of normal strength to toss accurately. When we had closed to within three horse-lengths I threw it at the fleeing rider; it took him in his lower left back, driving at least two hand-lengths’ of the shaft out of his abdomen. He sank out of the saddle and crashed onto the road, snapping the lance. He screamed in pain when he hit the ground. I pulled up next to him and dismounted.

He lay in the road on his side, panting and bleeding heavily. He had reddish-orange hair and a very round face; he looked to be very young despite the fact that his hair was already thinning.

He would die soon.

“Are you the only patrol on this road?”

His thoughts told him to refuse to answer but he knew he was dying. He thought of his mother, and of days at home watching the sun set over a castle on a hill.

“I . . . I shouldn’t be here. I’m a singer, not a fighter.”
And he thought that no other patrols were anywhere near, and so no help would be coming. I squatted next to him and touched his face; the skin was very soft and his wispy beard looked as though it had never been shaved. He thought me beautiful, and wished he could dance with me.

“I am sorry I killed you,” I said. “You did not belong in the game of thrones.”

“Am I going to die?”

“Yes.”

He moaned softly, and sobbed a little. I stood, picked up the lance head lying in the road and shoved it through his heart; the noises stopped. I wiped my sword clean on his cloak, red with the gold image of the animal known as a lion sewn onto it, and checked his corpse for money; he had more than I expected. I decided to keep his sword, and slung its belt over his saddle. I left the body by the side of the road in case any of the Brotherhood wanted his boots or armor. Then I asked his horse to follow me as I walked my own horse back to retrieve my dagger from his friend’s chest.

The scouts had reached the bodies of the first two Lannister soldiers I had slain and were examining them when I rode up.

“Third one get away?” one asked.

I stared silently at him. He looked away.

“Of course not. He say anything before he died?”

“This was the only patrol this far south. The others have been called away and these three should have left already.”

“Then no one will miss them for a few days yet.”

“Go. Report this information to Lord Dayne. Have him send two more scouts here. Go now.”

The scout mounted up and rode off as I directed; his fellow rifled through the other dead man’s clothing and stood up to hand a small bag of coins and a wooden bottle to me.

“Thank you,” I said. I kept the money and opened the bottle’s stopper to sniff it.

“Blackberry wine,” the scout said. “I tried some. It’s quite good.”

I drank it down and tossed the bottle into the trees. The scout was right; it was very good. The dark-haired man I had killed with my dagger lay sprawled on his back, the weapon lodged deeply in his chest. I placed my foot on his shoulder and pulled it free, and used his cloak to clean it. He also had a few coins and a stick of dried meat, both of which I kept.

“Take these horses back to Thoros,” I told the remaining scout. “Tell him to add them to the pack train.”

“Yes, Princess,” he said. His thoughts showed him somewhat in awe of what I had done to the Lannisters.

On the next morning we veered off the road along a narrow, overgrown track. One of the Brotherhood men had lived here in peacetime, and knew of an isolated clearing in the heavy forests south of Harrenhal where the pack train’s animals could graze. We made a camp without fires and ate a meal of cold meat and cheese, and then I sat cross-legged in the darkness with Tansy, Ned,
Gendry and Thoros to discuss our final moves.

“I will go in the morning and capture a Holy Hundred soldier. If that yields the information we need, we will attack tomorrow night.”

“I’m coming with you,” Tansy said.

“I would have you remain here.”

“I know how to capture one of them without your twisting his head off.”

“How?” Thoros asked.

“I’m a woman. Trust me in this.”

The men did not like it, but I agreed to follow Tansy’s plan. We set out early in the morning as planned and at Tansy’s direction we took up a hidden position in a small cluster of trees along the road between the castle Harrenhal and the small nearby town called Harrentown. Truly, these people had little imagination. Most of Harrentown had been burned by a passing army, but a brothel operated amid the wreckage and a little farm market had been established.

Some people and wagons passed, and once a small group of warriors that we took to be members of the Holy Hundred by their clothing, armor and shields, but there were too many. Finally a lone Holy Hundred warrior came up the road from the town, on foot and walking his horse. Like the others, he wore dark blue livery with white trim and a stylized animal called a mountain lion. His thoughts showed that he was somewhat drunk. We stepped into the road side-by-side, as Tansy had planned.

The man stopped and looked at us suspiciously.

“What do you want?”

“We need your help,” Tansy said in a whining voice I had not heard from her before. “Our horses ran away and we’re lost and scared and . . . and . . .”

She began to snivel as though she would soon cry. I stood quietly next to her, looking at my feet and doing my best to appear small and harmless. I knew we were beautiful, at least by the standards of Barsoom and of John Carter’s Dirt. I had been bred for beauty, after all, and Tansy had become stunning after weeks of regular meals, exercise and bathing. Tansy believed that either the knights’ code of honor or the hope of a sexual reward would mean that no man could refuse to help two vulnerable, beautiful women or even question their presence in the middle of an empty forest.

This one did.

“What are you two doing out here stopping travelers? Do you have more friends in the woods?”

He reached for his sword. I sent a quick, strong command to his horse to rear and the animal obeyed. When the man turned to bring his mount under control, I moved across the interval between us in two quick strides. With my right hand I reached behind my back to where I had moved one of my daggers in its sheath; with my left I clamped down on the wrist of his sword arm. I placed the dagger to his throat.

“We need no assistance. Remain calm and do not speak.”

He nodded. Tansy joined us, bringing my sword. I handed her my cloak, his sword and a dagger he wore on his belt. I pushed him into the forest, taking him far enough from the road so that we could
not be seen or heard. I told his horse to follow, and telepathically called for our horses to join us.

When we reached a likely spot, Tansy took over holding the dagger and I unwound a length of rope I had wrapped around my waist. I tied him securely to a tree in a standing position, then stood back to observe our prisoner. Tansy joined me.

“You are breaking the laws of gods and men,” he spat.

“The first do not exist, so neither do their laws,” I replied. “And the laws of the second are hard to find in these lands.”

“If you’re going to kill me, just do it and let the Stranger do his will.”

“I have no idea what that means, nor do I care. I will ask questions. You will answer them.”

“And if I don’t?”

“She’ll hurt you,” Tansy answered.

“My faith is my armor. You bare-breasted bitches cannot hurt me.”

That word again. And we were heavily-covered by the standards of Barsoom. Even the tops of our breasts and the cleavage between them offended his gods.

I asked questions about the Holy Hundred, their defense of Harrenhal and their routine activities. As he’d promised, he answered only with insults. His thoughts told another story, confirming Squire Peck’s information that 86 of them were present with no other troops, though four were currently too sick to serve. With his return all would be present in the castle.

They did not patrol outside the walls. They instead spent a great deal of their time parading their horses across the drill yard inside the castle in intricate patterns. They had regular prayers, and I asked when these occurred. He scoffed.

“Heathen bitch. You know nothing of the Faith?”

“No. Nor do I care to. Do you all gather for prayers?”

“If you weren’t damned to the seven hells, you would know that.”

His thoughts said that they prayed in small groups.

“When do you all gather together?”

“Do you think I’m stupid?”

“Yes. When do you all gather together?”

“Go fuck yourself.”

We of Barsoom can actually do that, but he intended it as an insult. Yet I picked up a sliver of a thought.

“Tell me about ‘Happy Valley.’”

“How do you know about that?”
He was suddenly frightened. He was willing to let us kill him, but this was a grave secret he was
determined to protect. And by trying not to think of his secret, he of course thought of it.

“You have sex with young boys?”

“I knew it!” Tansy interjected.

“Your entire Holy Hundred is made up of men who prefer sex with boys?”

“All men sin. We ask the Father to forgive us. We fight to earn his forgiveness.”

“And still you keep buggering children,” Tansy said with some anger.

I knew from the reaction many in the camp had to Tansy and I sharing our sleeping furs that sex
between people of the same gender carried a terrible stigma here even though many noble women
shared their bed with a friend. Those who did have sex with a partner of the same gender,
particularly men, were often killed in hideous ways including burning alive. We have no such barrier
on Barsoom; our people find love where they will and I had had female lovers many times.

An even greater revulsion applies to those who have sex with children. There is no real counterpart
on Barsoom, as we mature so quickly that sex between adults and children rarely occurs. The
scientist in me does not allow me to say “never,” but I could not recall hearing of such a thing. I
already knew that sex had a very different emotional meaning for these people because of its intricate
ties to reproduction. Yet another paper I would present if I ever returned to Helium. Instead I focused
on the inquiry at hand.

“Tell me about Happy Valley,” I repeated.

“No.”

But of course, he did. His unspoken answer told of a mythical place where men like him could have
sex with boys at will without fear of punishment or even harsh words. Their Happy Valley was a
regular mass sex event, for which they had already brought a number of boys from Harrentown as
well as some adult male whores. I explained it to Tansy while he looked on with an open mouth and
wide eyes.

“Perverts,” she said, in a hushed voice. “A holy order of perverts holding their perverted holy
orgies.”

“Demon-eyed sorceress! How can you know that? But it’s none of your concern. We do the work of
the Seven.”

“And fuck little boys,” Tansy interjected. “Can we kill him now?”

“Not yet. When is the next Happy Valley?”

“Go to the seven hells.”

“There are no gods, therefore there are no hells. Their event is tomorrow night. Twenty of them will
be on watch, the rest in the baths. Do you know where those are?”

“Yes,” Tansy said, “and I know how to get into them secretly.”

“Good. We are done with him.”

Tansy made to stab him with the dagger which still lay in her hand. I held her back.
“No, you are not a killer. This is my work.”

John Carter would have left him tied where he stood. I am not John Carter. I rammed the man’s dagger through his heart and into the tree, retrieved the rope and left the holy warrior pinned there to die. Once again I freed his horse, but this time I told it to follow us so that it could join our pack train and its return to Harrenhal alone would not alarm the Holy Hundred. We kept his sword.

We rode back to where the Brotherhood’s fighters awaited us much deeper in the forest. The men gathered around us, grouped into their assigned teams. I described what we had learned, with Tansy clarifying details. I did not specify how I had learned these things, and they assumed that I had tortured the prisoner. I let them believe that; most were not bothered and the others forgot any disquiet when I told them of Happy Valley. They muttered angrily. Those among them who had been reluctant to undertake what was, in truth, an attack of murder and terror now became enthusiastic at the prospect of slaughtering the Holy Hundred.

It struck me that had we not captured the Holy Hundred soldier and forced him to divulge his secrets, we could not have invented a story better suited to giving our fighters justification for our actions. My comrades now seemed much more at ease with their mission, but this new knowledge did not ease my own qualms. I knew that I would have killed these strangers had they instead engaged in quiet prayer and good works for the poor. I shook my head sharply as though that would clear my mind, and focused on the upcoming assault.

Tansy reminded us about the huge drain that emptied the bathhouse of Harrenhal; as a child, she and the castle’s other children had climbed up and down it despite the dangers of a sudden outrush of waste water. It had been included in her model, but some of the men still expressed disbelief at the size of the drain. She explained that the baths of Harrenhal were large enough for one to swim across. And the bathhouse contained seven such pools.

“We will infiltrate through the baths,” I told the fighters. “And we will kill everyone we find within. Spare any children. When that is complete, we move to our objectives as planned.”

“What about the sick?” Tansy asked.

The tower including the solar, known as the Kingspyre, had been assigned to a group of six fighters now clustered to my left. I turned to them, unsure they would carry out an order to murder helpless patients.

“We will alter the plan,” I told them. “You six will take my place with the team securing the main gate. I will clear the Kingspyre Tower including the solar.”

“What will you do with the sick?” one asked.

“Do you truly wish to know?” I countered.

“No,” he said quietly.

“This change takes me into the center of the castle instead of the walls,” I noted. “Once the fighting begins, there is no need for secrecy. Call out very loudly if you are in trouble and I will come as quickly as I can. Everyone else continue with your mission. Do not abandon your mission unless I specifically order you to do so.”

They all nodded, some disquieted that I had casually chosen to murder the sick, as though killing the healthy were somehow different. We would leave no survivors to tell who had attacked the castle; Ned believed and I agreed that the Lannister would doubt the Brotherhood capable of such a feat and
would look to blame other enemies. That might provide some extra time for the wagon train to make its escape.

Preparing for nighttime battle, all of us took handfuls of wood ash we’d brought for the purpose and blackened our exposed skin. Tansy and I did so for each other, as we had a great deal of skin showing. The men stopped their own work to watch. I wore my boots, battle harness, skirt and leggings as I had for the fight with the Mighty Pig and Tansy dressed in similar fashion. She once again tied my hair into a ponytail with a bright blue ribbon. I did the same for her.

I was about to commit an act of terrorism, in the name of people I barely knew. And I had no second thoughts. I knew those would come later, in the darkest part of the night when the moons Cluros and Thuria fall out of view, the hour when the demons come.
Chapter Eight

Chapter Summary

In which a cat escapes Dejah Thoris, but once again a singer does not.

Chapter Eight

We walked quietly through the forest, single file, with Tansy leading the way. She had us kneel under the trees when we reached a stone-lined channel; she whispered that this was the outflow from the baths. The walls of Harrenhal loomed above us; I thought the garrison careless to allow the vegetation to approach so close to the fortifications. I scanned carefully with my telepathy but the closest guards on watch were some distance away. We moved slowly and carefully up the drain and gathered under the cover of an overhang where the drain met the channel.

The end of the drain had been closed off with iron bars, with gaps between them wide enough for a child to slip between but certainly not some of our larger fighting men. Years of flowing water had eroded a great deal of the mortar holding the bars in place. I set my feet and pulled out one of the bars, laying it aside as gently as I could to avoid raising a clatter. We crept into the widened opening; this time I led with Tansy and the Lord of the Fallen Star right behind. Gendry brought up the rear. We had left two men to watch the horses at our camp and two more to watch at the drain entry, giving us forty-one fighting men in addition to we four to confront a garrison now numbering 85.

It was very dark; the night outside gave no light. We followed a dim light from the end of the tunnel. The sounds of laughter and music came down from above along with the faint glow. Someone was having a good time.

The drain was tall and wide enough for all of us to comfortably walk upright. It soon narrowed and turned sharply upwards; I motioned for the rest to stay put while Tansy and I climbed up the small tunnel. At its top a wooden barrier closed it off, but other tunnels led off to the sides at steep angles. Tansy pointed into one from which a good deal of light shone.

It led to an overflow, a small rounded opening at floor level sealed off by iron bars to keep an unwary bather from being sucked down the drain. Again, the gaps between them were wide enough for a child but not for an adult. From behind the bars we could see most of the baths. They were filled with naked men, some of them engaged in sex acts with their mouths while others thrust themselves into their partners from behind. This act horrified me when I realized where they were placing their sex organs; we have nothing like this on Barsoom.

As Tansy had described, a single door led into the large stone-walled room; an armed and armored guard stood there by the heavy wooden door which opened outwards. A thin man, the only other person among them still clothed, sat on a tall stool at the far end of the room, playing a stringed instrument and singing.

I tested the bars. I did not think I could pull them free, but it appeared that I could brace myself against the wall of the drain and kick them in. We slid back down the tunnel to where our friends waited.

The men once again gathered around us. I nodded to the Lord of the Fallen Star; it was as we had
expected. He gave the men their final instructions.

“Understand, this is simple murder. If you’re not willing to do that, you need to stay here. The princess will break the overflow open for us and then cross the bathhouse to hold the door. The rest of us are going to kill every adult man in that room and then every Holy Hundred warrior in this castle exactly as we planned. There will be no prisoners. We will spare the innocent if they do not get in our way, but if they resist or try to raise an alarm, kill them. Man or woman. Do you understand?”

Everyone nodded, myself included.

“The princess has command during the battle. Her word is absolute. If she should fall, command passes to me, and then to Gendry. Understood?”

Again, everyone nodded. A couple of nearby fighters reached over and gently slapped my shoulders – by coincidence, a sign of respect on Barsoom as well – while the remainder looked at me and muttered “princess.” With killing to be done, I was one of them. I turned to Tansy and Gendry.

“Tansy, stay with Gendry. Gendry, if any harm comes to my sister you will answer to me. You will not like the questions.”

“As you say, Princess.”

I climbed back up the drain, followed by the Lord of the Fallen Star and a line of Brotherhood fighters. As I had planned, I braced myself at the top of the passage. I looked at Ned; he nodded. The man behind him, a large fighter I did not know by name, thought, nice ass. I shook my head in resignation and kicked the middle iron bar, the tallest of the five blocking the overflow drain. The sound echoed in the tunnel. The bar bent but did not fall. Several men looked over from the baths. My foot hurt, and I realized that I must have a strengthened skeleton to go with my enhanced muscles else my foot would have broken. I kicked the bar again and it came free of the top of the opening but not the bottom. I grabbed it with both hands and wrestled it back and forth until it came loose in my hands. After wriggling through the opening, I stood.

One naked man had come to check on the commotion. I swung the iron bar directly into his face; he fell into a heap on the floor. An uproar started in several of the baths. With both hands I threw the bar at one man trying to climb out of a bath. It struck him across the chest and he collapsed into the water. He did not rise to the surface.

I drew my sword and strode firmly toward the door; I dared not run lest I slip and fall on the wet stones paving the floor. I passed two men standing in the baths with their backs turned to me, each obliviously ramming himself into a small boy. I paused to take off their heads with a pair of two-handed swings of my sword and continued on. The guard at the door came to meet me, lowering the faceguard of his helmet and drawing his sword.

My sword met his and the force of the collision drove him backwards. He slipped on the wet floor and dropped his blade while trying to regain his balance. I placed my left hand on his faceguard and slammed his helmet once, twice, three times into the stone wall. He stopped moving and I let him fall.

I looked back, to see the Lord of the Fallen Star standing in the water of the first bath, methodically cutting down its occupants as they tried to climb out. But he was alone. The broad-shouldered Brotherhood fighter who had admired the shape of my loins was stuck in the drain opening. I pondered whether I should return to clear the pathway or guard the door as planned. Before I had to choose, he disappeared and more slender members of the Brotherhood began to pull themselves
through the gap and into the bathhouse. Despite the screams, the music had not stopped.

Peering around the doorframe, I saw no one in the hallway outside the bathhouse. I pushed the door closed and leaned against it. Soon enough someone started to press on the door, then many others. I held it closed while fists hammered on the other side and the pressure grew. But then it slackened, and soon no one was trying to open it any longer.

When I opened the door, several bodies piled against it fell into the hallway. I saw red blood everywhere: on the floor, staining the baths, even on the walls and ceiling. The color struck me as very odd, one of those inappropriate thoughts that comes to one during stressful moments. Prostrate naked bodies lay on the stone paths between the baths and floated in the pink-stained waters. Tansy stood in a corner with Gendry in front of her cradling his war hammer; he apparently had used it to remove a second bar from the drain cover.

As I joined Ned, the broad-shouldered fighter who had been stuck earlier now dragged the musician over to where the Lord of the Fallen Star and I stood.

“Look what I found. Tom o’ Sevens playing for the buggerers.”

“You know I was spying on them,” the musician told Ned. “I was always with the Brotherhood.” The Lord looked to me. The musician’s thoughts were clear: he was with whoever paid him.

“Kill him,” I said. He spotted my sister and screamed her name.

“Tansy! You’re with them! Tell them I am too! Don’t let this red-eyed bitch murder me.”

She walked over to join us, Gendry right behind and keeping a close watch on her. She spat in the singer’s face when she drew near.

“I trusted you, you son of a bitch,” she said. “And then you left. A week later the wolves came and killed my people: the peaches, the serving wenches, the boy who cleaned the stables. They were looking for me. By name. My father’s name. How did they know who I was and where to find me, Tom?”

From Tom’s thoughts, I understood the “peaches” to be the whores working at her brothel, called the Peach.

“Everyone knew about Sweet Tansy and the Peach. They didn’t need no help from me.”

He wore a long scarf about his neck. I used it to pull his face close to mine; the broad-shouldered fighter kept hold of him and moved with him.

“I will know if you lie,” I said. “Did you betray my sister to the Starks?”

“Everyone knew!” he repeated, terrified. “They was offering gold and would’ve found out anyways.”

He spoke the truth. He had told the soldiers – from a house known as Bolton, in the service of the Starks – where to find Tansy.

“Do you wish him dead?” I asked Tansy.

“Kill him.”

“On his knees,” I told the Brotherhood fighter. He shifted his hands to the singer’s shoulders, forced
him down and stepped away. The singer thought to escape.

“If you run, it will be worse,” I said. “Remain still and you will feel nothing.”

He leapt to his feet, but the Brotherhood man grabbed him and slung him back down. The singer fell to one knee.

“Back up,” I told the fighter, and when he was clear I took off Tom the singer’s head. Tansy’s expression never changed. I could not spare time now to tend to her, but took a moment to touch the side of her face. She looked at me and nodded slightly.

“Gendry, remain with my sister,” I said, and looked at the broad-shouldered man. “Let us go.”

I gestured to Ned and we headed for the doorway, where our fighters were already assembling into their groups. About half of the fighters followed me to the right; the remainder followed Ned to the left. As we ran down the corridor, six Holy warriors charged forward to meet us; the screams from the bathhouse had been heard by a sentry who had alerted these men, the garrison’s ready reserve.

The first man held his shield much too high. Remembering my practice, I kicked the shield, knocking him down, and stabbed him between his eyes as his shield skittered away. I caught the next warrior’s sword on the down-stroke and flung it to the side, then opened his throat on the back-swing. His comrade to his right thought that provided an opening and wildly lunged forward with his sword aimed at my left breast; I blocked his weak thrust with the gauntlet on my left forearm and rammed my sword-point into the base of his throat, smashing the armored gorget, supposedly offering him protection, into his larynx. He collapsed to the floor and gasped for air.

The two warriors behind them locked their shields together; I knocked down the man on my right with a strong kick to his shield. He fell, exposing his friend’s left armpit, and I went to one knee to jam my sword into the weak armor there and through his heart and lungs. I pulled it free and smashed its pommel into the face of the man on the ground.

The last man dropped his shield to make a two-handed overhand swing; I caught it on my sword and forced him back against the wall. Face-to-face, I pinned his sword and both his hands above his head with the sword in my right hand and drew his dagger with my left. I stared through his helmet’s eye-slits into his very young, never-shaven face; he thought my eyes a gateway to hell. I punched the dagger through his armor plate and buried it deep in his belly. His brown eyes grew very wide and he dropped his sword.

“You, um, need any help there, princess?” one of the Brotherhood men asked.

“No,” I said, then remembered my courtesies. “Thank you. All of you gather around me.”

I walked to where the gasping man lay slowly dying, and put my sword through his armor and into his heart. I gave the same treatment to the man I’d hit in the face; he was not moving but still had some activity in his mind. Then I turned to the fighters. My fighters.

For thousands of years, Helium’s royal family has earned the right of leadership. We cannot lead soldiers until we have served as soldiers. I began as a junior gunner on Battleship Number 34, cleaning already-spotless hatches and adjusting perfectly-calibrated targeting scopes. I have led boarding parties onto the blood-slick decks of Zodangan warships and crossed swords with merciless First Born pirates. I knew my role now.

“You all know your missions. You have trained. You have practiced. Trust your brothers. It is time to fight.”
In that moment they loved me without reservation. Each of them would die for me. On this night I only asked that they kill.

We fanned out from the bathhouse into the darkness, each group following its pre-assigned route. I made up one group by myself so that I could attend to the sick in the Kingspyre tower.

As I stalked across a bridge from the Kingspyre’s neighboring tower, a Holy warrior burst out of the doorway ahead of me. His eyes went wide and his thoughts expressed shock. I read in them how terrible I appeared as I loomed out of the night with my skin blackened and wearing dark leather. Blood dripped from my sword, my black ponytail bobbed in time with my steps, and I had a hard, determined look that frightened even me. My red eyes, which I had always considered my best feature, reflected the torchlight and put him in mind of demons.

I reached him as he fumbled for his sword and cut him down with a single, two-handed stroke across his chest. He fell to the stone floor of the bridge and began the work of dying. I had not broken my stride.

I took the steps up to the solar two at a time. A guard stood before its entrance; he raised his sword over his head to strike at me and I took both arms off at the elbows, again with a single stroke. I was filled with a single-minded ferocity and surprised once more by my strength. He stared mutely at the stumps while I stabbed my sword’s point into his throat.

The door had been closed and barred. I kicked it in, and it gave easily, coming off its hinges to crash onto the floor. My foot still hurt. Inside four men lay in the beds that the wealthier of these people use for sleep, while three women in long gray dresses and odd-looking head coverings huddled in a corner. I used some of the bedding to wipe my sword somewhat clean, and sheathed it. This was dagger work.

A fourth woman, this one dressed in more colorful fashion with her gray-streaked brown hair uncovered, burst into the solar from a back room as I started cutting the throats of the sick men.

“Stop this at once!” she shouted. “You cannot do this!”

“Be silent,” I said as I killed the third man. She stepped in to block my path to the fourth.

“I will not let you do this,” she said in her very high-pitched, almost screeching voice.

“It is not for you to say,” I said, and pushed her aside. She fell onto one of the beds, but got up and ran to the shattered door as I killed the last man. She leaned into the hallway and began shouting.

“Ser Bonifer! Help us! Murder! A red-eyed demon is murdering us!”

I walked to the doorway and grabbed her roughly by the arm. I pushed her against the wall.

“You must be silent,” I told her again.

“No! Murder! Murder! Ser Bonifer! Help us!”

I pinned her against the wall, my left forearm across the top of her chest right below her throat. I placed the point of my dagger over her heart. She was very thin with small, low breasts and I could see the clear outline of her ribs and collarbones on the part of her body not covered by her clothing. A small spot of blood began to stain the white stripe across her dress where my dagger pricked her skin.

“I will not tell you again.”
Her face was oddly uneven, as though one side were slightly higher than the other. I looked into her eyes. They were bluish-gray and very wide. Her thoughts broadcast only terror. She screamed incoherently. She kept screaming until she began to cough and a small trickle of blood flowed out of the corner of her mouth. Her eyes seemed to become a deeper blue. Her face became less severe, and her hair now appeared reddish-brown rather than the wood-brown-and gray I had seen before.

“You killed me,” she said softly, a bewildered tone in her now-familiar voice.

I pulled my dagger out of her chest; I had not been aware that I had pressed it through her heart. She slowly slumped to the floor. Blood pooled beneath her still form; her hair now appeared brown with gray once again and her face took on its original shape. Her last thoughts dwelt on a lover she had betrayed in her youth; I shut them out as I ripped away the top of her dress to clean my dagger, only realizing that exposing her breasts would shame her after I had already done so. I strode back down the steps, sheathing my dagger and drawing my sword again. Despite the odd apparition my mind felt clear, with only a cold determination. Fueled by Tansy’s rage over the singer’s betrayal, I had rarely felt more ready to kill.

A Holy warrior, fully armored except for his helmet, ran upwards to meet me. I kicked him in the chest and sent him sprawling back down the steps; he fell onto his back on a landing. His sword clattered down the stairs. He had close-cropped yellow hair and he seemed very young, though I have a hard time judging the ages of people here.

“Please. Mercy.”

“No.”

“Father receive me . . .”

I tried to stab him through the heart, but he crawled awkwardly backwards in a vain attempt to escape and my sword went into his belly. I twisted it, pulled it free and left him moaning in pain and self-pity.

“Perhaps your gods will take you to Happy Valley.”

When I exited the tower back onto the bridge, an archer stood at its parapet with nocked arrow, preparing to loose it at someone below. He did not see me and I stepped to him quickly; he wore no armor but instead a thick quilted tunic. I shifted my sword to my left hand, grabbed the back of his tunic and threw him over the edge. He screamed as he fell. Very soon the screaming stopped.

At the other end of the bridge, a second archer heard the scream and turned toward me. He already had nocked an arrow, and he raised his bow and loosed as I ran toward him. It flew off into the night, far wide of me. I reached him before he could nock another and he dropped the bow, turning to run into the tower. I chased him down the stairs into the cellar where he disappeared into the darkness. Pulling a torch out of the sconce at the bottom of the stairs, I moved carefully forward and found him on his knees at the end of a corridor lined with what appeared to be empty prison cells.

“Please don’t kill me.”

I killed him.

I encountered no one else as I left the tower and met the Lord of the Fallen Star in the castle’s courtyard. Gendry and Tansy stood with him. Gendry reached for my sword; I handed it over and he inspected it, making sure his new grip and crossbar had withstood heavy use, and then began to clean it with a rag. Still unsettled by my vision in the solar, I reached for my sister, pulling her into
“You are well?” I asked softly into her hair.

“I’m getting there,” she murmured back. “You were right. It was disturbing to see you kill someone.”

“You wish I had not?”

“I asked you to do it, and I meant it.”

I released her and stroked the side of her face.

“The sick are accounted for?” Ned asked, breaking my reverie.

“Yes. Also six fighters outside the baths, a warrior on the bridge, another at the door of the solar, a third on the stairs, two archers on the bridge and one woman who interfered.”

“Regrettable but necessary.”

“The castle is secure?”

“We’ve cleared the walls and the barracks. A few survivors went into hiding and we’re hunting them down now.”

“Their leader?”

“Killed in the baths. We have no way of identifying anyone else. We likely killed some of the male whores as well.”

He turned to Tansy. “I’m sorry,” he said, his first acknowledgement of her previous life.

“Occupational hazard,” she said. “And no need to apologize. That’s no longer my life’s work.”

Ned looked at her strangely. His startled thoughts revealed that she had stopped using the rough peasant speech of her whore persona.

“Prisoners?”

“Not many. The Holy Hundred didn’t have camp followers. There’s a cook who’s been here forever – Lady Tansy vouched for him. And an old blacksmith.”

“And our men?” I remembered to ask.

“A few injured, none killed. Your information was correct. The Holy Hundred did not fight well.”

“I noticed this also.”

“There may be some survivors holding out in the tunnels below the castle. Can you help our men search them?”

I nodded. Tansy made to follow; I stopped her with my hand on her chest.

“An ulsio is never more dangerous than when it is cornered with no hope.”

“It’s the same for rats,” she said. “I know those tunnels. You can use my help.”

Two Brotherhood fighters went with us; I made Tansy stay directly behind me and the two men
followed her. I told them that I had exceptional hearing and could detect people breathing if there were no other sounds about.

And while I could not actually hear people breathing, I could hear them thinking, and there were two people underneath the Harrenhal kitchens. A wide stair led downward from the back of the large cooking area; we set off down the stairs with the Brotherhood men carrying torches while I kept my sword in my hand. Both had been with me outside the bathhouse and remained somewhat stunned by what they had seen; they gladly allowed me to go ahead of them.

“Where does this lead?” I asked Tansy.


As we drew closer, I could garner more details from the simple and child-like thoughts of the two people in this “warehouse.” They were not trying to hide; they apparently slept on the warehouse floor and seemed puzzled that no one had yet asked for supplies for an expected feast.

We entered the large, torch-lit underground chamber and found it filled with wooden racks holding sacks, barrels and boxes. A short, round and very dirty man dressed in what appeared to be a discarded flour sack shuffled toward us, pointed at my breasts and shouted, “Tits!”

A second man, taller and thinner but likewise dirty and wearing a sack with holes cut in it for his neck and arms, stood behind him and pointed at Tansy.

“Tits!” he cried.

He moved alongside his friend and the two of them stiffly swung their arms back and forth, alternately pointing at me and at my sister and shouting, “Tits! Tits! Tits!”

“Should we kill them, Princess?” one of the fighters asked.

“No kill Harpo!” the shorter man sneezed. “Kill Tom, let Harpo live.”


“By the gods,” Tansy said, “they’re idiots.”

“That is not a kind thing to say,” I scolded gently. “They did not ask to be this way.”

“No patronize Harpo!” the fat man said. “Harpo speak for self.”

“Calm yourself,” I said. “We will not kill you, if you work for us. If you do not work, you will die.”

“Work!” they both said together.

“Take these sacks of grain to the castle courtyard and load them on the wagons there. Do not stop until all of them are in the courtyard and on the wagons. Courtyard. Wagons.”

I turned to one of the fighters.

“Keep watch on them,” I said. “If they do anything other than carry grain, kill them.”

“Yes, Princess.”

The three of us now continued on our tour, with Tansy pointing the way. I found one Holy Hundred
fighter cowering in a dark corner; I held his torch while our remaining fighter dispatched the terrified holy warrior.

After several more hours of walking, I was satisfied that the Holy Hundred had been exterminated. We returned to the courtyard to find that Ned had already sent word to Thoros to bring the wagons and pack animals inside the castle; for now, my part was done.

Leaving the Lord of the Fallen Star and our Brotherhood companion, we returned to the kitchens. The old cook was overjoyed to see Tansy and despite the late hour made us a wonderful spread of roasted meats, fresh bread and steamed vegetables. I had never had such delicious food and ate a great deal of it, with both wine and the wonderful golden-brown drink known as “ale.”

Afterwards we sought out Tansy’s childhood chambers for some sleep. As we walked through the stone-lined corridors, I detected a strange thought pattern. It was not human, but it was telepathic, and it probed for human thoughts.

It was not as strong a telepath as I, allowing me to monitor its probes for a time while shielding myself from detection. It sought a human to enslave, that it could force into servitude. Apparently I had killed its former servant, the mousy-haired screaming woman, and it desired a replacement. It detected Tansy and selected her as its prey, advancing toward us up the corridor. I drew my sword.

“Dejah, what is it?”

“Some sort of monster. It is not human. It can also read thoughts. I have never encountered its like.”

“What does it want?”

“To enslave you. I will protect you.”

I motioned for my sister to remain behind me as I cautiously rounded what I believed to be the last corner between ourselves and the monster.

I saw the beast. It was very small, perhaps half again the length of my forearm, and extremely ugly. A round head held two pointed ears, while a long fur-covered tail whisked back and forth. It was covered in orange fur, highlighted by yellow stripes.

Serve me, its thoughts broadcast at me.

Die, I responded.

It turned and ran in an odd loping gait. I gave chase. I pounded down the corridor with Tansy coming after me.

“Dejah!” she shouted. “It’s just a kitty! It’s innocent!”

It ran into a chamber; I could see gray outlines of a bed, table and chairs in the flickering light of the torches in the corridor. It had hidden under the bed.

You’ll never catch me, its thoughts taunted. The other female will serve me.

I grabbed the bed and flipped it over.

Die, I repeated.

The monster leapt to the open window. It arched its back and emitted a horrible hissing noise, showing me its small but sharp teeth. If I came close, it intended to leap for my throat.
Choose your death, I broadcast at it. Out the window or be cut into pieces.

Tansy had arrived at the doorway.

“Dejah, it’s just someone’s pet.”

“It is a monster. It seeks to enslave you with its mind-control powers. It will shit in a box and force you to clean it. And it wishes you to bring it fish.”

It leapt out the window. Its thoughts cursed me until it reached the ground. I put away my sword and looked out the window in search of its broken corpse. Somehow the monster had landed safely on the stone pavement far below and now rose to its feet and began to lick its paws.

“It was just a cat, Dejah. They’re harmless. I wonder why it jumped like that?”

“I do not know,” I lied. “But I do not like cats.”

We encountered no further monsters as I followed Tansy to her childhood chambers. They had since been used again, most recently by some now-deceased holy warrior. He had left behind a holy book and some holy objects; we tossed them all into the holy fire we built in a stone fireplace.

This would be my first night on this planet in an actual bed chamber; I found it somewhat austere but comfortable. The bed had a large rectangular mattress filled with the large, fluffy hairs of birds, known as “feathers.” It was very soft and felt very soothing under my tired body. I curled myself up next to Tansy and slept very soundly; my physical exhaustion overcame my racing thoughts, something I have rarely enjoyed at the moment of sleep.

Tansy still slept when I awoke; I left her and went to the castle courtyard where a great deal of activity was already taking place. Thoros had moved the wagon train and pack animals inside the big gates. While his men – and the two addled individuals we had found under the castle – carried sacks and barrels of food out of the castle depths to load them in the wagons and arrange them on the backs of horses, the Lord of the Fallen Star supervised the collection and stripping of the dead. Their heads were removed for mounting along the walls and the corpses stacked in the courtyard for the Lannister to find.

“There’s a dead woman, too,” one of the Brotherhood fighters said. “Looks to be noble. What about her?”

“Like the others,” I said. “Take her head, strip her and add her to the pile.”

The Lord of the Fallen Star looked at me. I nodded, and then looked away. He said nothing more, and I did not wish to know what he thought.

Weapons and armor taken from the dead went into additional wagons found in the castle, along with some of the castle’s enormous stores of food and other supplies. A string of over one hundred matching gray horses would be taken back to the caves as well, each bearing a load of food. Harrenhal had a reputation as a haunted place – one occupied by the spirits of the dead in the beliefs of these people – and we hoped that the horrific sight of the mounted heads and stacked bodies would demoralize the Lannister’s men.

Ned shook his head as he watched the two warehouse workers become tangled and begin cursing one another.

“Do not harm them if it can be avoided,” I said. “They are not capable of making their own way in
“Who is?” he countered. “But I understand. We’ll give them a place and put them to work. If we send them away they’ll surely die.”

“Thank you,” I said. “They are innocents. Annoying, but incapable of evil.”

“Or good, either. But we won’t make their infirmity worse.”

We do not have such people on Barsoom. I knew, in theory, that they could be hatched. But the Breeding Council’s inspectors check every egg carefully, and those with imperfect embryos are destroyed well before hatching. It is a harsh standard, and in the past provoked some heated controversies. I assume that imperfect hatchlings are likewise destroyed; I had never thought to investigate and few others seem inclined to ask such questions, either. What was the moral choice in this matter? I did not know.

While I pondered this, I watched one of the fighters tear down the dark blue banners with white lion symbols that flapped from the castle’s towers. He threw them down to another fighter who shoved them into a fire burning in a large metal container at the edge of the courtyard.

I had no doubt now. This planet had definitely changed me. Dejah Thoris of Helium had been a hard woman when necessary; Dejah Thoris of Jasoom was simply a hard woman. Would John Carter even want the new Dejah Thoris?

I loved Tansy, with fierce intensity. I felt friendship for Ned and Gendry. But everyone else I had encountered on this planet could have been one of the disposable cleaning cloths we use on Barsoom after eliminating waste, for all that I cared whether they lived or died. I had killed men who attempted to surrender, and murdered a terrified woman for screaming. I knew that I would see those other eyes in her eyes for a very long time.

I needed to leave this place before it changed me even further. It was time to begin my search.
Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

In which Dejah Thoris makes a promise.

Chapter Nine

“I will not be separated from my sister.”

I have never liked hearing my own words thrown back at me. Having finished bathing and drying myself, I sat on the edge of the bed and continued cleaning the wood ash from my harness.

“This is something I have to do alone.”

“Very heroic of you. What did you see last night?”

“What does that mean?”

“Something happened to you. While you were alone, killing the holy warriors in the solar. What did they say to you?”

“Nothing I have not heard before.”

“Then what did you see?”

I thought to lie, but could not imagine anything believable.

“I saw you. In the woman I killed.”

“Dejah,” Tansy sat next to me on the bed, wrapping her arms around me and pulling me close. “I would rather die with you than live alone. My life was a little piece of hell before I met you. I’ll gladly die before I go back to it. If you’re going to leave without me, then please just run that burning sword through my heart first. It would be a kindness.

“We’re sisters now. And that means we stay together. No matter what happens.”

“We are sisters,” I repeated. “And so I would not take you into danger.”

“You truly do not understand this place,” Tansy answered, letting go of me. “I’ve told you before. These men fear you. They fuck me. You won’t be out of sight before three or four of our brothers-in-arms are pushing me onto my back and shoving their cocks into me. They saw what you did to Tom o’Sevens, so then it’s a blade across the throat for Sweet Tansy to make sure she won’t tell the killer princess.”

Her face reddened and she spoke even more quickly, with a husky, emotional tone underlying her words.

“You seem to think that all men and all women are equals, just because you’re stronger, tougher and smarter than any man. It’s not that way for the rest of us. There’s a saying we have, for a really good reason. ‘Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them.’”
She slowed a little, and leaned back from her intense, forward posture.

“You might take me into danger, it’s true. But as sure as all seven hells, you would leave me in danger if I stayed behind. Do I have to beg you to protect me?”

I dropped my leathers and returned her embrace. I felt deeply ashamed; hot tears ran down my face.

“I am truly sorry. I was thoughtless and cruel. I would never wish to make you feel that you had to beg your sister for anything. I love you.”

“Then take me with you.”

“Always. I will never leave you.”

I had experienced the thoughts of the girls Jeyne and Willow as they died, as they thought of the horrible pain and humiliation of their rapes. The violation, as someone else took their body and made their own will meaningless. It had shocked me then, and recalling their memories still made my hands physically shake. I could not imagine that happening to Tansy. And yet, I could. By her words, it was clear to me that it had happened to my sister at least once. To someone I loved. Unbidden, my mind replaced Jeyne with Tansy in those vivid, horrific images, and I began to weep uncontrollably.

“Dejah,” Tansy said, now concerned. She stroked my face. “You didn’t know. It’s all right. Truly. Calm down. What is so terrible?”


“Dejah. I’m fine. As long as I’m with you, I’m fine.”

I looked at her, staring into her wide blue eyes to be sure she understood the depth of my conviction.

“No one will hurt you,” I said, my voice raspy from the sobbing. “I will kill anyone who even thinks to harm you.”

“You’re scaring me.”

“This is who I am.”

Well-rested, I toured the castle as Tansy showed me where the dragon had melted walls and towers with its fiery breath. As she had said, the damage had clearly come after the stones had been put into place. I did not know of any weapon of Barsoom that could cause such damage; a cutting torch could do so but the operator would have to stand directly in front of the stone, making it useless in battle. I had read papers proposing directed-energy beams that might have had similar results.

My eyes, and apparently those of many from this land as well, found Harrenhal a depressing place. We saw the remnants of a pit used to torture animals that had been dug into the side of the courtyard fairly recently. But the impression went beyond that. The dark gray stone used in its construction seemed to absorb light and sound. In addition to the melting, many of its buildings had simply collapsed from obvious lack of maintenance. And it was gigantic; I estimated that it could comfortably house 20,000 people, and would require a garrison of at least 4,000 soldiers to properly man its walls, fighting positions and gates.

All of that seemed to imply that this had once been a much richer and more heavily populated land.
“Did you have a happy childhood?” I suddenly asked Tansy as we sat the roof of the Kingspyre tower and looked out far over the surrounding countryside, seeing the ruins of Harrentown, a large lake with an island in the middle, some farms and forests. It was a beautiful view, despite the odd shades of green. I did not see many signs of habitation. Few people apparently came up here, but someone had repaired the wooden ladder leading to its hatch within the last century, and the surface seemed solid enough to hold us.

“That’s an odd question.”

“You have not been happy for a very long time.”

“And you wondered if I ever had been?”

“Yes.”

She thought for a moment.

“I was happy here,” she finally said. “I know it seems a dreary old pile of rock. And it is. But I had friends, I was loved, I had no real cares.

“You can’t return to childhood. Once you leave the garden, the gate shuts behind you forever. I left it too early, but that’s true for most people in these lands.”

“It is with us as well,” I said. “I am sorry you had to leave the garden.”

“The time always comes. At least this time when I leave, I won’t be alone.”

“I was foolish. I will never leave you alone.”

“I know.”

We rode out with the last of the Brotherhood on the second morning after the attack. The two addled fools from the warehouse, the cook and blacksmith, the three oddly-dressed nurses and a dozen boys rescued from the baths all left with the Brotherhood; Harrenhal would be home only to the dead until someone found the corpses.

The wagon train veered off onto a stream bed leading into the woods a short distance down the road leading out of Harrenhal. The going was very tough, with men having to dismount and push the wagons across many obstacles, but that hard effort meant that no hoof- or wheel-prints would remain to give away their route. Tansy and I dismounted to watch the work and speak with Ned and Gendry.

“I cannot thank you enough,” Ned said. “Many people will live through the winter because of you.”

“Many people died here because of me.”

“I am grateful nonetheless.”

He took my hand and raised it to kiss it, but I pulled him close in an embrace instead.

“Formalities end when you shed blood together,” I said. “Be well.”

Tansy allowed him to kiss her hand, while I embraced Gendry as well. He blushed when he felt my breasts press against his chest. Tansy embraced him and, seeing his red face, kissed him.
“You’ll find that girl you want to kiss,” she said. “And she’ll be very lucky.”

We mounted up and rode away from Harrenhal. This road was wider than any I’d yet seen on this planet, deeply rutted by wagon traffic and obviously rarely if ever maintained. The sun shone brightly and many of the small flying creatures Tansy told me were called “birds” sang happy songs, all in seeming mockery of the carnage we left in our wake.

Not long after setting out we came to what Tansy said was called the Kingsroad, the most important thoroughfare in the land. Fittingly, it was likewise a deeply rutted dirt track. With war to the north and war to the south, either direction seemed an equal choice to seek John Carter.

“Where does the road lead?”

“To the north, it crosses the River Road. To the west that leads to River Run, the seat of my father. To the east it goes to a land known as The Vale.”

“The Vale?”

“A poetic term for valley.”

“I suppose there is a great valley there?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“What lies beyond that crossroads?”

“Eventually the road reaches a land known as the North.”

“Poetic.”

“You come from a city called Helium.”

“I concede your point. What is to the south?”

“The land becomes much richer farmland, and actual people live there. It eventually reaches the capital, a very large city called King’s Landing.”

“Do you wish to go to River Run?”

“There’s nothing for me there.”

“Are they not your family? You could be made legitimate.”

“That’s unlikely. But even were I not a bastard, I’ve been a whore. Once that line’s been crossed, you can never go back. A whore can never be a lady. Besides, you’re my family now. The Tullys never were; the Whents were for a time but no one seems to know what happened to them. I assume the Lannisters murdered them so they could give the castle to their followers.”

“Then we will go south. Who rules in King’s Landing?”

“Queen Cersei, First of Her Name.”

“We shall pay her a visit, and ask of John Carter.”

I now doubted that I had come to Dirt, at least not in the present time. John Carter had described steam-powered railroads, and Ulysses Paxton had confirmed that these had been greatly improved
since John Carter left their planet and that flying machines as well as combustion-powered wheeled vehicles had begun to appear. Our own observations of Jasoom confirmed networks of paved roads and railroads crossing every continent. Surely this realm’s greatest thoroughfare would at least have been paved in that case, and supplemented by steel rails. I saw no sign that either had ever existed here.

I had landed among barbarians, and I fit right in.

For the main thoroughfare of the realm, the Kingsroad also lacked both traffic and amenities. Much of that could be attributed to the recent warfare, which apparently had started after some action by Tansy’s hateful older half-sister, the now-dead-for-good Stone Heart. But even counting the burned-out buildings that formerly housed taverns, inns, stables and similar businesses there did not seem to be enough of an infrastructure here to have supported much commerce during times of peace. Trade dies when money rests in the hands of only a few.

Those few were the high nobles and the religious elite. On Barsoom many of the wealthy (or more accurately, many of their well-paid apologists) claimed the mantle of “job creators” who would uplift the masses, if only they could control even more of the land’s wealth. Though according to Tansy most of the rich in Westeros did not attempt to cloak their vile greed and disdain with claims of serving the greater good, and simply took what they wanted because they could.

We had taken vast amounts of gold from the coffers of the Holy Hundred, because we could, and Ned had insisted that Tansy and I take several fat sacks of coins. We’d also fitted ourselves with cloaks, tunics and other items from the clothing we found in Harrenhal. We had plenty of money, we actually looked somewhat respectable, and so we stayed in inns whenever possible.

The first we entered had roasted a sheep. We took an empty table at the very back next to a pleasantly crackling fire and I asked for a platter of sheep meat, which I learned is called “mutton” for some reason, and a pitcher of ale. Tansy had some mutton as well. Dark, rich reddish meat with a musky taste; I savored every bite. There were also roasted potatoes, another gift of the non-existent gods. While I ate my mutton, a man sat across the table from me, next to Tansy.

“Sweet Tansy, are you working here now? Will this do?”

He lay a silver coin on the table, and began running his hand up and down her thigh. I did not need to read his limited mind to grasp his meaning. I wiped the mutton grease off my face with the cloth provided.

“You will take your hand off my sister, take your coin, and leave.”

He was a somewhat fat man, with brownish hair that only covered the back part of his skull and a brownish beard tied into a point. The contempt I felt for that beard shamed me, but only for a moment.

“Oh, and what about you? You work with Tansy here, Redeye? I wouldn’t mind you two doubling up on me.”

He laid a second silver coin on the table. I reached across the table and grabbed his beard-braid to pull his face close to mine. I held the knife I’d been using to cut the mutton in front of his eyes. Juice dripped slowly down the blade. It made me hungry. I hoped I would not get his blood on the knife, as I had not finished using it on the mutton.

“I will not repeat this again. Take your hand off my sister. Do not reach for your knife. Take your
“I’d rather stay here and do some business with my girl.”

“Have you ever raped anyone?”


His thoughts said otherwise; he was loathsome but no rapist. Therefore he would live.

I cut his beard off with the knife. He fell back onto the bench and, his face having turned bright red, jumped to his feet and reached for his own blade. I punched that supremely punchable face, trying not to kill him; his red nose broke and he collapsed onto his back. I held the platter of mutton and pitcher of ale in place as his feet struck the bottom of the table, but he spilled my drink and Tansy’s. The innkeep rushed over.

“What’s happening here?”

“He drank too much,” I said. “Please bring us more ale and mutton. And a clean knife. He is paying.” I handed the innkeep the two silver coins, and tossed the ridiculous little beard into the fire.

“Is he dead?” Tansy asked. “I always hated him.”

“Not yet. Are you going to finish that?”

We could not always secure a bed in an inn and spent a number of nights huddled under trees. There were scavengers about called wolves; less fearsome than most creatures of Barsoom but deadly enough if a pack found us while we slept. Fortunately our telepathic senses never truly sleep, and have evolved to alert us of the approach of enemies including the fierce predators of Barsoom. I awoke several times each night to drive away wolves who wished to attack our horses. It was not hard; they instinctively feared me. They were wise to do so.

After one night of camping under the strange stars, we bathed in a small stream running through the woods. It was a beautiful little enclosed valley, and I was watching the flying animals – birds – with fascination and wondering why we did not have more of these on Barsoom, given our much lighter gravity. Another paper was taking shape in my mind. When I looked down, there was a thin stream of red blood in the water. Tansy was bleeding. I became very upset.

“Are you hurt? Are you ill?”

“It’s nothing. Just my moon blood.”

“Your what? What can stop it?”

“Nothing. It’s a natural part of a woman’s life, Dejah. A woman of this world, anyway.”

She looked at me.

“I deserve the truth now.”

“I will give it. First tell me that you will recover.”

“Yes, like I said. It’s natural. A woman carries eggs, and once every cycle of the moon your body flushes them clean, including blood. That only happens in healthy women. If you’re too lean, like I probably am now, you don’t always have moon blood and probably can’t become with child. I have
moon blood far less often than most women because I’ve taken so much moon tea over my life. Plus it lessens as you age, and at one-and-thirty I may be approaching that stage.”

“Moon tea? Become with child? This has to do with live birth?”

“Dejah. Just how ignorant are you?”

“Deeply. I am only an egg. I just fell out of the sky one moon cycle ago.”

“I believe that. Let me get dressed and I’ll explain. And then you’ll explain. You’ll explain everything.”

We walked back to our little campsite, and Tansy told me how women of this world carry their eggs within, and the men apply sperm during sex, which may or may not quicken the egg. As I understood her – and it was difficult to follow for one totally unaware of the process – every woman has a cycle that matches the orbit of this planet’s moon; she is most fertile during the middle of the cycle, and at the end of the cycle if she has not quickened her egg is expelled along with blood. Women place rags in their underclothes – the rags I had found in Brienne’s saddlebags – to absorb this flow.

That gives a woman little control over child-bearing, other than refusing to have sex. And I had already seen how difficult that was for women here: men wanted, and expected, sex constantly. Rape, which clearly had little to do with sex and everything to do with domination, seemed common.

And women also wanted sex, they just didn’t demand it as boorishly as many of the men. Actually, they had no means to demand it, and usually could only satisfy the demands of men. The women had no power over the most basic biological function of their lives.

“This is horrible.” I was truly shocked. “How can you live like this?”

“We want children. We want them desperately.”

They must receive some sort of hormonal reward for carrying a child. I wished to study this process in depth; it would answer so many questions about the origins of the four-limbed races of Barsoom. And it was so radically, bizarrely different from our own form of childbirth. We females have full control over our ovulation. When we wish to produce an egg, we do. It then incubates in a hatchery, receiving a nutrient bath that allows it to grow. When ready, the child breaks free and emerges.

I recalled Brienne’s imagery of a newborn child.

“How large do you get when bearing a child?”

“About so,” she said, holding her arms wide in front of her.

“Is it painful? How long does it last? And how does the child emerge?”

“Apparently not when you carry them, though it’s damned inconvenient. It lasts nine moon cycles, usually. The child comes out the same way it went in. That part is very painful, and many women die in the process.”

“Apparently? You have no children yourself?”

She looked away, and I sensed pain.

“I am sorry, I do not wish to cause you distress.”
“Like I said, we want children. It’s part of our being, and I wanted them too. But part of being a whore is to avoid carrying a child. To do that, we drink a concoction called moon tea. I drank it regularly, and I made it for the girls who worked for me. That always made my nickname a little bitter: the tansy flower is an important part of moon tea.

“Anyway, if you take too much moon tea over time, it interferes with your ability to carry a child. Many women miscarry. That means their child dies inside them. I’ve never even reached that stage. I sometimes think I’m at peace with that but obviously I’m not.

“We were the only two women on the Brotherhood’s expedition, which rescued twelve small children. No one asked us to even look at them. Did that strike you as odd?”

“No. Should it have?”

“Women here are seen as nurturing. We bear the young and care for them. None of those men saw us that way.”

“They know me, and for the most part fear me, as an emotionless killing machine. And I thought the nurses we captured cared for the children we found.”

“That’s not the point. I know those men want me for sex. Some of them have had me. But none of them saw me as a mother. As a complete woman.”

She sighed.

“I think I’ve always known that you don’t understand these things. That’s why you don’t judge me, and I love you for it.”

“I wish I could do something for you.”

“You can. Stop avoiding telling me your real story. Right now.”

By now we had struck our camp and saddled up. As our horses walked southward I pondered my story. I knew that telling Tansy everything might cost me my sister, but I owed her the truth. Anxiety held me in its nerve-jangling grip as I spoke, and I felt light-headed, on the verge of panic.

“I am Dejah Thoris, Princess of Helium, daughter of Prince Mors Kajak and Princess Heru, granddaughter of King Tardos Mors. I am the wife of John Carter, who commands my city’s military forces and those of our allies.”

“All right.”

“Helium is a real place, but it is not in Sothoryos.”

“All right.”

“All this,” I gestured around us at the empty pastures on either side of the road and the forests beyond, “is part of a planet, with a name I do not know. The Eastern Continent, the Southern Continent and Westeros all lie on an immense ball of rock that hurtles through an empty void. We call such a ball of rock a planet.”

I used John Carter’s word, planet, as I did not know if these people had such a term in their language.

“There are many planets in the universe.” Again I used John Carter’s term. “What we call the vast
expanse out beyond a planet’s shell of air. An unknown number, at least to us. Every star in the night sky is a sun just like that one, plus many more too far away to be seen, and most of them are circled by planets. As I said, I do not know the name of the planet on which we stand now. But Helium lies on a different planet, a planet we call Barsoom.

“Our people are very similar to yours, but not exactly the same. We lay eggs outside our bodies, for one thing. And we do not feel the same passion for children. I suspect that we live much longer lives than you do. Our blood is blue, not red like yours.”

“Do they all look like you?”

“My copper-colored skin is common to all of our people, and almost all have black hair. Some have black eyes rather than red; I have never seen blue eyes like yours among our people. There are other peoples on my planet with black skin or yellow skin and a very few with white skin, but we are the most common type.”

I did not wish to hide facts from my sister, but did not think it a good time to describe the six-limbed green people of Barsoom.

“As I have stated, I was bred for size, strength and beauty. As a princess, I am larger, more intelligent and more beautiful than most women, but less receptive to the emotions of others.”

I did not know their word for empathy, or if they had one, only that I had very little of it.

“I do not think that last is a common failing of royalty among my people, but is a shortcoming unique to me. I have become a much harder woman since my arrival here, and this frightens me.”

Tansy looked at me but said nothing. She had seen me execute the singer Tom and knew what I had done in the castle’s solar. She understood that I did not simply indulge in self-pity.

“Our society is violent, at least as violent and war-like as this one. I believe it to be much older than yours, for we are capable of making many more devices than your people. We have machines that fly, pictures that move, and weapons of terrible destructive power. We have a great deal more knowledge of the natural world, and are much wealthier.

“It is also possible that I am insane. You may run away now if you wish.”

“And how did you come here?”

“I raised my hands to a blue planet in the night sky, where I believed that John Carter had gone, and wished to be there. That is how John Carter said he came to Barsoom.”

“He is not from your world.”

“No. He called his home planet Dirt. It is very similar to this planet. It may be this planet, but I have come to doubt this.”

“So you came here by magic.”

“I do not believe in magic, but I cannot deny that I disappeared from my home, and arrived in the forest.”

“Naked.”

“Yes, but we are often naked on Barsoom. I prefer to be unclothed.”
“I’ve noticed. The rest of your story is true?”

“Mostly. I do not recall lying but I might have. John Carter believed that we of Barsoom do not lie, but only because in his honesty he did not recognize . . .”

“Dejah. Stay with the point.”

“Yes. I came to seek my husband, John Carter. I was not always so good at killing people, but a princess of my people is trained to fight. I am somehow stronger and faster than I was on Barsoom. I have no explanation for this. Do you still wish to be my sister?”

I had come to the decisive moment. Her answer came quickly, though it seemed as though eons passed.

“That’s not subject to change.”

I exhaled.

“I am glad. I have come to love my sister.”

“And she loves you.”

Relieved to learn that my alien origin – and failure to disclose it – had not cost me my sister’s love, I rode alongside her feeling that I might float out of my saddle at any moment. Suddenly very thirsty, I took a long pull from the water bottle I had looted in Harrenhal. The countryside and the road remained empty, until I some time later detected three people watching the road from a campsite among the trees. They had built a platform in a large tree from which they could shoot passing strangers with arrows, but when the youth on watch determined that we were women who could be raped he summoned his two older companions and the three of them stepped into the road to block our passing.

The two men had apparently been farmers forced to join one of the many armies fighting in the recent wars; the younger man stood in awe of their tales of adventure. They had murdered a number of people who passed by their ambush site and robbed them of money or useful items. They raped any women among their victims, and looked forward to doing the same to us. Afterwards the youth threw the bodies and any carts or wagons into a deep ditch a short distance off the side of the road. They sold any horses they captured.

And now they saw easy prey simply ride right up to them. The youth continued to think about their past exploits; one of the men marveled that each of them had a woman to rape while the other tried to figure out how he could dominate his companion by making him hold us in place while he had his turn with each of us first. They disgusted me and I knew that I would kill them without regret. I slid off my horse and drew my sword.

“Now you just drop that pretty sword and it’ll all be over before you know it,” said the man who believed himself their leader. He stood a short distance in front of his companions, with a broad smile that showed several rotting teeth. He had not washed in a very long time, and wore ragged clothes. I stalked toward him and slashed him across his protruding belly; he screamed, dropped his sword and fell to his knees.

The second man, taller and thinner, with sparse and dirty hair the color of chicken grease, raised his sword unsteadily; I knocked it aside, sending it flying out of his hand, and ran him through. He looked blankly at me, and I placed my foot on his belly to push him away and free my sword. The youth dropped his own sword – he had no idea how to use it – and raised his hands.
“I didn’t have nothing to do with it,” he said in a squeaky voice. “They made me do it.”

“You enjoyed it. They let you rape the women after they were done.”

“Only ’cause they made me.”

“You lie. You may kneel and I will cut off your head, and you will die without pain. Or I will stab you in the belly and you will die very slowly, like your friend.”

The first man had stopped screaming and now whimpered, asking for his mother. People of Barsoom do not ask for a parent as we die; that relationship is not as fundamental to our being. Such begging as does occur is usually for the intervention of the goddess Issus, and is considered a cowardly and humiliating act. An honorable man or woman of my planet dies silently and proudly.

“Do you have to kill me?” the youth asked. He had no beard, and red marks covered his dirty face. “I won’t do it never again. I promise.”

“I have no wish to speak with you. Kneel and die. Stand and die. I am indifferent to your choice.”

He began to weep, but did not kneel. As I had promised, I jammned my sword into his belly, twisted it and pulled it free. He fell onto his back and continued to cry.

“It hurts,” he howled. “It hurts.”

“So does rape,” I told him. “Soon it will be over. I believe you told that to the women you raped and killed. You thought it amusing then. Is it no longer so?”

I tore his tunic from his body and used it to clean my sword as I walked back to my horse.

“Are you alright?” Tansy asked.

“I should ask you. I am sorry that you witnessed that.”

“We are what we are. Let’s not try to hide it from each other.”

“Thank you.”

“You probably shouldn’t leave their swords for the next fuckers to pick up and use.”

“You are right.”

I sheathed my sword and walked back to the dead body and the two dying robber-rapists. I picked up each sword by its hilt, with the tip resting on the road, and pressed down on the blade with my foot. They were all cheaply made and bent easily. I searched the bodies for money; the dead man had none but the dying adult had a few coins, which I kept.

“Bitch!” the dying youth screamed as I checked him for belongings. He had nothing of interest other than what appeared to be a toy soldier tucked into his leggings. I dropped it next to him. “They made me do it! You’ll go to hell when you die!”

I ignored him, mounted up, and we continued our southward ride.

We camped in the forest that night, well back from the road where our horses would not be visible. I considered what might have happened to Tansy without me; I had dispatched the three bandits with little trouble, but they would surely have raped and murdered my sister had I not been present.
Tansy’s outburst, and my memories of Jeyne and Willow, had obviously affected me deeply. I could have simply killed the younger rapist, or even let him go with a stern warning to repent lest I return to kill him. Without medical care which I knew that these people could not deliver, the two I had left with belly wounds would die slowly and in a great deal of agony. I had been intentionally cruel, and yet I found that I did not regret my actions. Had I not killed them, they would have raped the next female travelers they captured, and then murdered them. It had not been my intention to become some sword-swinging avenger of women, but at least on this occasion I did not mind having played the role.

The weather remained very fine, and I enjoyed the ride. We passed a few farmers moving wagonloads of produce, straw or manure for short distances along the road, but no one making a multi-day journey. They did not seem eager to engage in conversation with strangers, and one farmer and his son abandoned their cart to hide from us among the reeds of a small swamp.

Two days after I killed the bandits, I detected a larger group blocking the road. As we drew closer, I could make out twelve thought patterns. They intended to stop travelers and exact “taxes” in the form of horses and any valuables they might have. All were on foot, and as we drew near I saw that none had weapons other than pieces of wood.

I considered dismounting and killing them, but decided that this would be excessive and might disturb my sister. She had not objected to my killing armed men, but I suspected that she had not fully approved of my execution of the youngest would-be rapist even though she had said nothing about it. Or perhaps I had simply projected my own misgivings upon her.

I asked my horse to halt a short distance from the tax collectors, and Tansy pulled up beside me.

“More rapists?” she asked.

“I cannot tell,” I said. “They will demand our horses and money, and beat us with sticks if we do not deliver them.”

“Beat us to death, you mean.”

“It is likely.”

“Can you kill them all?”

“Easily. Do you wish me to?”

“If you have to.”

“They have no training. We can ride past without killing all of them.”

“Let’s do that, then.”

“Ride directly behind me. Do not let any space open between your horse and mine. The spare horses will flank you on either side to keep any attackers away from you.”

I explained the formation to the horses; they understood and thought it an exciting game. I suspect they understood at some level that humans could die, but they pretended otherwise. That is the way of horses.

We moved forward, picking up the pace until we were at full gallop when we reached the people blocking the road. Only one stood his ground, flailing about with his stick, and I applied the flat of my sword to his head as I passed him. He fell and the spare horse on that side easily leapt over his
unconscious body. The remainder scattered, some continuing to run away long after we had passed.

Not every experience on our ride southward involved killing people. We rode through mostly empty countryside, the skies clear of rain and the air sweet and cool, a sharp and pleasant contrast to the hot, dusty winds of Barsoom.

Every day, I rode a different horse and learned to commune with each of my tiny herd. I found the connection both stimulating and soothing; while we can make telepathic contact with most of the higher animals of Barsoom, they are usually hostile. Even those we keep as pets are often unpleasant creatures, in their attitude much like the little monster Tansy had named a “cat,” though not as noxious in appearance.

Despite having killed a great number of people, I felt myself become more at ease in this strange world. My sister had seen me kill and had learned of my alien origins, yet she loved me still. That lightened my heart – the metaphorical center of emotion on both Barsoom and this nameless planet – even as I worried that I rode on a foolish quest and had dragged Tansy along with me. I sought one man among millions, with little to aid this search beyond my senses. And I had no reason to believe he might wish to be found; I could easily be as deluded in my unrequited love as the last woman to wield my sword, and be headed toward the same fate.
Chapter Ten

Chapter Summary

In which Dejah Thoris encounters a different type of furry creature.

Chapter Ten

As we drew closer to King’s Landing we encountered more commercial traffic on the road and fewer bandits. Twice we passed small patrols of Lannister soldiers; they simply looked for would-be robbers and greeted us politely, each time warning that two women travelling alone needed to be very careful. I was glad that I did not have to kill them.

I expected that we would find nicer lodgings closer to the city. A small inn stood alone, with a stable and small fenced yard. All of the buildings were of stone and well made; we appeared to be the only visitors.

We dismounted and left all four horses standing in front of the inn; I asked them to remain in place and they as usual agreed. I scanned the inn and found no guests present, only an adult man who seemed to be the owner and a very worried woman I took to be his wife. One more set of thoughts could have been a child, or a child-like adult; they seemed somewhat disturbed to me.

The innkeeper greeted us at the door, his wife standing behind him. He was a tall man, steeply stoop-shouldered with curly gray hair. She was smaller, slender and younger, with yellow hair, small breasts and an extremely nervous demeanor that made it very unpleasant to receive her thoughts.

Inviting us in, the innkeeper declared himself very pleased to see us. After exchanging pleasantries Tansy and I went back outside to take care of the horses, brushing all four, cleaning their hooves and giving them buckets of the grain known as “oats” to eat. The inn had a very well-kept and well-supplied stable, but oddly, no other horses were present. After we returned our host bade us to sit at a large table in the otherwise empty common room while he prepared Evening Meal and regaled us with tales of his life.

He had been the top-rated chef in King’s Landing, he said, working at a well-known establishment called the Black Destrier. I looked at Tansy. Never heard of it, she thought very hard so that I could understand, or him. Or anybody rating chefs, either. I nodded to show that I had received her thoughts.

Prior to that, he had been captain of one of the King’s warships and had won many battles against pirates. He also painted many fine pictures and wrote popular adventure tales. This seemed unlikely; I did not believe these people knew about printing, let alone publishing. I supposed they had to have some way of spreading their stories – Tansy, Ned and Gendry had all made reference to adventure tales, though I knew that Gendry could not read.

I did not know what to make of our host. His thoughts said that he thoroughly believed these claimed achievements to be true, but with the feverish edge that usually denotes a delusional mind. Telepathy does not, exactly, allow one to tell truth from lies though that is often the practical outcome. What it does reveal is whether the subject believes something to be true. If they are mistaken, or deluded, that will not be immediately obvious.
Whatever the truth of the innkeeper’s boasts, the food was indeed quite good: small round pieces of pig meat he called “medallions” in a very fine wine-based sauce, served over a boiled grain he called “rice.” The innkeeper joined us with a glass of wine – an actual glass rather than the goblets or mugs that seemed common here – and continued to tell us of his accomplishments while his wife hovered nervously behind him, continuously rubbing one hand over the other. She thought us unable to resist his charms, and that we would soon join him in sex games of some sort. I could not determine what this entailed without deeper probing, and did not care enough to try. He did have very fine wine, much smoother than the thick and viscous liquid that often went by that name.

After we finished our meal, the innkeeper wanted to show us his art: still-life paintings of ships mixed with odd paintings and charcoal drawings of horses that looked like people. They had eyes and sometimes breasts and hands like people, but their lower half was that of a horse. They stood on two legs, with the painting’s focus usually on the part known as the “ass.”

The ship drawings fascinated me; such vessels once plied the seas of Barsoom but my planet’s oceans had been dry for tens of thousands of years. John Carter had told me that ships were among the most beautiful things on his planet, and I saw that reflected in these paintings despite the innkeeper’s middling skill with a brush. They had sails to catch the wind, and some were powered by large wooden sticks as well. Cutting through the water, throwing up a spray of foam, I could see hints of the beauty John Carter had described. I hoped we would see real ships soon.

Next, the innkeeper wanted us to read his adventure stories. Tansy took a scroll but I pleaded my inability to read; literacy was rare in these lands and Tansy sent me a bitter thought wishing she had thought to say the same. She read through the first part of the story and made some non-committal sounds, and then noted our extreme tiredness.

“I’m afraid my eyes are just too sore tonight,” she said. “I’d like to read this in the morning though.”

“I’m eager to hear what you think,” he said. “I’ve been told it’s the best story ever written.”

I wondered who might have told him this, but he accepted that we needed sleep and his wife showed us to our room. She seemed relieved when we accepted a single room with but one bed, assuming that we preferred sex with one another and therefore would not be attracted to her husband. She need not have worried on that score.

The bed had a thick cover known as a “comforter,” and a very soft mattress underneath. The innkeeper’s wife brought us a tub and many containers of hot water, and we enjoyed a bath before curling up under the comforter, unclothed as was our usual habit.

“How bad was his story?” I whispered in Tansy’s ear.

“Worse,” she whispered back. “Story you might recognize. A man’s flying machine falls out of the sky. He wakes up in a strange world, finds he’s been turned into a horse-man, runs around swinging a sword and fighting an evil wizard. Even though his hands have been turned into hooves.”

“I do not have a horse’s ass.”

“Remember that the next time you’re upset that you landed on this planet. It could have been worse.”

I slept well until, late into the night, my telepathic sense altered me that someone had entered our room. The figure radiated a great deal of anger, anxiety and jealousy. It moved over to our bed, where I lay curled up behind Tansy’s back, my right arm around her mid-section. The figure held a
knife in one hand, and planned to kill us as we slept. I watched through my eyelashes as the killer bent over to peel back the comforter and stab Tansy in the chest, long hair dropping over the figure’s shoulder to dangle next to the bed.

Before the stabbing could commence, I grabbed the hair in my right hand and pulled it sharply downward. The intruder’s head smacked into the bed’s wooden sideboard with a loud thumping sound and his or her body slumped to the floor.

I leapt out of bed, wearing nothing, and grabbed the intruder by the head, ready to smash it into the floor. Before I could do so, I saw that it was the innkeeper’s nervous wife and that she had fallen on her knife, the handle of which now protruded from the center of her own chest. Her dead eyes stared at me, as vacant as they had been in life.

As I confronted this scene, I picked up my horse’s thoughts. Someone was trying to tie her in her stall, and she resisted. I dropped the corpse, awakened Tansy and told her to gather our belongings. Then I crawled out of the window onto the roof, still naked but now carrying my sword. It was a short drop to a small yard between the inn and its stable.

No one was about, and I hurriedly entered the stable to find my mare tied tightly in her stall with lines leading to a bridle and hobbles on her front and back feet as well. With my horse so secured and unable to move or kick, a man in a strange costume stood directly behind her atop a small piece of furniture known as a “stool.” It was the innkeeper, and his thoughts showed him thoroughly involved in a bizarre fantasy scenario.

“What are you doing to my horse?” I demanded.

“She wanted me,” he answered, his voice muffled by the costume’s headpiece.

“What?”

“She needed a stallion.”

He stepped down off the stool and out of the stall, and now I could see the costume. He wore a large covering over his head, shaped like the head of a black horse. Close-fitting black robes covered the rest of his body, open in front to display his engorged sex organ.

“You could use a stallion, too. You really need to put on the doe suit, but that can’t be helped now. Turn around and I’ll give you what you need.”

I still had my sword in my hand, and I did not think about what I did next. With a quick twist of my wrist, I sliced off most of his sex organ. It flopped to the ground and he screamed in pain, covering the gushing wound with both of his hands as he sank to his knees and then onto his side. Blood pooled underneath him.

Tansy arrived just as he sank to the ground, out of breath with her arms wrapped around our possessions. She dropped them on some straw not yet fouled by horse waste, and handed my leggings to me.

“What in the hells happened here?”

“He . . .” I could not think of how to describe what I had seen. “He was trying to rape my horse. Then he wanted me to wear some sort of sex costume, and turn around so he could stick his sex organ into my ass.”

“He what?”
“He wanted to put his sex organ into my ass.”

“Before that.”

“He was trying to put his sex organ into my horse’s ass. So I cut it off.”

“You cut it off?”

“Yes, there it is on the ground.” It had grown much smaller, and now looked like the strange boneless creatures called “slugs” that could be seen on this planet’s plants early in the morning.

She now looked more closely at the innkeeper.

“What in the hells is he wearing?”

“He believes himself to be a horse-man creature known as The Black Destrier, a warrior prince of his people. His herd. Whatever one would call it. He claimed that my horse desired sex with him; he appears to have believed that to be true.”

“He’s a fucking lunatic.”

“Yes.”

“So he dressed up as a horse-person?”

“You can see for yourself. He must have worked very hard on the costume.”

“He’ll bleed to death.”

“We should treat his wound.”

Tansy sighed heavily.

“Stay here.”

She ran into the inn, and returned a few moments later carefully holding a large, broad-bladed knife for cutting meat known as a “cleaver” that she had heated in the kitchen fire, some rags and a jug of water.

“Roll him over.”

We turned him onto his back and pulled away his robes to reveal the ugly wound. I held his arms away from it and Tansy swiftly cleaned the area with the rags and water before she pressed the hot metal to the damaged area. The horse-man screamed before he lost consciousness, and I smelled burning meat.

“Is he alive?” she asked.

“Yes, but he has fallen into a dream state. Lovely horse-women surround him. Some of them look like us.”

She shook her head.

“There was a bed in the back of the kitchen, hadn’t been used in a while. Put him there and let’s get away from this place.”
I hefted the innkeeper and placed him as Tansy instructed. I did not know if he would live or die, though the loss of blood had been extreme. Would he be able to urinate now that Tansy had cauterized the area? I had not thought to provide a channel.

“They were going to rob and kill us?” Tansy asked as I exited the inn.

“Rob us, possibly. Kill us, definitely. At least the wife wished to kill us. The man believes an evil wizard has injured him. He seems to think we are also horse-people.”

“You left the horse-head on him?”

“I did not think to remove it.”

“No matter. Let’s ride.”

“I did not mean to cut off his sex organ. He advanced on me and I was disgusted. It was a very ugly organ, narrow and bent to one side. Not beautiful like that of John Carter. My sword moved before I thought about it.”

“No second guesses, Dejah. They committed crimes, they suffered for it. It’s not up to you to sort out their level of guilt.”

“They were not able to defend themselves. The innkeeper was not responsible for his actions.”

“That crazy blonde didn’t look at you and see a warrior. She saw two women, and in this world, Dejah, that means two victims. Don’t you go turning inward with your guilty thoughts – she died with her own knife in her heart. She didn’t mean for us to ever see the morning. You said it yourself, the crazy innkeeper wanted to stick his cock up your ass. You protected us – and your horse. End of story.”

I did my best to follow her advice. I had to soothe my mare’s fear and re-assure her that the bad man had gone away – horses do not like to contemplate death – before we could mount up. We rode out before we had to explain the bodies to anyone else who came along. As we rounded the inn, a door opened and a small voice called out, “Mama? Where are you? Where is Papa?”

Tansy grabbed my bridle and pulled us into the night.

I smelled King’s Landing before I saw the city walls. An incredible reek of shit emanated from the city, along with a heavy pall of smoke. The death rate from disease in such a place must have been astronomical, but Tansy explained that war had devastated the countryside and many people had fled to the city to escape the violence. That in turn had resulted in an overcrowded city, one suffering from unemployment, crime and a lack of food as well as poor sanitation.

“You have lived in King’s Landing yourself?”

“I must have been eight-and-ten. I was beautiful and I’d grown these,” she touched her breasts, “and been working for my mother for about four years at that point. She sold me to a brothel in the big city.”

“Your mother sold you? I thought slavery was not allowed in Westeros.”

It was legal in Helium and widely practiced; my family owned a great many slaves and they had tended me since I first emerged from my egg. I had rarely given it much thought; when I had, I had wished that the institution did not exist but I had done nothing to abolish it. As Helium’s lone
princess and lead science advisor to my grandfather I had, potentially, a great deal of influence. Yet at best I had spoken out at royal councils to curb its excesses; I had never thought to challenge its fundamental existence.

John Carter had considered slavery part of the social order imposed on mankind, whether of Barsoom or Jasoom, by the god in which he professes not to believe. He had fought in his nation’s civil war for the faction which wished to retain slavery. While he never showed disdain for any of the races of Barsoom, his participation on what I could only consider the morally repugnant side of this war troubled me.

“It’s not,” Tansy answered, not noticing my distraction. Or perhaps she had simply become used to my habits. “There are ways around that. In my case, and that of many whores in the bigger King’s Landing brothels, there was a legal contract. I was obliged to work for a woman named Chataya. I couldn’t leave without paying a penalty that equaled what I would make for the remainder of the contract, which made it damned near impossible to quit since it automatically extended every year. My contract was never sold, but it could have been, and I would have had no say in the matter.”

I had assumed this planet to be as primitive in all of its social constructs as it had shown itself in its technology. And while the treatment of prostitutes horrified me, the scientist within had to take note of the sophisticated legal arrangement that had been used to tie Tansy to her employer. These people were not backward in every respect; when committing evil they could be very advanced.

“A man named Littlefinger,” Tansy continued to ignore my wandering mind, “who owned brothels in King’s Landing and in some of the Free Cities offered Chataya a great deal of money for me. He was a constant customer despite owning his own houses where he could fuck for free, but he paid Chataya huge sums to reserve me, which meant a lot of money for me too.”

“You were his favorite?”

“Sort of. And this is where it gets pretty sickening. Catelyn Tully, the Stone Heart, was my sister. I look a great deal like her, before, you know, she died and rotted. Littlefinger had been fostered with the Tullys, and became obsessed with her when they grew a little older.”

“Did you know him as a child?”

“Not really. I went with the Whents to Riverrun, the Tully seat, a few times and played with the noble children there. Catelyn kept her siblings away from the little bastard, and Littlefinger did whatever she said. So I knew who he was, but not much more than that.”

“So he would pretend you were your sister?”

On Barsoom we are very familiar with the concept of role-playing during sex.

“Exactly. He made me dress like her, and then beg him to fuck me, and tell him how much I hated my betrothed and my husband and preferred his tiny cock to theirs.”

“That sounds . . .”

“Sick?”

“Yes.”

“It was, but it was pretty mild compared to some of the things a whore gets asked to do. Our friend back at the inn probably paid someone to dress up like a horse and take it up the ass. And there are powerful men who enjoy abuse, and will pay well to have a beautiful woman insult them, whip
them, piss on them, treat them as a child or a prisoner. One rich orange-skinned buffoon once paid me to piss on a bed because one of his rivals, a far better man, had slept in it."

"Your beauty made you successful?"

"This is where I teach you more of our world. When you say that, I’m supposed to deny that I think I’m beautiful."

"Even though you are, and believe yourself so."

"Right. It’s called false modesty, and it’s a big part of good manners. Men can make themselves out to be more than they are. Women must make themselves less."

Did this society give any advantages to its women?

"When everyone can read thoughts," I said, "there is no false modesty."

"I can see that. But to answer the question, not really. A beautiful whore is intimidating. The most successful are just pretty enough to be attractive, but you always want a potential customer thinking, ‘I could fuck her,’ not ‘she’s out of my league.’ It certainly helped me when I was a courtesan, sort of a higher class of prostitute reserved for the very rich and powerful."

"Do you miss it?"

"For an exotic beauty from the stars, you are insightful."

"I am learning more about you every day."

"I suppose you are. And yes, sometimes it did make me feel powerful. I like being desired. I’d guess that you do, too."

"Sometimes. When I choose to be."

"Yes, when you choose. And that’s the thing. I didn’t get to choose. I had a little leeway to refuse a client, but not always. And once you’re in the room, what are you going to do?"

"I miss the money and the power – I even fucked the king, more than once – but I don’t miss the life. I’d rather be riding around with you."

"I am glad to hear that. How did you escape?"

"The same way it happens in the storybooks. My mother died, she left me her brothel and all her savings. I used her money and what I’d saved to buy out my contract, then went back to Stoney Sept to take over the brothel."

Even as we neared the city and could see its walls, the road remained a muddy track. It was wider, but still unpaved. No one had even tried to fill the deep ruts caused by wagon traffic: when the grooves made the track impassable, wagon drivers simply steered around them, creating an ever-wider morass. Fortunately the ground was fairly dry as we approached; it surely could not be crossed during rain.

Once we came within sight of the city, I began to pick up the thoughts of the people within: thousands, then tens of thousands of unfiltered, undampened thoughts. I had to ask Tansy to stop while I adjusted to the waves of mundane existence beating into my brain.
“Will you be able to enter the city?”

“I believe so. I must block out the thoughts I do not wish to receive in order to be able to function, yet at the same time I cannot block them all out. We will be in great danger if I cannot read any thoughts.”

“People here survive without reading thoughts all the time.”

“You have people here who cannot see?”

“Sure.”

“And they survive?”

“Not well, usually, but they do.”

“Because they have long experience, yes? Often their entire lives?”

“And you’d be like someone who just got both of her eyeballs poked out and staggers around disoriented and in distress.”

“A disturbing image, but essentially correct.”

We rode around the perimeter of the city, finally coming to a tavern featuring a large outdoor space with tables overlooking a wide river, where a family with many working children served fish. I ate several different kinds of grilled seafood, and enjoyed them all very much, along with what was called white wine. While I ate, I focused on building up my defenses against the pressing wave of loose thoughts coming out of King’s Landing.

After the fourth fish, I let my body relax and looked out over the river while sipping wine from a metal goblet. I knew how to prepare my mind for what lay ahead; it was little different than the mental defenses we royal learn to repel hostile telepathic probes. It is not simple to keep up one’s screens while receiving the thoughts one wishes to read, but it has been the subject of thousands of years of study and practice. After a short time I pronounced myself ready.

“You just wanted to finish your wine.”

“That is true, but I would have done so without an excuse.”

King’s Landing had been built on the slopes of a large hill or a small mountain, with a complex of red buildings at its summit that Tansy said was the fortified royal palace. The walls were large, but simply-designed – fortifications not designed to repel cannon, firearms or airships looked very strange to my eye. They had been badly damaged at some point in the recent past and only partially repaired. Scaffolding had been erected at several points but no workers were present.

A great number of wagons and people on foot and on horseback gathered in front of the city gates to pass within. Guards wearing gold cloaks stood to the side and waved them past. One of them looked up as we passed; his thoughts pondered asking us to stop to be searched so he could have a look at our breasts, but he decided that the effort would be too great for the expected reward. I felt somewhat insulted.

Inside the gates, the smell and the crowds grew even greater. Tansy said we needed to find a stable for the horses; places offering stalls for rent lined the inside of the city walls to either side of the gate. We stopped at several stables before we found one where I was satisfied by the owner’s thoughts. The regularly-cleaned buildings offered good shelter for my horses, and the animals within told me
that they had received adequate care.

The owner helped us stable them himself. He was a friendly man who looked to be somewhat older, with gray hairs around the fringe of a bald head.

“And what is this horse named?”

I had never given my horses names. That is not our way with thoats, and it never occurred to me to do any different here.

“Brown Horse.”

“And that one?”

“Gray Horse.”

“And those?”

“Other Brown Horse and White Horse.”

It saddened him to see such a pretty young woman with such a simple mind. He helped us brush down the horses and then invited us to eat with him. It had not been long since we had enjoyed our grilled fish, but I found myself hungry again.

He had only a little food, and I gave him a gold piece to buy more from a tavern nearby. I told him to bring back as much as he could buy with the gold. Tansy warned him that I would become upset if the meal included eggs. He returned with two serving girls from the tavern; between them they had several platters of roasted birds called geese plus vegetables, bread and pitchers of ale. The women went back to the tavern for a second load.

I liked the geese: the meat was dark and very rich, with crispy golden skin. As I ate one goose and then another Tansy asked him about his stable and the conditions in the city. I found I needed an extra cloth to wipe away all of the fat that ran out of the goose.

“By the gods. Does she always eat that much?”

“Sometimes more. What’s new in King’s Landing?”

“That depends. What do you know?”

“That Cersei Lannister became queen, which must mean that her sons are dead. And we’ve heard rumors of war.”

“Many more than her sons died. A tremendous explosion of green flame destroyed the Sept of Baelor with most of the capital’s leading lights within. The High Sparrow, the Young Queen, Lord Tyrell, the Hand of the King, the Grand Maester. Many more. The Young King was so stricken with grief that he threw himself out of a window, they say. At least it’s known for sure that he went out the window and died.”

“What of the Lannister?”

“She means the Kingslayer.”

“He’s off leading the royal army, conquering the Riverlands again. Why he didn’t become king, no one knows. There’s talk in the palace that the queen crowned herself even without his knowledge.”
“You know people in the palace?” Tansy asked.

“Of course. I was in charge of the stable attached to the Tower of the Hand. Then young Chadworth
was murdered and I sort of lost all reason to live. A while later I realized I needed purpose again and
opened this place.”

“Who was Chadworth?”

“My grandson. He had reached 10 years when the Starks killed him.”

I kept encountering victims of this Stark family. Bad enough that he was named Chadworth, but then
to be murdered made for a woeful story. I continued to eat the delicious geese, and listened to their
conversation.

“What happened?”

“After King Robert died, Lord Stark was accused of treason against the new king. I don’t know the
truth of that or not, but Lannister soldiers came to arrest him. Chadworth spotted his daughter, Arya
Stark, escaping through the stables. When he accosted her, she stabbed him with a little sword right
in the belly. Then she stood over him and yelled, ‘Needle is mine. You can’t have Needle. So I stuck
you with the pointy end!’

“I ran to him but it was too late. It took him three days to die; belly wounds are like that. My
daughter threw herself off the city walls in her grief. I tried to drink myself to death, then starve
myself to death, but finally I came back to life.”

I resolved that I would kill this Arya Stark, slayer of Chadworth, should I happen to meet her.

“Is there word of any armies threatening the city?”

“Some say the Tyrells and Dorne seek vengeance for the great explosion.”

“Two powerful families who hold sway to the south-west of here,” Tansy explained. “Mostly known
for fighting one another if I recall correctly.”

“You do. They’ve also lost many of their leaders. It would surely be a long while before they could
make war on the Queen.”

“So there is peace in the South?”

“I wouldn’t say that. But the great war has come to a close, at least for now.”

We thanked the friendly stabler for his information, and went into the city.

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We walked about the city for a while; I found it dreary and deeply disliked the smell. As I moved
through the crowds it became easier to filter their thoughts, and soon I could pick out individual
minds without too much interference.

“None of this impresses you, does it?” Tansy asked.

“My home city is several times the size of King’s Landing,” I answered. “And enormously cleaner.”

Thanks to the labor of tens of thousands of city-owned slaves, I thought to myself, and felt ashamed.
I had no cause to feel my society superior to theirs, not when it allowed one person to own another.
Tansy took me to the site of the massive temple that had once dominated the city, and we looked at
the crater where the great explosion had taken place. I had wanted to see what could have wreaked
such devastation. A blast of that size usually implies nuclear fission, but I found no signs of the
tremendous heat that arises when atoms are split. There had been fire, and thousands of people
nearby had died, but I found none of the glass-like residue that nuclear events leave behind.

I thought the explosion must have resulted from some form of fuel-air explosive but I had seen no
signs that these people understood distillation or had petroleum-based fuels: their lamps burned oils
derived from plant and animal sources. The blast of green fire implied that someone had deployed a
technology unavailable to this culture. This mystery might be somehow connected to my presence
here.

“So we’re here. What were you planning to do?”

“To see if the Queen or anyone else in government knows of John Carter.”

“And we’ll just walk up to the Red Keep, bang on the door and ask to see her?”

“I am a princess.”

“Who is often thought mad.”

“Well, yes. Do you have another idea?”

“I do. We can go see Chataya, my old madam.”
Chapter Eleven

Chapter Summary

In which Dejah Thoris experiences a sexual encounter.

Chapter Eleven

Chataya ran a very expensive and exclusive brothel; Tansy had worked there until she bought out her contract. Chataya recruited the most beautiful and accomplished women, and allowed only the richest and most powerful patrons into her establishment. Important government officials would come there for release, and Tansy suggested that I could read their minds from nearby. Or even meet them in Chataya’s large common room so I could ply them with alcohol and leading questions.

“Maybe it’s best if you sit still and look pretty, and let me ask the leading questions. Men like to talk about themselves. And they really like to talk about how powerful they are, and how many secrets they know. If John Carter has appeared here and had an impact on the battlefield, someone who knows will come to Chataya’s.”

“We flirt on my planet.”

“Probably by stabbing each other.”

This was not true, but many noble women refused to make love with a man they could best at swordplay. Usually they determined this with blunted practice swords. Usually. So perhaps it was partially true.

I followed Tansy to the brothel, which probably should have been termed a “pleasure palace.” A huge walled garden surrounded the yellow-brick-fronted building of four stories. On this warm and sunny day the large windows had been opened and it gave an open and airy appearance. All of it appeared well-maintained. Despite my prejudices, I was impressed.

The uniformed doormen let us in without question, assuming us to be applicants and judging us attractive enough to pass on to the owner. Inside the walls, the gardens were lovely, filled with flowering plants along paths of crushed gravel. Inside the building, statuary and tapestries decorated the walls while a quartet of musicians played soft background music. I could see such a place on Barsoom, except for the type of entertainment offered.

Chataya turned out to be an older woman with very dark skin. She came from a land known as the Summer Isles, far to the south. She greeted Tansy warmly and listened attentively to her proposal.

“I’m not sure I like the idea of you questioning my clientele. You know we bank on discretion here. They come here to get away from their positions, not be quizzed about them.

“But I can do better. I can get you into the palace. To the queen herself.”

That would settle any questions. But what would we have to do for the queen? Chataya’s thoughts showed some fondness for Tansy mixed with bitterness over my sister having left her employment, and guilt at making this suggestion to her.
“She’ll pay well for a pretty pair like you two. It’s just a short job, you stay in the palace a few days and return. All very discreet.”

“We’d have freedom to roam in the palace?” Tansy asked.

“I doubt you’d be invited to meetings of the Small Council. But you wouldn’t be prisoners, either. You would be considered handmaidens to the queen by day and bed maids by night.”

“Let me talk to my friend.”

She pulled me into a small side room with a very ornate couch. “We’re doing this.”

“Tansy. I would not ask you to work as a whore again.”

“We get our answers and we leave. No whoring necessary. The queen will find other playmates. We’re not going to get a better opportunity.”

“I have been many things, but never a whore.”

“And you’re not one now. We’re courtesans.”

“Courtesans?”

“Much higher paid, much higher status.”

“Are we not too beautiful?”

“Not for this job. We’re just what the queen ordered.”

“I do not like this plan. I do not trust Chataya. She resents you for leaving this place, and intends something unpleasant.”

“Dejah. I know how to play this game. Let me help you.”

I remained uneasy, but did not insist on leaving. Soon we bathed in scented water while maids thoroughly washed our hair and shaved Tansy’s legs; people of Barsoom do not grow hair there. One of the maids asked if I would like the hair over my ovipositor “waxed”; I pulled from her thoughts what this meant and shuddered. I did not think it wise to show the differences between my anatomy and theirs. I also feared the pain. I knew women of this place to be far more sensitive there than I; I could not fathom how anyone could stand such a procedure without screaming. Tansy declined as well.

Chataya’s daughter, a very kind young woman named Alayaya, dressed us in ankle-length robes of a very thin, translucent material. She also gave us tiny leggings she called “panties,” that covered our genital areas and very little else. These would have been appropriate on Barsoom, but I had not seen their like here. She said other clothing would be provided in the palace. Alayaya had no negative thoughts toward us and remembered Tansy fondly, but I remained uneasy. I attempted to glean more from Chataya’s mind, but she had left the building and I could not locate her.

We had planned to remain in Chataya’s brothel for several days before going to meet the queen, but Alayaya informed us the following morning that Queen Cersei wanted new playmates immediately. We cleaned our teeth and freshened our breath, put on our whore costumes with cloaks over them, and walked to the palace, known as the Red Keep. We entered through a side gate as Alayaya had instructed and waited with a bored functionary until a guard wearing white armor very similar to that of the Lannister came to collect us.
We followed the guard through many hallways and up flights of stairs, encountering no one along the way. *They use back passages to bring whores into the palace*, Tansy communicated silently. We finally came to a richly-appointed bed chamber.

A serving woman met us and stood by while the guard left. She told us to remove our cloaks but otherwise said nothing. Her thoughts radiated immense jealousy; she wished that the queen would desire her as she feared Cersei would want us. We now wore only the sheer robes and tiny gold “panties.” The guard came back a few moments later with a beautiful yellow-haired woman; he looked us over closely before stepping out and closing the door.

*The queen*, Tansy informed me, but I already knew that. Cersei’s mind showed that she had no intention of putting off her pleasure – she wanted us immediately.

“Let me see Chataya’s latest gifts,” she said, walking over to us. She put her hand under my chin and then ran it down the front of my body, pausing to fondle each breast through the gauzy fabric of my robes. She did the same to Tansy.

“Oh you will do. You will do very well. Refresh yourselves if you like.”

She indicated a small table that had been set with small plates of fruit and glasses of a golden wine. I was disappointed to note that she had no bacon. There were no knives present, either, only an odd eating utensil made of gold, with a rounded oval bowl on its end with three sharp spikes. I picked one up and looked at it.

*Don’t eat anything*, Tansy commanded. *Your table manners will give us away.*

“It’s called a spork, dear,” the queen said. “It comes from the Summer Isles. I can trust no one outside of my sworn guards with a blade in my presence. That includes even a fruit knife. Anyone I bring here could be an assassin of the Faceless Men.”

I looked at her.

“But not you, dear. The Faceless Men can change their faces, but not their bodies. They have no one like you two. And Chataya has vouched for you.”

I wondered at Cersei’s confident foolishness. On Barsoom many orders of assassins employ beautiful women for their deeds, as well as fat men, ugly women and beautiful men. I did not doubt that the same applied here. Probing her mind, I found that Cersei found us both very desirable. I reminded her of a former lover named Taena who had left her. She found my coppery skin exotic; it reminded her of women from Dorne, Ned Dayne’s home, who were said to be highly sexual. Tansy put her in mind of someone named Sansa, a younger woman Cersei had longed to sexually dominate. Imagining Taena and Sansa submissively at her sexual command excited Cersei.

Cersei looked at the serving woman.

“Dorcas, you may go.”

She glided away and out a door that had not been visible. Her thoughts indicated that she immediately threw herself on a cot in a small room there and fell asleep.

Cersei removed a pair of daggers affixed to the sides of her tunic, and placed them on the table next to the plates. Then she thought better of that and walked over to a desk, placing them in a locking drawer. She came back to the table, picked up a glass of wine and drank deeply.

“Come here and undress me, both of you.”
We undid the laces that held her tight black leather tunic in place and slowly pulled it off of her. She was wearing another tunic underneath, of some lightweight white cloth. Her breasts strained against it; they were much larger even than mine or Tansy’s, yet high and pert like those of a woman of Barsoom. It was as though this planet’s gravity had had no effect on them. They were truly magnificent. We pulled the tunic up over her head.

“Kiss me.”

Tansy kissed her first, and I followed. Cersei used her tongue expertly, and I returned it. She breathed heavily.

“You may drop your robes now.”

We let them fall. Each of us took her by one hand and the three of us walked to the very high bed. It had a footstool next to it to help one climb. She did so and sat, turning to us. We pulled off her skirt and her leggings.

Cersei was indeed beautiful, with finely-formed legs which she crossed to expose what she thought of as her “great ass.” Sensing her approval, I paused to admire her. I failed to see what made this ass “great,” but she liked having her body admired. I ran my hand gently across the self-declared great ass and down the outside of her thigh. She shivered.

Every customer wants to think he or she is the one exception, the one the whore actually wants, Tansy sent. Making them believe that is the whore’s art.

Tansy and I climbed onto the bed and lay alongside her. Cersei kissed each of us again. She ran her fingers across our breasts, lightly, giving extra attention to the nipples. She then motioned for us to kiss each other while she watched. Tansy cupped my left breast in her hand and kissed me. She was my sister, not my lover, and I had never kissed her, not in a serious way. I now learned that Tansy knew how to kiss; I closed my eyes in actual pleasure, momentarily forgetting where we were. Her tongue rasped along my lips and met mine; I extended my tongue and wrapped it around hers. She expressed shock but stopped herself from breaking away; we of Barsoom can extend our tongues when aroused but apparently the people of this planet lack this most useful ability. Once she relaxed, she liked it very much. So did I.

“Kiss her tits,” whispered Cersei, now highly aroused.

Following Tansy’s silent instructions, I rose to my knees. She knelt before me and took my breasts in her hands. Her touch thrilled me. She leaned forward and took my right nipple in her mouth, rolling her tongue over it. I gasped and involuntarily arched my back to look up at the canopy over the bed. I put my hands on her shoulders as she moved to my left breast, outlining the aureole with her tongue and then sucking on the nipple itself.

I did not want her to stop, but Cersei called softly to us.

“Switch,” she said, breathing heavily.

I needed a moment to breathe as well. Tansy smiled at me, placed her hands behind her neck and pulled her shoulders back slightly to present her breasts. She had never looked so desirable to me. Cersei’s thoughts indicated that she liked to see a slow building of passion. I kissed Tansy’s lips softly, not using my tongue, and then the side of her face and her neck, moving downward. All the while I kept track of Cersei’s interest. She enjoyed watching me, thinking of this Sansa person in Tansy’s place.
I reached Tansy’s left breast and settled my thighs onto my calves to place it directly before me. Making love to a woman’s breast is an art form on Barsoom, one I had mastered long ago. I did not know if these breasts were constructed in the same manner as ours, but that certainly looked to be the case.

Tansy had exquisitely beautiful breasts. I circled her aureole with my extended tongue, carefully dropping my hair into Cersei’s line of vision. This frustrated the queen, so I withdrew my tongue, pulled my hair back behind my ear and concentrated on the nipple, nipping it lightly with my teeth and teasing it with my tongue.

Cersei grew ever more aroused, and apparently so did Tansy. I could not penetrate the screen around her thoughts without using more force, but her body stiffened. Her nipples grew even larger and more erect and her aureolae took on a sheen and now appeared swollen. She grabbed a handful of my hair and twisted it, giving a sharp intake of breath. I placed my left hand on her right flank, feeling a pulse run through her. She moaned softly, then leaned down and bit me on the shoulder.

I released her breast and stretched back upward to face her. I kissed her again.

“Enough. You’re here to pleasure me.”

*Kiss her*, Tansy said silently. *I need to recover from what you just did.*

I turned my attention to Cersei, kissing her lips softly at first, but she grabbed the back of my head and returned it with a very hard kiss of her own, roughly thrusting her tongue into my mouth. Her thoughts revealed that she had become highly excited.

Tansy lay next to Cersei and took turns with me, kissing the queen, and then the two of us began to work our way down her body. Cersei’s skin was white and nearly flawless, and sweet to the taste. Unlike either of us, she had no hair under her arms. We kissed her shoulders, moving down to her unbelievable breasts. I kissed the nipple, then took it into my mouth and teased it with my tongue. Tansy did the same on her left breast. Cersei gasped.

Tansy continued downward, while I kissed, licked and sucked Cersei’s breasts and kissed her mouth again. I had no idea what to do with a Jasoomian woman’s sex organ; Tansy indicated that she would take care of Cersei. Cersei had no hair there either and I was intensely curious to study her, but Tansy had been firm that we could allow no signs of my inexperience to give us away. I read Cersei’s mind and gave her what she wanted, on her large pink nipples and on her lips. In this the women of Jasoom or whatever planet on which I found myself were no different than those of my home world. I had done this before; my skills with my tongue exceed my skills with my sword.

As I wrapped my tongue around hers, Cersei’s entire body began to shudder and her mind went completely blank: for several seconds, it had no thoughts at all. She arched her back and her left leg began to make rapid kicking motions. Then she slowly began to think again, mostly patterns of bright exploding colors. I had never experienced this sort of thing; even second-hand it was exhilarating and my own breaths quickened as well. I would have to ask Tansy about this phenomenon later; perhaps there was another paper in this.

I released her tongue and she breathed heavily. A short while later it happened again, and then a third and a fourth time. We continued until I read in Cersei’s thoughts that she was tiring and had had enough. I stroked the top of Tansy’s head to indicate that we were done.

At Tansy’s silent command, I curled up next to Cersei on her right, and lay my head on her shoulder. Tansy did the same on her left. The queen lay back, feeling contented, and idly ran her fingers through our hair.
Cersei had enjoyed us; I tried not to shiver in revulsion when she thought how we had given her the best sex of her life, better than she had experienced with her brother Jaime.

*This is what a queen deserves*, she thought. *It’s a shame that I’ll have to tell the Kettleblacks to kill these two when I tire of them, but I can’t have anyone spreading tales. It’s not worth the risk, even for a reward like this.*

I clamped my hand over the queen’s mouth and held her down. I looked at Tansy.

“She means to have us killed. With a black kettle.”

“So kill her.” She looked at Cersei. “It’s nothing personal, your grace. But you really do deserve it.”

“I want to question her first.”

“Hurry then. Our time will be up soon and that guard will want a look.”

“Where is John Carter?” I asked the queen.

She had never heard the name, but refused to answer a question from a whore. She remained silent, though I would not have let her speak had she tried.

“Who is this land’s greatest warrior?”

She thought of a gigantic monster risen from the dead, her brother Jaime, the Mighty Pig, who it turned out she despised, a beautiful young man who kissed another man, an old man who killed enemies with a spoon, and the buffoon standing guard outside her door. She thought of no one remotely like John Carter.

“Who is your most powerful enemy?”

She actually laughed internally at that one. She believed all of her enemies to be dead, but slowly she began to reveal a repressed terror of another queen, one younger and more beautiful and served by terrible flying creatures. That did not seem to involve John Carter as far as Cersei knew; I could not be sure if this last were real or a nightmare vision.

“I am finished.”

“Then finish her. We’ve got to be going.”

“We are unarmed, and unclothed, in the most closely-guarded room on this continent. I do not know that we can escape.”

“We surely can’t escape if she has us killed.”

I thought about simply suffocating her, but changed my mind. Cersei had given me an idea.

“Get me the spork.”

Tansy dashed to the table and brought back the golden eating tool. I inserted it into the deep valley between the queen’s breasts. I was still amazed at how they pointed directly upwards, as though something had been implanted inside them. Tansy held down her left arm; I had her right pinned beneath my hip. She struggled, but could not break free. I looked my sister in the eye.

“I am sorry for bringing you here. I am sorry for making you act as a whore again. You would have been better off not becoming my sister.”
“Don’t be silly. I told you weeks ago. You’re the first person I’ve ever really loved. I’d rather die as your sister than live without having known you.”

*By the seven gods and all the demons, thought Cersei, don’t make me listen to this tripe. Just kill me now.*

I looked down at our captive queen.

“There are no gods, your grace. But I shall do as you say.”

Her eyes bulged – unlike most of her subjects, she was not stupid, and immediately realized that I had read her silent thoughts. She had not until that moment thought that I would actually kill her. John Carter would have tied her up and left her hidden in her dressing room; I was about to put a spork in her heart.

*Who are you?*

“A Princess of Helium,” I answered out loud, and then in my own language, “*yi valonqar e Elium.*”

*The valonqar!* She recognized my title! How did she know even a single word of my language? But my arm had already started to shove the golden spork through her breastbone. She let out a scream smothered by the hand I still held over her mouth; her back arched once again and she strained to break her arms loose. She relaxed as she died, and I straddled her to hold her face in my hands, desperately hoping to pick up any clue from her final thoughts.

“Dejah! The guard!”

I had allowed myself to become distracted. The guard who had brought us here, now wearing his helmet, had entered the room at the muffled scream and fast approached. I leapt atop him, wrapping my bare legs around his torso to pin his sword arm to his side. We careened around the room while he flailed at me with his free hand and I tried to jam the blood-covered spork through the eye-slit of his helmet. He crashed into the wall in an effort to shake me off; it knocked the breath out of my lungs but still I held on.

Finally the spork poked into his eye and he began to bellow loudly. I kept twisting the spork and when it gained purchase in his eye socket I punched it home into his brain with the side of my fist. He immediately collapsed limply to the floor.

I untangled myself from the guard’s body, and told Tansy to close the door. There were no thoughts detectable in the hallway outside. The queen’s serving woman still slept, though how she did not wake from the racket we had made I could not guess. I told Tansy to find some clothes for us while I tended to the bodies. Had I suffocated Cersei, there would have been no scream and I could have thrown her out the window as though she had committed suicide like her son. Sometimes I act before I fully think things through. A scientist should know better.

After stripping the guard, I strewed his armor and clothing between the door and the bed as though he had taken them off himself in his eagerness to make love to his queen. I placed his body on the bed alongside that of the queen, turning them to face one another, and removed the spork from his eye. I placed the spork in Cersei’s hand, and stuck his dagger into the bloody hole over her heart with his dead hand wrapped around its handle. I yanked the silks out from underneath the bed’s thick pad to make it look like a struggle had occurred. The little scenario I’d created would only fool the stupid, but it might confuse others. And there were many stupid people in the queen’s service.

The *valonqar*. Cersei’s last thoughts concerned the unfairness of her life, how she had never received
her due from her father, her brother/lover, her children or the people of her realm who never loved her. She regretted the deaths of the three children fathered by her brother, and that she had seen so little of her eldest, fathered by her husband the king, before she secretly sent him away to clear the path to the throne for her other children. Her first son instead became a blacksmith. She felt especially humiliated to have been killed by some foreign whore. She imagined a number of other people stabbing her, well-dressed men and women including the Kingslayer; apparently all would have been preferable as the instrument of her death. She remembered a seer predicting her death at the hands of a valonqar.

Tansy had found two apparently new outfits identical to that the queen had worn, with leggings, a short leather skirt over them, and a leather tunic. They were garishly decorated with the Lannister family lion, but that was not to be helped. I had seen other women clad in similar garb that I now understood to have been imitating Cersei, so hopefully anyone who saw us would not realize that we wore the original. Cersei had been a tall woman so the clothing fit for the most part; though neither of us was small-breasted it sagged over the chest on both of us, leaving the golden lion somewhat wrinkled. Tansy had also found two more daggers of the same extraordinary steel from which my sword had been forged, in addition to the two the queen had worn. I broke open the desk to retrieve those blades; I also scooped a handful of gold coins into a pair of pockets on the sides of my new outfit. We each slipped a pair of the daggers into the loops on our new tunics apparently meant for them.

Tansy began tapping the walls of the bedchamber, searching for a secret passage. I joined her. We found what seemed to be a door behind a garish tapestry showing the Lannister lion trampling the animal symbols of the other houses. We could not make it open, so I kicked it in and hoped the tapestry would hide the damage for at least a little while. I scooped up our cloaks, our sandals and our whore costumes, and glanced wistfully at the guard’s sword on the floor. It looked like a truly fine blade. But Tansy pulled me into the dark corridor, and we arranged the tapestry to cover the opening as best we could.

We moved down the dark passage as quickly as we dared. Eventually we heard screaming behind us; the serving woman had found our work. My work, were I honest with myself. I realized that she was the only other person who had seen us with the queen and considered going back to kill her as well, but I detected other thoughts approaching the bedchamber in response to her screaming. Instead we pressed on. We went up and down stairs and took so many turns that we became thoroughly lost. Many observation portals dotted the walls of the passage. We looked through them but eventually became bored of staring at empty rooms, servants cleaning floors, and guards sleeping instead of guarding. Were I writing an adventure tale I suppose I would say that we overheard the Lannister generals making their plans, but we saw and heard absolutely nothing of any interest.

One portal looked out into a busy corridor that seemed to include public traffic: there were workmen, laundry women, fruit sellers and others among the soldiers and court officials passing back and forth. When it became empty we slipped out of the secret door and headed toward the bright daylight visible down the wide passage. Soon we passed a bored guard who waved us out of the castle gates. We were back in the city.

*Did we get away?* Tansy thought intensely.

I tried to scan the crowds to see if we had been followed, but could not tell for sure amid the mass of moving, shoving people.

“I need a place where we can remain without moving for a short time,” I answered.
Tansy led me into a tavern, a busy place filled with working people and street prostitutes—not upper-
class courtesans such as ourselves. Despite our beauty and our exotic clothing, no one paid any
attention to us; unusual-looking people apparently came and went at all times. We found a small
empty table in the back corner, and squeezed ourselves onto the bench behind it, from where we
could look out over the wide room and no one could come up behind us.

A serving woman brought us wooden tankards of ale; I sipped mine and concentrated on the people
within and immediately without the tavern.

“Well?” Tansy finally asked.

“I believe we are alone.” I looked about. “Other than all of these people.”


“Nothing about John Carter. She had never heard of anyone like him. But I may have just killed
Gendry’s mother.”

“Cer . . . she was Gendry’s mother?” Tansy caught herself before speaking the queen’s name aloud.

“Possibly. Perhaps likely. She thought of giving her son away to be raised as a bastard. Yet she still
went to see him, at a distance, and imagined a young blacksmith who looked very much like
Gendry.”

“Why would she give him away?”

“I do not know. The thoughts of the dying are not always clear, and they sometimes confuse fact
with fantasy. At some point she definitely saw Gendry. Whether she believed him her son, or
fantasized of it, I cannot say.”

“She could do worse for a son. Actually, she did. Much worse.”

“Should we tell him?”

“What are the chances of our ever seeing him again?”

“Very low,” I admitted. “And perhaps it is best that he not know.”

“As you said, it could be fantasy. Hell, I fantasized it myself when you asked if I were his mother.”

“As did I.”

“Truly? Why?”

“He looks very much like a young John Carter. Enough to be his son. He is attractive, intelligent and
of good character.”

“So John Carter is the spitting image of Robert Baratheon. How curious.”

“I thought Robert was foolish and fat.”

“And drunk. Absolutely. Yet he was quite a man before all that.”

“You enjoyed him.”

“I would have done him for fun, yes. I took his money all the same.”
She smiled slightly, and shook her head.

“What else did you learn?”

“She recognized my title. Somewhere, she had heard my language.”

“You’re not the only person from Barstool to visit Westeros?”

“Barsoom. I do not know what it means.”

“It’s a vast land with millions of people in it. Visitors from the skies could come, live out their lives and die, and no one would ever hear of it more than ten miles away.”

“So this might have happened many times?”

“I have no idea,” Tansy said. “Is it worth worrying over?”

“Likely not. But I am curious.”

“You’re always curious. Did you learn anything else?”

“She was a bitter and unhappy woman, upset that a copper-skinned whore killed her and not someone more worthy. But nothing else of use, at least I do not think so.”

“She was more upset over who killed her than she was at being killed?”

“People have odd thoughts at the moment of death. It is the mind’s way of lessening the shock of the moment.”

I held up my hand to stop her from replying, for a man approached our table. He was of middle age, with thinning hair and well-made clothing. He leaned over the table and looked at us each in turn. His thoughts said he hoped we were prostitutes. I pulled out one of Cersei’s daggers and placed its point against his slightly protruding belly, where no one else in the tavern could see.

“I believe you have the wrong table,” I said.

“I believe you’re right,” he answered. “A pleasant evening to you both.”

“What did he want?” Tansy asked as he walked away.

“Our breasts wrapped about his sex organ.”

“He’s not that lucky. Not even . . . that woman . . . deserved us.”

We finished our drinks and paid with one of Cersei’s golden coins; I told the barmaid to keep the change and forget from where it came, she smiled and her thoughts said she would do so.

I had acted as a whore. It seemed that I should somehow feel degraded, but to show those feelings would insult my sister, and I would not do that. I had my answers regarding John Carter’s presence in the South of this land, but I had paid for them. I had learned that even the incomparable Dejah Thoris has a price. “Once that line’s been crossed,” my sister had said, “you can never go back.”
Chapter Twelve

Chapter Summary

In which Dejah Thoris learns of her new planet's two greatest wonders: orgasm and pie.

Chapter Twelve

We returned to Chataya’s brothel as night fell, wearing our cloaks to cover our newly-obtained clothing. As soon as we had changed into simple dresses Chataya herself hustled us into the private dining room where we had met before.

“I’m so glad you two are safe,” she said. “Have you heard the news?”

“No,” said Tansy. I had a preview but remained silent.

“Queen Cersei is dead. Some lovers’ quarrel with her Queensguard, Ser Osmund Kettleblack. He’s dead too. People are saying they started arguing in the middle of sex and ended up killing each other.”

She seemed puzzled that Cersei was having sex with this Kettleblack person instead of us. She assumed that we must have been turned away from the queen.

“What is a Queensguard?”

“Seven of the best knights from all of the kingdoms. The best fighters and the most honorable. At least they used to be honorable, but they are great fighters still. They protect the ruler, and swear off of sex. They’re good customers, usually; a man who’s sworn off sex will pay a great deal to make sure no one knows he’s still having sex.”

“And this story of a fight during sex. The people believe this?”

“You truly aren’t from around here. You saw the big smoking hole in the ground?”

I nodded.

“No one doubts anything anymore, no matter how strange it sounds.”

And no one could have missed the shattered secret door for long. Someone in the palace did not want it known that Cersei had been murdered.

“Who rules now?”

“No one knows. There will be anarchy soon. I’ve called in all my guards and told my girls to stay here at night. We’re closed for business until things get sorted out. What will you two do?”

I realized why she had seemed so surprised to see us again: she knew that Cersei had her whores killed after she tired of them. She had expected us to service the queen a few times and then disappear forever. No wonder she was happy to see us when we arrived in King’s Landing. Cersei paid her well to provide new playthings, and to stay quiet when they never returned. Chataya could
make some additional money and assuage her anger at my sister for breaking her contract, all at the same time.

I wondered if I should kill her. I wondered if I should tell Tansy. Chataya was Tansy’s friend, or at least Tansy thought so. And the dark-skinned woman had been willing to let her be killed, and apparently had wanted her to die. But would Tansy believe me, and forgive me for killing her friend? I was confused.

I felt my emotions drain away. I recognized this as the state I enter when I prepare to kill someone. I willed it away. We would leave King’s Landing and never see Chataya again.

“We will leave in the morning,” I said. “Thank you again for all of your kindness.”

Chataya fed us some fine roasted meat from a bird called pheasant and we returned to our room for the night. Tansy said nothing of our sexual encounter, and lay next to me unclothed as though nothing unusual had happened. I lay on my back looking at the ceiling, where I could just make out some sort of intricate design, and wondered what would happen if I kissed her. Or if I killed Chataya. Or if I did both. As was her habit, Tansy fell hard asleep and flung an arm and a leg across me. Comforted by this ritual, I eventually fell asleep myself without seeking a new encounter.

Later I awoke and left Tansy in bed, donning a cloak over my nude body and walking through the brothel and quietly crossing the garden to the privy. The room had a chamber pot in a small closet that one could use rather than making the late-night walk, but its use embarrassed me. While we of Barsoom eliminate far less often than the people of this planet, the need does arise. As I returned, Chataya met me in the doorway.

“You could make a lot of money for me if you stayed,” she said. “That tanned skin, those long legs, those big high tits with those dark nipples and that sweet ass. And that haughtiness! I’d pay you well. You’d only work when you wanted to. Your etiquette needs improvement; you eat like a starving boy of four-and-ten. But I could teach you that.”

She meant it. She thought I was a whore, and an expensive one. And perhaps now I was, though I had not been paid for pleasuring Cersei. I paused as though I were considering her offer. I scanned the household. No one else was awake except the two guards at the front door, and they were outside. Their thoughts involved some upcoming horse race that excited them; they were absorbed in quiet discussion of gambling odds and could not hear us.

“I know you sold us to Cersei,” I said softly. And then I punched her in the chest, very hard, right over her heart. She gasped and fell back against the door frame.

“It was only business,” Chataya said through gritted teeth.

I punched her again, and this time she died. I went back upstairs, crawled under the fur with Tansy, and pulled her close. No second thoughts kept me from sleep this time.

I awoke hoping there would be bacon for First Meal and that wonderful Summer Isles stimulant called coffee. Tansy was already up and came into our room as I was putting on my own leggings. We had burned Cersei’s clothing in the fireplace the night before; the smell of scorched leather still hung about the room.

“Chataya died last night.”

“How?”
“It appears to be a seizure of the heart.”

“She was old, was she not?”

“Old enough, yes. But. Do you remember a woman named Camille from the Brotherhood’s camp? Black hair, very pale skin, unpleasant attitude?”

“No.”

“She died in that big fight when you first arrived. You punched her right over her heart and it stopped beating from the shock. She looked a lot like Chataya does now.”

“Why would I kill Chataya?”

“Because you figured out that she sold us to Cersei, and knew we would be killed in the palace. Or under it. So you killed Chataya before she could sell us out again.”

I sat quietly, not knowing what to say. Tansy dropped to her knees in front of me and took my hands in hers.

“Dejah. We are sisters. That means we trust each other. You should have told me.”

“I was afraid you would not believe me. Chataya was your friend long before you knew me.”

“She was a business associate. You are my sister. Nothing you could ever do would change that. And I knew what Chataya was, and I suspected that we had been sold as soon as you said that Cersei planned to have us killed.”

She paused.

“That wasn’t the first time Chataya sold me, and put me in danger. I should have known better.”

She lifted my hands and kissed each of them on the palm, then placed them on the center of her chest, over her heart, with her own hands on top of them.

“I know you were trying to protect me. But we keep each others’ secrets.”

“I will remember. My sister. You are not upset that I killed Chataya?”

“Sweet Dejah. You can’t stab your way out of every problem.”

“It has worked so far.”

Chataya’s daughter, Alayaya, believed that her mother had died of a heart ailment, as did the rest of the staff. No one thought to look closely to see if she had unusual bruises. The ways of the Summer Isles called for an elaborate funeral with a parade; the mourners would dress in colorful clothing and there would be music, singing and dancing along the route of the procession before the body was burned amid a great celebration.

That was how Alayaya described it to Tansy and I, but with the city in such fear of violence she had decided to forgo the funeral parade. Chataya would be burned in the garden of her brothel.

A very subdued audience gathered: prostitutes, kitchen workers, guards. Many wept openly. I stood next to Tansy and felt the waves of sorrow wash over the small crowd as Alayaya applied a torch to the kindling stacked under her mother’s richly-wrapped corpse. I felt her sorrow; she missed her
mother deeply even though her mother had made her a whore. Chataya had told her daughter that this was the way of the Summer Isles and had no shame attached, but Alayaya had grown up here, in King’s Landing, and absorbed a different set of social mores.

The others missed her as well, unaware that she had been murdered. Unaware that her killer stood a scant distance from her pyre, pretending to be sorrowful.

We met with Alayaya a short time later to let her know that we would leave this city early the following morning.

“I’m very sorry,” she said. “My mother handled the accounts, but as far as I can tell the queen paid the girls directly. I show payments from the queen for other girls, enough to buy out their contracts, but none directly to the girls. The queen died before she paid for you two. I suppose I could try to bill the palace but you didn’t actually finish the job, did you?”

“No,” Tansy said. “We waited in an anteroom and suddenly chaos broke out all around. No one paid any attention to us, so we took clothes from a laundress’ basket and we left.”

“That was wise. I’m glad you’re safe, but I can’t pay you.”

She was highly embarrassed, and would have given over the money had Tansy insisted.

“I think the Maiden’s telling me to give up the life,” Tansy said. “It was a mistake to try to get back into it.”

She looked at me, and I understood what she wanted. Alayaya had no reaction; she had not known that her mother sent us to be killed. That pleased me; I did not want to kill Alayaya, but had she been a knowing participant in Chataya’s murderous scheme I would have gladly snapped her long and lovely neck. I shook my head slightly and saw that Tansy noticed.

“And you?” Alayaya asked me. “You’re astonishingly beautiful. My mother hoped you would join us here.”

“I follow where my sister leads,” I said. “I will give up the life as well. Perhaps I will take up the sword.”

Alayaya laughed politely at what she thought a weak jest.

“You’re always welcome here,” she said. “My mother would have wanted that.”

I believe that I kept my face still as she said that. I did not feel guilt for slaying Chataya – she had meant to murder me and worse, murder my sister. I realized that I indeed now valued Tansy’s life over my own.

“Thank you,” Tansy said. “But I think it’s time we made our own way.”

“There are few ways open to women of Westeros, even those as beautiful as you and your sister.”

“Still, we will try.”

Alayaya embraced us both, and we left her pleasure palace, now wearing simple dresses she had given us. It was time to depart this huge city of the terrible smells and worse inhabitants. I had killed in personal combat and in battle on Barsoom, but I had never murdered anyone until I arrived on this planet. And now I had done it twice more, and had been willing to kill yet another screaming woman simply to silence her. I had also killed a member of the elite Queensguard for performing his duty. I
had been a whore, even though I had not been paid. I had learned that John Carter was not to be found here or at least had not come to the attention of the ruling house. And I had learned that I must trust my sister, no matter how frightening the potential repercussions.

I was not the woman John Carter believed me to be. “The incomparable Dejah Thoris” was a myth. She always had been and I knew that, yet I at least believed her to be good. Now I had to doubt that, and consider all the other ramifications of that myth. If John Carter loved a fantasy, had I done the same? Just why had I reached my hands toward the blue orb of Jasoom, and then ended up here instead? I had believed John Carter a paragon of honor. Once I had esteemed that quality above all others. I had given honor no thought at all since my arrival – I spared the Mighty Pig because he amused me, not because he had earned my respect. Perhaps I did not belong with John Carter. Perhaps we all end in the hell we deserve.

I would have preferred to remain in King’s Landing for a few more days to investigate the great explosion of green fire, but we needed to leave before someone connected the trail of dead bodies to me. John Carter was not here, and I had assassinated a crowned head of state. It would not do to linger at the scene of the crime.

We gathered our things and walked to the stable to collect our horses, my weapons and most of our gold. All was safely where we had left it in the stable-owner’s large iron safe. The stable owner had taken excellent care of our animals, and I was glad to give him a little extra gold – even without any whoring profits beyond what I had stolen from Cersei’s writing desk, we still had plenty from our share of the Harrenhal loot.

Leaving King’s Landing itself proved more troublesome. A long line had built up behind the Dragon’s Gate from which we wished to depart, as soldiers wearing red cloaks had replaced those in gold we had seen on our arrival. They inspected everyone closely, and also checked the contents of all carts and wagons. We walked our horses slowly forward, and a soldier stepped in front of me, peering at me closely.

“Copper skin. Dark hair. We have some questions for you.”

“Hold,” came an impossibly loud, echoing voice. “She’s a friend of my family. I’ll handle this.”

The Mighty Pig pushed his way through the crowd. He looked ill, and both of his wrists were heavily bound in protective casts. The soldier backed away.

“We are old friends,” he said quietly so only Tansy and I could hear. I would not have guessed he was capable of such. “One of you take each of my arms, smile, and we walk straight through the gate. Understand?”

I detected no treachery in his thoughts. I nodded to Tansy, and she did as he said. I watched and copied her, looping my hand behind his elbow and onto his forearm. He led us and our horses past the line, talking non-stop about non-existent friends and relations until we were clear of the gate and its guards. Then he stopped.

“I owed you a life. I hope we’re even now.”

“You do not know that it would have been my life lost.”

“No, I don’t. Think of it as keeping the lives of my men off your conscience if you prefer.”

“Why?”
“That’s not clear?”

“No, I am sorry. It is I who is not clear. Why did we need help leaving the city?”

“I rode in last night with Jaime Lannister. This morning he issued orders to bring anyone matching your description to him for questioning; I knew it had to be you. I think he’s seized power and possibly the crown from his sister. I don’t know why he wants you, I assume it’s because of the sword, but I don’t want to know why. I know that I serve a family of monsters, but I swore an oath. Don’t ask me to break it any more than I have already. And don’t go back up the Kingsroad. The rest of Lannister’s army is headed south.”

“Thank you.” I kissed his cheek. Tansy kissed the other. We mounted up and rode away.

We cut across from the Kingsroad down a wagon track to another road heading northeast to a town called Rosby. No one pursued us, and we rode through farmland untouched by war. Tansy explained more of what had happened in King’s Landing, and made me show her my tongue. I learned that what we of Barsoom consider to be “sex,” the people here refer to as “extended foreplay.”

I described what I had read in Cersei’s mind as Tansy applied her tongue to Cersei’s sex receptacle and I had mine on her breasts.

“It’s called an orgasm. It’s not spoken of often. I’d guess most men don’t know it exists; at least not many even try to give one. Some of the Faith say it happens when a woman is possessed by a demon. Others believe it’s necessary for a woman to become with child, to match the same reaction from a man. So they claim that a woman cannot get with child by way of rape, which is a damned convenient way to blame a woman for her own rape.”

“How is that?”

“If you are with child by a rapist, that means you had an orgasm. And if you had an orgasm that means you enjoyed it. And if you enjoyed it . . .”

“No rape.”

“Exactly.”

We rode awhile and I considered that. I was very glad not to have been born a woman of this planet. Except that I envied the glorious gift of orgasm that we of Barsoom cannot, as far as I am aware, receive.

“Orgasm is not always received?”

“Depends on the woman, depends on her lover. Some have it often, some never at all. And the lover needs some skill and a will to give it. Unless she gives it to herself.”

“You can receive orgasm from yourself?”

“With your fingers.”

“You do not need a lover?”

“No, but it’s usually better that way. I’m pretty sure no one has one every time.”

“You have received orgasm?”
“What do you think happened when we were with Cersei? When she told you to kiss my breasts?”

“From me?”

“Yes, from you. And that magic tongue. It’s pretty rare to get one just off your breasts.”

“I have many skills.”

“I’ve underestimated you.”

Even though I did not wish to become my sister’s lover, the fact that I had given her orgasm, and done so in a unique way, made me very proud of myself.

“Do you often receive orgasm?”

“Only during sex for fun. Never when I was working. Not from a client, anyway. I’ve play-acted them I don’t know how many times.”

She began to moan, writhing back and forth and then throwing her head back. She shuddered and panted, “oh gods, oh gods, insert name here, oh gods.” Then she finally screamed.

“That is not how you received orgasm in the palace.”

“No, but it’s what the client expects. You’re playing a role. I needed to show Cersei that I was excited by you, but not more excited than I was by her.

“It’s also a thing with me, and a lot of whores. My own pleasure is mine, not the client’s. You try to hold onto something no one can pay for; some whores won’t kiss, that’s one example. I don’t want to mix how you made me feel for real with how I pretended to feel with her.”

“So you liked it?”

“From you? Oh gods yes. I had to bite you to keep from crying out. You don’t have orgasms?”

“Not like that. We have pleasure but not nearly as intense. My reaction when you kissed my breasts was as intense a pleasure as I have known.”

“I’m so sorry. I could tell you liked it and I’m glad you did, but a woman of our people could have had much more. I wish you could have gone over the edge.”

“And receive orgasm? So do I.”

“You used that tongue on John Carter?”

“Yes. He enjoyed having it wrapped around his sex organ.”

“No doubt. Did he come?”

“Come?”

“As you like saying, ‘receive orgasm’.”

I did like saying it. I would have preferred receiving it.

“I suppose he did receive orgasm. His seed came flowing in powerful spurts, his skin turned as red as mine and he panted uncontrollably.”
“So that would be yes. You didn’t get the same pictures from his mind as you did from Cersei?”

“I cannot read John Carter’s thoughts.”

“Ah. I’m sure he did though. He never tried to make you come?”

“To help me receive orgasm?”

“Yes.”

“I suppose he did. Speaking of sex made him nervous and shy, but early in our time together he tried to apply his tongue to what he thought was my sex receptacle, but my people are not the same as yours and it gave me no pleasure. His sex organ would not fit inside me, either, which frustrated him greatly. Would I have enjoyed that?”

“If you had the same parts that we do, I’m sure you would have. If not, probably not. You can’t help what you are, Dejah. You were the normal one on your planet.”

I considered this; she was of course correct. I had fallen in love with an alien, and all that that entailed. Was there not more to love than inserting a sex organ? That was certainly the case on Barsoom.

“So you’re the most beautiful woman on three planets,” Tansy continued, “and you have that gift of a tongue. Why isn’t he the one searching for you?”

I could tell she was being playful, but that question had bothered me deeply. Did John Carter even remember me? Had he found someone else, someone who could receive his sex organ, and to whom he could give orgasm? Had he realized my true, murderous nature?

“You’re fading away again. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“It troubles me. But I have found my sister, and should appreciate what I have.”

“And if you do find John Carter?”

“Whatever happens, we remain sisters. As you have said, that is not subject to change. You will leave this planet with me. If that is not possible or is not your wish, then I will stay with you. Either way, we remain together.”

“And if John Carter objects?”

“Then I will know that he no longer wishes to be with me. I will not be separated from my sister.”

On this road there were plenty of inns, and we selected a fine-looking establishment built of red brick for our first night’s stay. It sat on the fringe of a tiny village of roughly-made shacks. I saw no evidence of wartime damage, nor did I see armed men walking about.

The common room held only a handful of people, who ignored us as we took a table. The innkeeper, a stout and friendly woman, said she had roast chickens; I ate three of them and a large loaf of fresh bread, plus a jug of white wine though it looked yellowish-green to me. All of the food was very good.

“Three chickens,” she said slowly as she gathered our platters. “Three. I don’t suppose you’ll want any pie.”
“What is pie?” I asked. The woman looked at Tansy.

“My friend is from far away,” she said. “They must not have pie there. What have you got?”

“Apple pie, fresh-baked. I suppose I should bring her the whole pie and not bother with slicing it?”

“That’s probably wise.”

“Milk?”

“Yes, please.”

The innkeeper returned with a round pastry, about an arm’s length across and perhaps half a finger deep. I stuck my finger into it, and tasted. It was warm, and inside had a sweet fruit filling. She handed me a wooden spoon, and a pitcher of a white liquid.

“What is this?”

“Milk.”

“What is milk?”

“You know, from cows.” I scanned her thoughts; this was the nutritive fluid secreted by cattle to feed their young. The concept disgusted me.

“Thank you,” Tansy interjected before I could comment. “It all smells wonderful.”

The innkeeper waited while I tasted my first spoonful of pie. It was glorious, a mixture of sweetness and fruit taste and crust. Truly we have nothing to match it on Barsoom.

“Try it with milk,” the innkeeper said.

Despite my disgust, I drank some of the tepid white liquid. It matched the pie perfectly.

“Thank you,” I said. “I have never tasted anything so glorious.”

“I’ll have more in the morning.”

“It will be difficult to sleep tonight.”

She smiled and walked away, thinking me strange but courteous. I had meant every word.

We returned to our room on the top floor of the three-story inn and prepared for sleep. I found myself watching Tansy remove her travelling clothes – tight leather riding leggings and a plain black tunic – with more interest than usual. I had seen her naked hundreds of times, but now I could not escape memories of her presenting her breasts to me in front of Cersei. I wanted my tongue on her light-brown nipples again, and hers on mine.

She saw me watching, and smiled. She picked up a wooden chair and pulled it over to where I sat on the edge of the room’s lone bed, and sat facing me.

“You’re thinking of what we did in Cersei’s bedchamber.”

“Do you also read thoughts?”

“Sometimes. When they’re really obvious.”
“It is a difficult memory to escape.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed me. Truly, I am. But you need to trust me in this, as I trust you.”

I nodded acceptance.

“I’ve had female lovers. So have you, I’m guessing.”

“Yes. Many times.”

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, Dejah, and I was one of King Robert’s picked courtesans. And you know how much I love you. And the things I can teach you to do with that tongue... of course I want to have sex with you all night and into tomorrow.”

“But?” I asked.

“You’re catching on. If we do become lovers, I don’t want it to have grown out of our performance for Cersei. That was vile. Degrading. Humiliating. Anything between us needs to be real, and beautiful.”

“I understand.”

“Someday we probably will. Seven hells, someday we definitely will. But not until Cersei’s in the past, and it comes about naturally.”

“You are very wise.”

“It comes from having been stupid. Thank you for trusting me.”

“We will still sleep curled together?”

“Of course. You’re the perfect bed warmer.”

We continued to enjoy warm beds as we rode through peaceful countryside, encountering no military patrols, Lannister or otherwise. We stayed every night under a real roof, sleeping in a real bed. An abundance of food surrounded us, including many kinds of pie. Each morning we still got up and performed our exercises, and I practiced with my sword. One can never have too much practice.

Steadily I felt myself relax, as I allowed myself to enjoy Tansy’s company and see these lands as they must have looked before war tore them apart. These people could have been happy, if not for the insanity of their leaders. I realized that this statement often held true on Barsoom as well.

And perhaps I could be happy here as well. It would be a very long time before the colors of this world felt natural to me, along with the weight of the air – I could feel its difference with every breath. But for the moment, riding through peaceful countryside with my sister and my horses, I felt more at ease than I had in a very long time.

Eventually we reached another town called Duskendale. This was a port town, and for the first time I saw the ocean. I knew that this planet – I no longer bothered to think of it as Jasoom or Dirt, or even entertain that possibility – had large oceans of salt water. Barsoom had also had these in its distant past.

I heard booming sounds coming from the ocean, that Tansy called “surf.” She explained these were waves crashing into the “beach,” the sand that fringed the water.
“Do you want to see?”

I was not sure, but she turned onto a sandy side track that headed toward the sound and I had no choice but to follow. The small trees and thick undergrowth eventually gave way to sand dunes similar to those of my home planet, but whitish-brown instead of the familiar red. Thick grass-like plants came up to my knees as we dismounted and walked to the edge of what turned out to be a small hill overlooking a deserted beach. To our left I could see the town of Duskendale and its small harbor. It had three wharves, two of them with ships tied alongside. A small fort was visible at the opposite side of the town.

Looking out over the ocean, I found it hard to breathe. The salt air felt so different, but the vastness of the blue-green-gray water made my vision waver and my knees weaken. This is a larger planet than Barsoom, with correspondingly broader horizons. I felt somewhat dizzy, and as I looked down it appeared that my feet were now far away. These were strange and unpleasant feelings, but I was determined to conquer them for the very idea of a water-filled ocean fascinated me. I could not study what I could not bear to approach.

When I could not stand the sight any longer – probably a short time – we rode down the track into the town and immediately spotted a large inn with four stories called the Seven Swords. A pretty young woman with twin braids in her hair greeted us in place of her father, the innkeeper, and assigned us a room on the top floor. The smells of salt and dead sea creatures on the air made me much sleepier than usual, and she sent a servant to our room with a platter of cold grilled chicken and fresh bread. After eating we retired early; I fell hard asleep before the sun went down.
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Summary

In which Dejah Thoris meets the pirates. It's a bad day for the pirates.

Chapter Thirteen

Troubled by a dream, I awoke to full darkness. I had seen Tansy on her knees before me on a field of ice and snow, her hands entwined behind her neck as she had done in Cersei’s bedchamber, begging me to plunge my sword between her breasts. In the waking world, she lay sprawled atop the furs next to me, perfectly safe with the moonlight bright on her pale bare skin, but I could not return to sleep. I watched her sleep for a few moments, then decided to look at the ocean by night and quietly put on my harness and leggings, with a dark green cloak we had found in Harrenhal over them. I went nowhere without my sword.

I walked back to the hill. The ocean under the light of a nearly-full moon was a beautiful sight, and I found myself much calmer looking at it without the wide horizon or the vibrant daytime colors. I stood for some time taking it in, my restless thoughts calmed by the cool salt breeze and the crashing rhythm of the waves. But then others’ thoughts disturbed this soothing picture.

I looked down at the harbor, and saw by the moonlight that a number of large ships had entered and stopped there. Smaller boats plied between these ships and the beach, landing men there or picking them up. The men leaving the boats were charging into the town and dragging people away. The small number of soldiers in the town retreated into the little fortress on the opposite side of the harbor and barred its gates, leaving the townspeople to their fate. By the scattered thoughts I could receive at this distance, it seemed the raiders mostly sought young women.

Tansy.

I ran back toward the inn. Amid the pain and fear it was hard to pick up individual thoughts, but the scattered impressions I could get from my sister showed that she had been roughly awakened and taken from our room.

As I pounded down a narrow street, three men wearing red cloaks turned into it in my direction. I flung back my cloak to clear my sword.

“Well now, this is a pretty little bitch. I want her.”

I drew my sword. They pulled out blades of their own. I knocked aside the first man’s sword and cut him across the throat. Even as I killed him, I shoved the man on the right into a nearby wall with my shoulder. As the first man fell he cleared an opening to the chest of the man on the left, and I ran him through the heart before he could raise his own blade. Turning back to what was now the last man I smashed my elbow into his throat, crushing his windpipe. I had no time to finish him, and left him slowly dying as I ran on.

As I blew through the doors of the inn, I realized that Tansy was not there. A man had shoved the innkeeper’s friendly daughter onto a table where he energetically tried to rape her. As she squirmed and struggled, I shattered an ale pitcher on the side of his head. He fell and I savagely kicked him
under the chin, snapping his neck. Another man had been watching the rape attempt, mocking his comrade’s inability to stick it in, and now made to run into the inn’s kitchen. I chased him, grabbing him by his ponytail and slinging him onto a table. He was rather fat, bearded and pathetic. He had a wide but short sword in his belt; I yanked it out and impaled him on the table’s thick wood. He wept.

I turned to the innkeeper’s daughter. Her father was nowhere to be seen, by my eyes or by my telepathy. “Run and hide. Anywhere you can.” She nodded, her eyes wide.

I ran toward the harbor, encountering more red-clad pirates. I killed two who tried to stop me, but otherwise ignored them. I had to get to the boats before they took Tansy away.

I was too late. Even as I ran, pirates dragged her aboard a ship in the harbor; I could sense her terror. I stood in water up to my knees and glared at the ship, as though I could will it to run ashore where I could vent my rage on its crew. I screamed in frustration at the night and at the moon.

I had promised my sister. I had looked into her eyes in Harrenhal and I had promised that this would never happen to her. And now she huddled on the ship right in front of me, waiting for the pirates to force her to the deck and ram their sex organs into her. I could feel her dread, her helplessness. And I could do nothing to save her.

First Born pirates had taken me captive on Barsoom, intending to eat me – until John Carter destroyed their foul religion they consumed people of other races, who they considered lesser beings fit only to serve them as a source of slaves or meat. I had been just as terrified as Tansy, just as sure that no one could save me. John Carter had freed me before I became someone’s dinner. Now Tansy depended on me to do the same. And I had already failed her.

Stalking angrily down the beach, I looked out at the ships in the harbor. Tansy tried desperately to reach me with her mind and I could follow her thoughts; her hands had been tied and she had been roped to a string of other frightened women. Somehow, I had to get out there. I had no idea how to swim through water, but I considered attempting it anyway.

Ahead of me, ten men were tying up a pair of women and loading objects into a boat pulled up on the sand. Their thoughts said they were headed for the same ship I wished to reach. I still carried my sword and ran through the waves lapping at my ankles; they were drunk, laughing and talking loudly and they never heard me coming.

The killing coldness had come over me. I did not think, I only reacted: they had my sister and I had no mercy. The first four died in a single motion, as I swept my blade left to kill two men and opened the throats of two more on the backswing. I vaulted over the boat and landed between two more men, chopping them down with short strokes into the sides of their necks. One man stood in the water staring at me; I stabbed him in the chest as he continued to stare. He silently toppled forward into the water, face-down.

Turning back, I met two men trying to pull ungainly broad but short blades from loops in their belts rather than proper scabbards. I pushed the first one down on top of the other, then ran them both through with the same stroke. The last one made to run away; I chased him down and stabbed him between his shoulders. He made a few gasping sounds and died as I ripped his tunic from his body to clean my sword.

I returned to the boat and cut the two women free.

“Go to a safe place. Run.”

They ran. But I now realized that I had no idea how to make this boat I had captured go across the
water to the ship. In my killing frenzy I had slaughtered everyone who could operate the vessel.

I continued down the beach, and soon spotted a boat coming ashore. A single man had hopped into the water and begun to stride to the sand, leaving the boat adrift. I walked up to him, determined not to kill my last chance at a ride to the ship. He was not one of the pirates; his thoughts wondered at how a knight such as himself had returned to his old ways of sneaking ashore on dark beaches.

“You are a knight, yes?”

“No, not a very noble one, but yes.”

“I think otherwise.” I opened my cloak. “I am a woman. I have breasts.”

“And very fine ones they are. But what does that have to do with me?”

“A knight must help a woman in need,” I said, repeating Ned Dayne’s rather childish description of knightly duties. “And I have great need. Those raiders have taken my sister to that ship right there. I need you to take me there in your little boat, so that I may kill them and bring my sister back.”

“Kill which ones?”

“All of them.”

He looked at my sword; I had not yet wiped it down with the last dead pirate’s tunic and blood still ran down the fullers.

“I just escaped from there.”

I read in his thoughts that this was true, and that he bore great anger toward the people on the ship for his capture and captivity.

“Then my killing them will please you. I am very good at killing people.”

“Helping angry women kill people isn’t exactly what’s meant by the code of chivalry.”

He believed me suicidal.

“If I wished to kill myself, I would not need your help.”

He looked at me for a moment, realizing that he had not spoken that thought aloud. Then he nodded.

“This is a stupid idea. And it’s not even the first time I’ve taken an insane red woman off to kill someone.”

“You will not regret this.”

“Oh, I’ll regret it, Lady . . . who are you, anyway?”

“Dejah Thoris, Princess of Helium. It is a complicated explanation.”

“Ser Davos Seaworth. They call me the Onion Knight. Also a complicated explanation.”

He waded back into the water and retrieved the boat, then motioned for me to sit in one end. I wiped my sword somewhat clean, sheathed it and complied. He climbed in and took up a pair of large wooden stick-like instruments he called “oars.” With his back to me, he rowed us toward the ship.
We actually have boats on dry Barsoom, and I had ridden them in our canals and down the River Iss. This was far different; the rolling motion soon had me regretting the platter of cold chicken I ate for Evening Meal. Soon after that it had joined the assorted garbage and scum floating on the harbor waters.

“These are terrible seas.”

“Seas? Princess, we’re in a harbor. A perfectly calm harbor. These aren’t waves at all.”

There are gods, and they have sent me to hell for my lack of belief.

“I am nearing death by vomit.”

He tried to distract me. I sprawled across a pile of canvas in the front of the boat, staring up at the night sky to avoid seeing the moving water.

“What are you going to do aboard Sweet Cersei?”

“Sweet Cersei?”

“The ship is named for Queen Cersei.”

“That is an extraordinarily stupid name for a warship.”

The dead queen was having her revenge. She had reached from beyond death to afflict her killer with the uncontrollable urge to vomit. Ser Davos continued his efforts to take my mind off my sickness.

“What happened to your sister?”

“She and I took a room at an inn in this town. I walked to the beach to see the sea by moonlight. While I was gone, the pirates took my sister. They dragged her onto a boat and then onto the ship named for Cersei. Like most women of these lands, she has been raped before. I do not know the details, only that it harmed her deeply. I promised that she would never be harmed again. Never be raped. I will not break that promise. I will board that ship and I will kill every one of them.”

Davos Seaworth turned to look at me.

“You mean that.”

“Every word, every breath, every thought. What do the queen’s men want with my sister?”

“They used to be the queen’s men. Now they’re just common pirates. If your sister is anywhere near as lovely as you, I think you know what they want. If not, they’ll likely kill her. And even if they do keep her, they’ll likely kill her after.”

I seethed with rage. I worked through my mental exercises to turn it into cold focus.

“How did they come to be pirates?”

“When things were looking poorly for Queen Cersei, the commander of her navy, a man named Aurane Waters, took the fleet’s new ships and fled. He and the queen had been lovers. His other lover, who was also the queen’s other lover, fled with him – a vicious woman named Lady Taena Merryweather.

“If you could manage to kill them both, I’d consider my service more than amply rewarded.”
I remembered Cersei thinking of Taena, who she believed looked like me. She was likewise beautiful in Davos Seaworth’s memory, but much angrier than she had been in Cersei’s.

“I will do what I can. Why were you a prisoner?”

“I was on a mission for my king, Stannis. I was shipwrecked and they picked me up. When they realized who I was, they put me in irons. I had unlocked the shackles and when most of the crew left the ship to raid this town, I stole this boat and fled. And now, idiot that I am, I’m rowing back to Sweet Cersei.”

As he rowed, he explained the layout of the ship, where armed men would most likely be found, and where the captain usually took prisoners. Sweet Cersei was a type of warship called a dromond, powered by both sails and oars, and the very largest in the royal fleet though a bigger ship had been destroyed before completion. I had been very fortunate to find such a guide. My words had reached him; he very much hoped that I would succeed and gave me the best advice he knew.

He pulled the boat up alongside the front end of the ship, where a large metal-clad wooden point protruded that he explained was used to ram other warships. He pointed at the deck of the ship far above.

“You’ll have to go up through the hawsehole.”

“The what?”

“This thick line, that’s what we call a rope, leads below the water to an anchor, a heavy piece of iron holding the ship in place. It leads up into the ship to a compartment behind that opening there. That opening’s called the hawsehole because . . . never mind. Sailors sneaking back aboard ship climb through that hole because there’s never anyone on duty in the hawser locker. See the hole next to it?”

“Yes.”

“That’s the head. Don’t climb through there.”

“Why?”

“That’s where the crew, they, I’m sorry my lady. That’s where the sailors shit.”

“I shall be careful.”

“When you kill Aurane Waters, be sure to give him my regards.”

“I will.”

“The gods go with you.”

I took off my boots and cloak, as Davos recommended, and climbed up the heavy rope hand-over-hand; it is easy with enhanced strength. I made sure not to look down, for I did not wish to resume vomiting. The Onion Knight watched from below, amazed at my climbing skills and admiring my shape but wondering if he had lost his mind. As I looked upward, I saw that someone had decorated the front end of the ship with a golden statue of Cersei, holding a spear and wearing ringed armor. The sculptor had given her breasts even larger than those she had borne in life, but had accurately captured her sneering expression.

The hawsehole was narrow but I wriggled through. The little room called a locker was dark and as the Onion Knight had said, was unoccupied but filled with thick coiled ropes. While the ship did not
roll as badly as the little boat, it still rolled and I felt queasy. But I would not leave this place without my sister. I felt no alert thoughts behind the door of the little room in which I crouched, but there was someone on guard directly above me. I waited a moment for my eyes to adjust to the darkness, then opened the little door and peeked into a low-ceilinged corridor.

It led only a short distance to a wide deck with benches on either side. Nearly-naked men slept on and under the benches, many of them chained to round iron fittings in the floor. A bored guard stood over them with his back to me; another stood at the opposite end of the deck. They wore red cloaks but no armor, and carried clubs in their hands but no other weapons.

These sleeping men must be the rowers the Onion Knight had described. As I looked more closely, I saw that the deck had large openings leading down to lower ranks of benches and sleeping rowers. Moonlight shone through matching openings in the deck above. I scanned for more guards and found two more pairs below.

Following the thoughts of the guard closest to me, I saw that he wished to relieve himself. Sure enough, he called out to the other guard that he was “visiting the head.” When he passed my dark corner I followed him into a tiny compartment. I stepped closely behind him, placed my hand over his mouth and stabbed him with my dagger under his ribs, working the blade back and forth. I held his mouth closed while he died, and left him sitting on the shelf in the compartment.

I put on his red cloak and his helmet; he was a young man and I am taller than most women, so we were about the same size. I walked back out and stood in his place; I would have to do something soon. The ship’s rolling and the smell of blood on my hands and dagger made me start retching again. I dropped to one knee to throw up and the other guard stalked across the deck.

“What in the bloody hells is wrong with you, you gods-damned lubber?”

When he got close enough, I stabbed him in his large and round belly and twisted the blade. He threw his hands over the ugly wound, bent over and started sobbing. I took off the helmet and cloak and silenced him with my dagger. He fell to the deck.

“They’ll kill us all for that,” one of the nearby rowers, now awake, said.

I wiped the dagger on the cloak, put it away and drew my sword.

“Not if you kill them first.”

I raced down the center of the deck, reaching across to either side as I ran to shatter the chains holding the rowers in place, using my sword’s splendid edge. When I reached the “aft” end, as I recalled Ser Davos’ descriptions, I dropped through the opening to the deck below. The guard there had heard the commotion and wondered how he should react. I grabbed him by the throat before he decided and smashed his head against the nearby wall – what Ser Davos called a “bulkhead” – breaking his skull. His comrade at the opposite end of the deck fled. I again ran down the deck, cutting the rowers free.

Climbing back to the deck above, I ran aft toward Tansy’s thoughts. She was in a large compartment at the very back of the ship with seven other women. The thoughts inside revealed two guards, the Lord of the Waters and his henchwoman Taena. The captives had been lined up on their knees, and the first had been stripped of her thin tunic. As I approached the compartment Aurane Waters rejected her as “too poor to ransom, too ugly to fuck.” The lovely Lady Taena, laughing, stabbed her in the chest. She clasped her hands over her heart, pitched forward onto the deck and died. I had to hurry.
A red-cloaked guard stood outside the door; he drew his sword but I kicked him in the chest. My legs had been very strong even before I landed on this planet; with my enhanced strength and an enormous surge of rage-induced adrenalin my bare foot struck the guard hard enough to cave in his chest, turning his heart to pulp and sending his corpse crashing through the door and into the room beyond. I pulled out my dagger and stepped through shattered remnants of the door. The sheer physical force of my anger surprised me later, but I spared no thought for it at the time. The guard had had the misfortune to bar my path to my sister.

Taena Merryweather stood immediately inside, facing the prisoners with her back turned towards me. She had just started to react to the noise when I clapped my hand around her shoulders and pulled her back firmly against my body. This close, she smelled of a pleasant flower scent. She wore a tight-fitting red tunic and really did resemble me, at least in body type; she was of the same height and proportions, with black hair that she wore just past her shoulders as I did, but olive-toned skin rather than my own copper-red. The point of my dagger now protruding from the center of her shapely chest was another difference.

She looked down at the dagger, softly said “Oh,” and dropped her knife. I let her fall to the deck.

Two armed and armored men stood behind the remaining prisoners, but they were not watching for an intruder. A tall man with long and well-styled silver-gold hair, who I recognized from the thoughts of Davos Seaworth as the Lord of the Waters, inspected the women. He had just ripped open the clothing of the woman next to Tansy and was about to pronounce judgement on her.

I strode across the compartment and stabbed the first guard in the eye with my dagger. I had been trying to stab him in the throat, but the rolling of the ship made it difficult to kill with any accuracy. The second guard stood in front of a wide bank of open windows that looked out over the harbor. I left my dagger in the first guard’s eye and grabbed the second by his sword arm as he tried to draw his blade. Then I slung him out of the window. He yelled incoherently until he hit the water, where the weight of his armor quickly pulled him under.

That left Lord Waters. He was tall and well-muscled, dressed in a billowy silk blouse, red to match that of his lover, with tight red leggings, black boots and a black sash around his waist. No wonder Cersei and Taena had become obsessed with him; he was quite beautiful. He had backed against the opposite wall. I drew my sword, as angry shouts and the clashing of metal could now be heard outside. The rowers were fighting the “marines,” the soldiers stationed aboard the ship, and they would not last much longer.

“Aurane Waters?” I asked. I did not wait for a reply. “Davos Seaworth sends his regards.”

I tried to finish those dramatic words by running him though the heart, but the ship lurched and I stuck him in the upper right arm instead.

“Ow! That hurt, wench!”

I gave up on the drama and resorted to a two-handed stroke aimed at his neck in order to remove his head. This time I slashed him across his perfect face, taking off only the top half of his head. Blood and brain flew across the compartment and spattered the prisoners. He slumped to the floor next to his lover, the nude body of the pale, fat woman she had murdered and the ravaged corpse of the guard I had kicked through the door.

A small set of stairs led to the main deck, where a group of marines milled about and forced back any rowers trying to climb up from below. The rowers were dying quickly; I did not have much time. I cut the women free, telling them to run. Tansy threw herself on me.
“I thought you must be dead. I was so frightened.”

She clasped me tightly and cried. I stroked her hair and kissed her forehead.

“No matter what happens, I will always, always come for you. I will not be separated from my sister.”

I glanced at Lady Taena, now sprawled on her back with her dark eyes staring sightlessly upward. The tight-fitting red tunic left her well-toned abdomen bare up to her lower ribs, with a short matching red skirt below, high-topped black boots and a black sash around her waist. I really wanted to strip her and take the outfit for myself; it would surely fit me and I would look beautiful and deadly in it. But a wide bloodstain and a dagger-inflicted rip ruined the front of the garment, with matching ones no doubt marring the back. I should have broken her neck instead; I again regretted killing before thinking. Reluctantly I left her where she lay, retrieved my sister and my dagger and rushed up the stairs and into the open.

“Grab the back of my harness and stay right behind me,” I told Tansy. She nodded quickly; her thoughts said she was unhurt. My joy at having her returned to me felt physically painful. “We have to fight our way back to the front end of the ship. A friend waits there.”

The marines had not seen us yet. I noticed a war machine on the deck above and behind us, a device for hurling large arrows. Apparently the crew had been prepared for battle, for a large wooden basket next to the machine had been filled with long, iron arrows. I climbed another tiny set of stairs to the ship’s topmost deck with Tansy right behind me.

We hunt with javelins on Barsoom; throwing them is a skill required of noble women. I had never liked the idea of killing animals for sport – as John Carter liked to say, hunting will become a sport when they give the prey a gun. But I had always been very good at throwing the javelin. I hefted one of the arrows; it was about the same length as a hunting javelin but heavier. With my enhanced strength this presented no obstacle and would probably make the missile fly truer and with more force.

The first marine I hit with an arrow slowly spun fully around and then toppled into the lower decks below. A man beside him looked up to see where the missile had originated; he took the next one through the chest. I continued to fling the deadly arrows at the marines. Some ran away and the braver ones rushed to attack me.

I had but one arrow left when the first marine reached me; I used it to stab him in the chest and then hurled it at the second marine. At such a close range it fully penetrated his body and killed the man behind him as well. There were only two men left standing and I now drew my sword and charged them, yelling wildly. The first received a two-handed cut across his chest and the second an upward cut under his jaw that split his skull.

And now the main deck stood empty. I led Tansy to the front of the ship, what Ser Davos called the “bow,” and saw him still below in his little boat.

“Can you climb down there?”

“Dejah, we can’t leave the other prisoners.”

“I came here for my sister.”

“They deserve the same chance I have.”

I made a horse-like sound of frustration. And I wanted to vomit again.
“Can you swim?”

“I’m a Riverlands girl.”

“So jump.”

She did.

I looked back down the deck. Bodies sprawled in grotesque positions, many of them skewered by the heavy iron arrows. Elsewhere rowers and marines lay as they had fallen, choking the life out of one another. I marched towards the captain’s cabin; I could hear sounds of struggle from below but this time no one stood in my way.

I heard sounds coming from the outside of the ship, and cautiously peeked over the edge. A boat had pulled alongside the ship and the men within called for the crew to lower a cargo net. I could not allow them to pursue Davos Seaworth’s little boat, so I looked about the deck. Another war machine stood mounted nearby, though this one had no iron arrows. I put my shoulder to its side and pushed until it broke free of the deck. It was very heavy, even for one of enhanced strength. I dragged it to the edge of the deck and balanced it on the railing above the boat below. When I thought I had it aligned, I shoved the broken war machine over the edge.

The machine crashed through the bottom of the boat. The men within began to yell. Some of them screamed instead; the device had apparently crushed someone when it landed. The boat quickly filled with water and sank, while the men flailed in the sea. Their thoughts indicated that most of them could not swim; my thoughts indicated that I did not care. Perhaps they should have chosen a different career.

When I reached the captain’s cabin the women were no longer there, other than the well-dressed corpse of Lady Taena and the three other bodies. For a moment I was glad that I had killed Taena. But how different were we, really? We looked alike, we had both made love to Cersei, and I had even wished to take on her clothing – a psychologist on Barsoom would not have missed the import of that symbolism. She had committed murder, but had I not also put a blade through the heart of an innocent, unattractive woman?

I stopped and retched again, now only capable of dry heaving. I scanned for the thoughts of the remaining female prisoners but could only locate one for sure; she had joined a group of rowers struggling to reach the main deck and was energetically beating a sailor with a piece of wood. I knew that I would never find them all. Their best chance was for the crew to give up their fight with the rowers.

Outside the cabin, a tall dark-haired man in a well-made red cloak and armor called for me to stop; his thoughts labelled him a ship’s officer. I cut his legs out from under him and pointed my sword at his throat he lay on the deck.

“What is happening below?”

He said nothing, but his thoughts revealed that the rowers had freed their comrades on the lowest deck and in the darkness were still resisting the marines. Many were dead and without their captain the crew was considering abandoning the ship.

“You are in charge here?”

Again he said nothing, but he was second to Aurane Waters.

“The Lord of the Waters is dead. I took his head. Most of his head. You command this vessel now.
And you will do as I say.”

“And if I refuse?”

“I will kill you. It is of no importance to me. But you may do me a small service, and in exchange you might live.”

A pair of sailors rushed up to us. I showed them my bloody sword. They ran in the opposite direction.

“Your crew will not save you.”

“No, I suppose not.”

I took his weapons and threw them out of the rear window of the captain’s cabin. Taking the officer by the collar, I dragged him up the small staircase and up another to a deck that overlooked the lower middle part of the ship. I leaned him against a railing.

“Tell your crew to leave this ship.”

“I swore an oath to defend the ship.”

“You swore an oath to some king or queen before that, did you not? You are a pirate now, without honor.”

“Fair enough.”

He leaned over the rail, cupped his hands in front of his mouth and began to bellow in a voice far louder than I expected, “Abandon ship! All hands, abandon ship!”

Now the deck became crowded with sailors, milling about in panic and wondering how to get aboard the ship’s boats. Some of these were secured to the deck and along its edges. Others were still on the beach, and three or four were tied to the sides of the ship. Some of the panicked sailors did not wait, but jumped into the water below. Most, I picked up from their thoughts, also could not swim.

A narrow beam connected this raised part of the ship to the similar raised part at the other end; I saw now that it was used to help lift the larger boats stowed on deck. But it also gave a route to my destination, so I wiped my sword on the officer's tunic, sheathed it and climbed up onto the beam.

“I'll bleed to death here.”

“Not if your crew saves you. I hope you were a good officer.”

“You promised that I would live.”

“I said that you might live. Perhaps you will.”

I walked carefully down the beam, only slightly wider than my foot. As the ship rolled from side to side, I again wanted to vomit. When I reached a mast I had to carefully edge my way around it and resume my perilous journey. Below me I felt that the rowers had emerged from below and now fought the crew for possession of the boats. A few looked up at me but not one interfered. The ship’s steady roll made the walk difficult, but eventually I made it to the raised section at the front of the ship. The “fore castle,” Davos Seaworth would have said.

A large lamp hung on a hook at the very front end, fueled by some kind of burning oil – I had not seen these people use liquid fuels for anything other than lighting. I looked at its flame and had an
idea. I took it down and returned to the hawser locker where I had first entered the ship. As I recalled, the thick ropes stored there were heavily coated in black tar. If this tar was anything like the similar plant-based substances of Barsoom the ropes would be highly flammable. I threw the lantern at the pile of coiled rope hard enough to shatter the lamp. The tar was indeed highly flammable.

Since I now could not exit through the hawse-hole, I returned to the deck and looked down. I wanted to retch but held it in. Davos and Tansy were below in the little boat. I clambered down the side of the ship to the anchor rope and began to climb down it. As I did, its tar coating caught fire.

I yelped when the fire reached my hands, and involuntarily let go of the rope. I plunged into very cold water that pressed the air out of my lungs.

I could not breathe. I had to reach the surface. I kept stroking my arms and kicking my legs but there was nothing around me but water. I knew I would sink to the bottom of the sea and die. I felt a strong hand grab my upper arm. I was being dragged to my death and could do nothing to stop it.

Soon after, someone was pounding on my chest and breathing into my mouth. I coughed up an enormous amount of water. I was lying in the bottom of Davos Seaworth’s little boat, with Tansy straddling me and pressing on my chest. Her transparent wet shift clung tightly to her body, and I realized that she must have been the one to dive into the water and pull me out. I have lived for 441 of Barsoom’s long years and have never seen anyone or anything quite so beautiful. I was filled with love for my sister, and with sea water.

“She’s breathing,” I heard her say.

“Good,” someone replied. “She’s going to want to puke soon.”

“Too late.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not my boat.”

Behind us, *Sweet Cersei*’s bow exploded into flames which then raced down the ship and up its masts.

“Paint locker,” the male voice explained. “They store paint next to the hawser locker. The princess couldn’t have set her fire in a deadlier location.”

Tansy and Davos pulled me out of the boat after the Onion Knight ran it aground on the beach, each placing one of my arms over their shoulders and then wrapping an arm around my waist. I could not give much help and at times my feet simply slid along the sand. With frequent stops and much cursing they dragged me back to the inn, which somehow was still operating as though slave raids were a regular occurrence. Maybe they were. Someone had removed the repulsively fat pirate pinned to the table in the common room.

Inside our room, Tansy pulled off my harness, rubbed me with a soft cloth known as a “towel” and poured me into the bed, curling around me to lend me her warmth. Ser Davos tried not to watch, but I picked up flickers from his mind revealing that he peeked a little. He retrieved the daggers I wore on my harness, stuck them in the top of the large wooden table in the middle of the room, and fell asleep in a chair with the weapons in easy reach.
Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Summary

In which Dejah Thoris eludes enemies but kills no one.

Chapter Fourteen

In the morning, Sweet Cersei had rolled onto her side. The harbor was not deep enough to cover the ship and part of her still-burning hull poked above the waters; other burnt ships had joined her on the shallow bottom. The rest of the pirate fleet had left, but not before putting all of the ships in the harbor to the torch.

The inn’s common room had been thoroughly wrecked by the raiders, but the inn’s cook had gone back to work as though nothing unusual had happened. The three of us took some bacon and bread to eat outside in a small garden. I had a very weak appetite after all of the stress put on my digestion on the previous night, but my sword and daggers needed cleaning. I also needed to buy a new scabbard and sheathes in Duskendale; the blood and salt water had ruined those I had worn aboard the ship.

We could see the smoking wreck from the garden, and I gazed at the missed opportunity. I could think of no way to remove the golden statue of Cersei without using several boats and many workers. Perhaps I could stand in Ser Davos’ little boat and use an axe to chop off her golden head? I regretted leaving the ship without taking any valuables.

“I did not have the chance to check the bodies of those I killed to take their money,” I said. “Pirates should have had a great deal, should they not?”

“You rob the dead?” Davos asked.

“It is the way of my lands.”

I looked at my sister.

“I brought back the only thing on that ship that mattered.”

“Tansy tells me you killed Aurane Waters,” Davos said. “Thank you.”

“I gave him your regards. I killed Taena as well, but did not think to say anything to her as she died.”

“I didn’t mean that you actually had to mention my name, but thank you again.”

“She wore a beautiful outfit. I wanted to take it but it had been ruined by my dagger.”

“You’re nothing like her,” said the Onion Knight. “It’s better you not look like her.”

He was likely correct, but I have always been vain about my appearance. A princess needs to look the part at all times. I had rarely done so here, often covering my body with ugly rags rather than showing the perfect form that confirmed my royal breeding. Since no one on this planet could recognize that, showing my body meant receiving unwelcome thoughts of sexual fantasies but none
of the respect I would have garnered on Barsoom.

I finished my food and laid my weapons, a small flask of oil and several clean cloths on the small stone table from which we had eaten so I could begin to clean them properly.

“It was a messy fight,” I said as I worked on a dagger, formerly Cersei’s dagger, “with the ship’s deck rolling wildly.”

“Princess,” Davos said, “that wasn’t a rolling deck. Ships are never any calmer than what you saw last night.”

“Then I am not boarding another ship. What about you? What will you do now?”

“I must rejoin my king. I failed in the mission I’d undertaken, but he needs me all the same. He’s somewhere in the North, so I’m thinking I’ll find a way to Maidenpool and take ship there for the North.”

“Where is Maidenpool?”

“North of here, a few days’ ride. It’s a small port but I should be able to find a ship unless the pirates have been there, too.”

“We also head north,” I said as I laid down the dagger and picked up my sword. As always, I felt a small thrill from its touch. “I must find my husband.”

“He’s in the north?”

“I do not know. He is a great warrior and where there is war, there I will find him. War attracts him.”

“There’s plenty of war in the North. You could take ship with me.”

“I have seen enough of ships, Davos Seaworth.”

“I don’t blame you. And you, Tansy?”

“I’ll go where my sister goes. What if she falls into a bathtub?”

“You don’t look alike, but the way you saved each other last night . . . aye, you’re sisters. When you went under, Princess, Tansy dove right in after you. I thought I’d not see either of you again.”

I reached over and squeezed my sister’s hand. I had expected to die in the water.

“Is Maidenpool on the road to the North?” I asked.

“Yes, or at least it can be.”

“Then you will ride with us. I have an extra horse.”

“Are the horses . . .” Tansy feared to complete her question.

“Yes. The raiders never came close to them. Our belongings left with them are likewise secure.”

Davos Seaworth wondered how I knew that with such surety, but said nothing aloud.

“Again, I thank you. That is a great help to me.”

“You would not rather go home?”
“Of course I would. But my duty is to my king.”

“He has earned this devotion?”

“He is just,” Davos answered. “A just man in an unjust world. That’s a rare thing and not to be scorned.”

“Is he a good man?”

“That . . . is more difficult to say. I suppose it depends on your definition of ‘good’.”

“So he is not.”

“Stannis raised me from nothing. I’m not like to forget that.”

“I understand. Just men – and women – are rare in our lands as well.”

“When do we leave?”

“I also wish to leave this place,” I said, laying down my clean sword. “But I need rest after my almost-fatal encounters with drowning and vomit.”

We stayed in the inn two more nights, and during this time I never let Tansy out of my sight. She swam in the ocean, while I enjoyed feeling the sun on my bare flesh; Tansy could not stand the direct sunlight without damage to her skin but we of Barsoom do not experience the painful condition she called “sunburn.” Ser Davos humored us as best he could, but remained impatient to rejoin his king. He finally relented and spent some time attempting to catch fish from the surf, using a long pole and a thick string connected to a metal hook.

I did learn to approach the ocean during daylight, and on our last day even walked barefoot out into the surf up to my knees. I could learn to enjoy this, I decided, but it would take a good deal more acclimation. The water bothered me less than the broad horizon.

Davos worried that sharing our room might be improper; I told him to tell anyone who asked that he was our father. He accepted this, though in the event no one questioned his presence. He slept on our floor and accompanied us to the shore, patiently answering my questions about the ocean, its creatures and the ships that sailed upon it.

“You have never seen the ocean?” Ser Davos asked as I watched Tansy swim in the surf. The Onion Knight sat next to me in a reversed position, with his back to the sea and facing the sand dunes, as my sister was naked and it would be improper to gaze upon her flesh, despite his great desire to gaze upon my sister’s wet, bare flesh. I maintained a watch with my eyes and my mind for the deadly sea creatures called “sharks” but located only friendly and surprisingly intelligent beings Ser Davos named “dolphins.”

“How did you get here from Sothoryos without crossing the sea?”

“I do not know,” I said, mostly truthfully. “I wished to be near my husband, and I appeared in a forest clearing in the River Lands.”

“Magic?”

“I do not believe in gods, or magic.”

“Can you explain your arrival then?”
“No. It bothers me to admit this.”

“I’ve lived far longer than you,” he said, unaware that the opposite was true, “and seen many things I can’t explain. That it seems no one can explain.”

“I will grant you this, but that simply means that one needs more information.”

They had no word exactly matching data, nor any real grasp of analysis. As best as I could glean from my encounters so far, they looked at evidence and made guesses, often invoking their gods.

“You believe that any event can be understood by man?”

“Yes, with enough study and information.”

“There’s nothing reserved for the gods to know?”

“No, since there are no gods, there is no knowledge reserved to them. All knowledge is open to man, if we can but understand it.”

He nodded.

“Sound logic, princess. Can’t say I agree, but I follow the path well enough.”

Tansy came running up from the surf, beautiful as the sunlight hit the drops of water on her bare skin. She had become very fit since the first time I saw her remove her clothing. I considered turning around to join Davos in staring at the dunes.

“Enjoy yourself?” I asked as she rubbed herself with a towel.

“Wonderful,” she said. “Winter’s coming and it’ll be years before anyone can do that again. But we’re not here for the waters, are we? Are you ready to ride?”

“I am. Ser Davos?”

“Been waiting to hear that for days.”

Duskendale included several shops devoted to arms, armor and other accoutrements of war. Apparently a large battle had been fought nearby and some of the more enterprising townspeople had scavenged the field for weaponry and other gear. I supposed they would soon restock their shelves from the wreck of Sweet Cersei, and someone would melt down Cersei’s golden breasts.

I bought a new scabbard in a large shop filled with armaments, along with sheaths for my daggers. Tansy had placed my salt-water-soaked leather battle harness in a tub of fresh water as soon as we returned to the inn from the pirate ship, and it remained soft and pliable.

“You do not wear a sword,” I said to Ser Davos as I slipped mine into its new scabbard. “Do you need one?”

“Not really,” he said. “I’m right handy with a knife or dagger but fairly useless with a full-sized blade. You might as well save your money.”

“I thought a knight had to carry a sword.”

“It’s tradition, but not strictly enforced.”
“You will be more respected with a sword,” I said, relying on what I had pulled from his thoughts and those of the shopkeeper. “I will buy a sword for you and teach you to use it.”

The shopkeeper laughed. I turned to face him.

“You have seen the sunken pirate ship? And the bodies of its crew?”

He nodded, still smiling at Ser Davos being schooled by a woman.

“I did that. Alone.”

“It’s true,” the Onion Knight said.

The shopkeeper shrugged, remembering that I had proposed buying a sword from him.

“I don’t doubt you. Neighbor says his daughter was saved by a screaming, sword-swinging woman who killed ten pirates before her eyes. Was only amused by a knight who couldn’t use a sword. No offense meant.”

I did not recall screaming, but I often do so when the excitement of combat is upon me. I also snarl on occasion.

“I was caught in a battle frenzy and killed them without thinking. They had taken my sister,” I nodded to Tansy, who was looking at a large table covered with boots and shoes, “and I needed to get to that ship. Ser Davos arrived just in time and took me there in his little boat.”

“Well, if it keeps the pirates away, I’m damned grateful.”

“Show your good wishes by showing me a good longsword at a good price.”

“Ignore the kitchenware I keep out here. I’ll be right back.”

“You don’t have to do this, princess,” Ser Davos said quietly while we awaited the shopkeeper. I watched Tansy try on some knee-high boots; she could not hear us.

“She is the most precious thing in this world to me,” I said. “And I would have lost her without you. A little gold is a small thing next to that.”

I started slightly, realizing that John Carter might be in this world – and that if he were my statement to Davos would not change. A life on Barsoom means an accommodation with death – we expect that those we love will die in our sight, or we in theirs. I had experienced this many times, yet now I saw that losing Tansy would have torn my soul in ways I had never experienced. In subtle ways, I was becoming more of this planet than I was of Barsoom.

The shopkeeper returned before Ser Davos could reply to my observation, bearing a polished wooden case. He opened it to reveal a very fine longsword.

“Castle-forged steel,” he said. “Next-best thing to that Valyrian blade of yours.”

I took it from the case’s velvet lining and hefted it. It had good balance; though it was slightly shorter than my sword it was heavier. Ser Davos was shorter than I so that would be a good thing. The sword had fine filigree along its blade and just one fuller, and not too many of the garish decorations with which these people loved to overload their hilts, pommels and guards. A simple steel knob covered the pommel, yet it somehow seemed elegant on this blade. A plain black scabbard chased in silver completed the set.
“A lord’s blade, it is,” the shopkeeper said. “Don’t know his name, some northerner threw it in a stream rather than give it to the Lannisters on his capture. I fished it out when we was... checking the bodies.”

He seemed somewhat ashamed to have robbed the dead, but it is a standard practice on my planet.

I laid it across my arm and gestured for Davos to take it. He lifted it clumsily, feeling very awkward. Yet I could see that the length was correct, and he was very strong for an older man. The sword looked like that of an experienced knight, as best as I could tell in this strange world, and that alone could save him trouble in the future.

“We will take it,” I said. “How much?”

“Twenty dragons.”

He hoped for 10, but was willing to accept five. I dug five of the gold coins called “dragons” out of my small leather sack and laid them on the table next to the sword case.

“Five, including two wooden training swords.”

“It’s worth at least twice that.”

“There are many other shops in this town. And the blade cost you nothing. It is all profit to you.”

He sighed.

“Deal.”

Tansy had chosen a fine pair of high leather boots for herself, and a matching pair for me. My boots had not recovered from their dunking in the ocean as well as my harness. I paid for the boots as well, a little more than the minimum the shopkeeper would accept, plus a silver coin to have hobnails driven into the soles of my pair, and we returned to the inn where the innkeeper’s daughter awaited. She motioned us into the kitchen.

“Soldiers was here, looking for you,” she said. “Two women, they said. Copper-skinned beauty with a red-bladed sword and her red-haired lover. Said you killed Queen Cersei.”

“I did.”

“Someone needed to. They’ll forget her soon as the next king’s on the throne. You ever get back here, you stay as long as you like.”

“Thank you.”

“That would have been me pinned to that table if it wasn’t for you.”

She threw her arms around my neck. I returned her embrace.

“We must ride.”

“I know. I moved all your things to the stable. Check your saddlebags and make sure I got everything.”

We mounted up and rode north; everything had indeed been packed including our gold and food including a fresh apple pie. I hoped I could return and see the ocean again.
No patrols complicated our exit from Duskendale; the innkeeper’s daughter had certainly believed that we were sought, but apparently the local lord made no greater effort to carry out his orders to find us than he had to defend his people from the pirates.

Even so, we camped under trees on our first night out rather than risk being caught at an inn, and shared the apple pie. On the next day, we continued our ride under very fine weather, and Ser Davos explained how he had come to serve a beggar king rather than the current ruler in King’s Landing.

“You told the innkeep that you killed Queen Cersei.”

“I stabbed her through the heart.”

“I hope you had good reason.”

“Half of the people in these lands have good reason. Possibly more. As for my reason, she wished to harm my sister. I killed her first.”

Ser Davos did not seem shocked that I had assassinated a crowned head of state, nor did he judge me for it. He accepted that I had had good reason to think Tansy in danger. I felt my judgement of the Onion Knight confirmed.

“The Lannisters are not like to forget nor forgive.”

“You have met the Lannister?” I asked.

“Which one?”

“Jaime of the Golden Hand.”

“No. Not all knights are equal; I was never summoned to court. King Stannis called me to Dragonstone, his seat, when it became clear he would need to fight for his just rights.”

“As king?”

“Right. With Robert’s sons actually Lannister bastards, that made Stannis the heir to the throne.”

“But the Lannisters held the capital and claimed to rule?”

“Through Joffrey, yes.”

“Son of Jaime and Cersei? Brother and sister?”

“Right.”

These people rated incest as a terrible crime, and considered those born of incest abominations. We of Barsoom likewise have strictures against love-making between close family members, though the very notion of fertilizing an egg with a relative’s sperm is absurd. The genetic problems are well-known and no sane breeding official would ever allow it to occur – and without state approval, the egg will never find a working incubation chamber.

“If I understand correctly,” I continued, “Robert was not the son or even close relative of a king. He took the throne as the result of rebellion.”

“That’s right. I gained my knighthood for service to Stannis during Robert’s Rebellion.”

“You were a great fighter?”
“Hardly. I delivered a shipload of food, including onions, to Stannis whilst his castle lay under siege. And thereby became the Onion Knight.”

“No less a brave act. But when Robert became king, he took the throne by . . . “ I floundered for the word.

“Force?”

“No. By illegal means. Improper means.”

“Usurpation?”

“Yes.”

“The side who does it calls it ‘right of conquest’.”

“Might makes right?”

“Exactly.”

“So it is in our lands. Yet if Robert was not king by law, then neither is his brother.”

“And neither was Joffrey.”

“Two wrongs thus making a right?”

“The land must have a king. Stannis has the strongest claim, and will make the best ruler.”

“You are loyal to your king.”

“I am.”

“I hope he justifies your trust.”

“As do I, princess. As do I.”

I enjoyed speaking with Ser Davos, who knew a great deal more of this land’s politics than he let on. Tansy remained very quiet throughout our ride, which troubled me. I knew the symptoms; a traumatic event does not leave one’s mind easily. Sometimes the threat alone is enough to disorder one’s thoughts; Tansy had not been raped on the pirate ship, but she had felt the terror of its approach. Among our people, we can share our deepest terrors and find comfort with our friends and loved ones; I did not know how to express this verbally. I wished that I could open my mind to my sister, sharing her pain and thereby lessening it. Though Davos Seaworth was a good man, he remained completely oblivious to Tansy’s suffering.

“Do you wish to tell me what is wrong?” I asked as we lay together late at night.

“Not yet.”

“I could not leave Ser Davos. I would have lost you were it not for him.”

“I know. That’s no problem. He’s a good man, and I owe him my life.”

She said no more, and I finally fell into an uneasy sleep. Even sisters have friction in their relationship, I knew by experience, but I believed this to be something more than that.
Since we seemed to have escaped Duskendale unnoticed, we stopped at a small inn for our second night. It had only three guest rooms, so we took one with Ser Davos insisting on sleeping on the floor. After a nice meal of roasted fish, I took him outside for sword practice. Tansy sat and watched quietly.

I have never encountered an adult male warrior so inept with a blade. Accountants, cooks, artists of this world – I do not expect them to know how to wield a sword. But I expected more from a knight who had been to war.

I looked at him holding his wooden practice sword, reached out and slapped him on the wrist with my open hand. He dropped the blade.

“You have been in battle, yes?”

“Aye.”

“You have killed people?”

“Aye.”

“How?”

“Whatever came to hand – knife, marlin spike, deadeye.”

“As you say. You have never fought with a sword?”

He wondered how I knew the nautical terms he had used.

“Pay attention. These lessons will keep you alive.”

“Not really, no. I’ve carried one, but put it aside to pick up something else more useful when it came to fighting.”

“First we will work on holding a sword as though you know how to use it.”

“I’m afraid I’m hopeless.”

“I would rather you be hopeless than dead.”

After some time, he finally held the sword with confidence. The sun had reached the horizon. I had never worked with anyone quite so inept, though I have never had the patience to be an effective teacher of any subject. Still, I hoped these lessons might help him survive in this violent land.

Three days later we reached the town known as Maidenpool. Unlike Duskendale, it had seen the ravages of war. Many repairs had been made to its buildings, though, and a large garrison kept watch on the walls and the gates.

An armed guard stopped us as we approached the gate leading southward. He was alone, but I could detect three more men within the guardhouse behind the open wooden gates. No other traffic attempted to enter the town with us, and the guard hoped to alleviate his boredom by harassing us. Davos dismounted and stepped over to the side of my horse.

“I’ll take care of this, princess,” he said quietly. “Give me some money.”

He placed his hand on my saddle as though he were steadying my horse while we spoke, and I
slipped a small leather sack of silver and copper coins into his palm. The guard did not see. I turned to look at Tansy, and gestured with my eyes for her to remain behind me. She nodded slightly to show her understanding.

I followed his thoughts and those of the guard, he told a story of how he travelled with his two daughters, all the while clinking the coins in the small sack, knowing the story to be meaningless. The guard understood the story to be meaningless, and after what he considered a decent interval to allow his fellows in the guardhouse to believe an inspection had been made, called out “Clear!” and closed his hand over the money.

We rode silently through the gate.

“You have done this before,” I said.

“Countless times,” Ser Davos replied. “Maybe even with that same guard.”

We dismounted and walked our horses through the streets to a stable Davos knew; the owner’s thoughts confirmed his trustworthiness but only because Davos vouched for us. He would have robbed us otherwise. With our horses stabled we walked to the harbor, with Davos leading the way. I fell in step beside my sister and took her hand.

“How are you?”

“No.”

“You are troubled by what happened on the ship?”

“Yes.”

“I have offended you?”

“No.”

“We will see Ser Davos aboard a ship, then you will tell me of this.”

She said nothing.

“Sisters share one another’s secrets. Do not close me out.”

“All right.”

Ser Davos sought a ship headed to a place called White Harbor; the third one he approached was headed there and willing to take him aboard in exchange for gold. I gave him a sack of coins, much more than the shipmaster wished.

“Princess, I cannot accept this.”

“I told you, I would have lost everything had you and your little boat not appeared at that very moment. I took the gold from bad men. Let it help a good man.”

We hugged him at the gangplank. Tansy had paid little attention to Ser Davos during our ride, though he had not noticed. Now she gripped him tightly, her eyes filling with unshed tears.

“Thank you,” she said into his ear.

“If I’d been blessed with daughters, I’d have wanted them to be just like you two, and sisters to one
another. May the gods keep you safe.”

I did not tell him that there are no gods.

“We have no space,” said the man at the door.

“We have gold.”

“Then we have space.”

He threw no one out to make room for us; he actually did have several empty tables. I showed him a gold coin, and asked for two roasted chickens, a bowl of roasted potatoes and another of mushrooms, and a pitcher of ale. And whatever Tansy planned to eat.

She only poked her chicken with her knife, and mostly stared at the table.

“What troubles you, sister?”

She said nothing, taking a small sip of her ale.

“Your silence distresses me.”

She finally looked at me and nodded.

“I was almost raped. Killed. They took me and did what they wanted. Again.”

“Your past is over. I will not allow anyone to harm you.”

“I know that you mean that, and I know that you love me. I just felt so helpless when those men pulled me out of bed and tied my hands. You weren’t there, and I was a thing for them to use.”

“I have been taken as well. I know how this feels.”

Involuntarily, I rubbed my wrists. The perfection of my body in coming to this planet had taken away the layers of scar tissue that had built up there, but in my mind I still felt where the ropes, chains or shackles had rubbed my flesh raw. Multiple times. Usually my arms had been pulled above my head to better expose my breasts. I flexed my fingers, again wishing to kill those who had humiliated me.

“What happened?”

“Usually John Carter freed me, and killed those who bound me.”

“Usually? It happened more than once?”

“Yes. At times I have felt that I only exist so that John Carter will have someone to rescue. More than once, an evil person saw capturing me as a means to attract or harm John Carter, or to force my grandfather to do something. I felt like a panthan piece in a Jetan game, with no will of my own or purpose other than to serve as a beautiful prize for someone else’s victory.”

“You resent that.”

“I do. I do, very much. And I do not want that ever to happen to you again. But as I told you on the ship, I will always come for you. I know it does little to ease the fear. But it is all that I can do.”
“And now I play the same role for you.”

“That is not my wish. I feel little pride in what happened on that ship, and no sense of victory, only relief that I reached you in time and shame that I was not there to kill your captors the moment they burst into our room. I wish you could be safe without me, but as you have explained, that is not the place of women in this world. I cannot change your world. But if I can keep it from harming my sister, then I will do so.”

“Dejah, you must have killed fifty men single-handed to free me. Maybe more.”

“Fifty-nine men and one woman on the ship, ten in a smaller boat I sank, seventeen men on the shore. And however many drowned in the wreck of the ship. I was very angry.”

“You never hesitated, showed no fear at all.”

“I felt none. I thought only of you. But my thoughts are almost always totally focused during battle. It is nothing admirable; my lack of feeling disturbs me.

“It was not that way when I was captured. I felt helpless and alone, subject to another’s will. I was captured by pirates from another race of people, who prey on those of my race – they eat us. Others of my own race took me and treated me as a lovely thing, an object to be bartered.

“I know that my feelings are not always the same as yours. Yet I am sure that I do understand this one. You are my sister and I love you with an intensity I never experienced on my own world. We are together, and our adventure continues. That is the part that matters.”

"I know you’ll always protect me. I’m still shaken. I just feel empty.”

“You did not see me fight in Harrenhal. I warned you that it would be disturbing to see me kill people. It is not the way it is told in the adventure stories.”

“It’s not that. I’ve come to terms with that. A little, anyway; I saw you kill Tom, remember, and the soldier in the woods. And the bandits. And that woman and her guard.”

“So what troubles you?”

She sighed.

“I’d learned to accept, or at least pretend to accept, a woman’s place. Then I started to believe it could be different, that no man would ever use me again. And then it happened again.”

“Tansy, I am so sorry. That was the longest I have been apart from you since we became sisters. It was my fault, not yours. I will not let it happen again.”

“You can’t just kill everyone who threatens me.”

“Watch me. I am very good at killing people.”

She brightened slightly, and at least began to eat. While many of Tansy’s feelings escaped my understanding, I did know this experience all too well. Captivity doesn’t end when the hero strikes off your chains. I was enjoying my food – it really was very good – when a short woman stopped behind Tansy and said, “Sansa?”

Enough people were staring already. I told her to be seated. She straddled the bench next to Tansy.

“I’m sorry, I was surprised. I thought you were my sister.”
I already knew that.

“Who are you?”

“No One.”

And that is exactly what her thoughts said. No One. She had remarkable mental discipline. I had not encountered its like on this planet. The smell of the roasted chicken had made her extremely hungry; her thoughts did reveal that she had not eaten in two days. I waved a silver coin at the innkeeper, and asked him to bring No One a chicken, and another for me plus more ale.

“How does your sister look like me?”

“I have no sister.”

“We won’t hurt you. Really.”

“You’re much older than my sister. Actually you look more like my mother.”

“And where is your mother?”

“She’s dead. She was murdered.”

“What was her name?”

“Not here. You should finish and we should leave here. Leave Maidenpool.”

And so we did. Tansy clearly wanted to take the girl with us – she was young, not just a short woman – and so I mounted her on my horse and rode one of the others without a saddle.

When we reached an empty stretch of the road, the girl started talking. Tansy and I rode on either side of her.

“The Lannisters are looking for you two. A black-haired woman with reddish-brown skin and her red-haired lover.”

“She is my sister. We are not lovers.”

“I’m trying to help you. Is it true that you killed Cersei?”

Her mind remained difficult to read, but she was not very large. I decided that I could always kill her if necessary.

“Yes. I stabbed her in the heart with a spork.”

I reached over to hunt through my saddlebag and pulled out the spork I had taken from Chataya’s establishment. I held it up for her to see.

“You killed her with that?”

“With one like it. I am very good at killing people.”

“So am I.”

We rode quietly for a time.

“Are you an assassin too?”
“No, I am a princess who knows how to fight. The queen wanted to harm Tansy. So I killed her.”

“Are you sorry?”

“No.”

“Good. I’m glad you killed her.”

This was not the first time I had heard something like that. Though it bothered me that I had killed so often without remorse, at least I was spreading happiness by killing bad people.

“So what’s your name,” Tansy asked, “and who was your mother?”

The girl stared straight ahead, thinking. She reached a decision and squared her shoulders.

“I am Arya Stark, of House Stark. My mother was Catelyn Tully Stark. Now who are you?”

“I am Dejah Thoris, Princess of Helium,” I said. “And this is my sister, Tansy.”

“Is that a real place?”

“I think so. I also might be mad. Some days I am not sure.”

“I think she’s jesting when she says things like that,” Tansy added. “But she really is a princess from a land in Sothoryos.”

“But she’s not your sister.”

“She is my sister of choice, and that makes her far dearer to me than a sister of chance.”

Arya Stark thought for a few moments.

“Just so.”
Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Summary

In which Dejah Thoris encounters sisterly friction, a spoiled lordling, cherry pie and the murderous Waif.

Chapter Fifteen

After we halted for the night in a grove of trees well-hidden from the road, and brushed the horses down, we resumed our conversation around a small fire.

“What have you heard about me and about my family?”

“I have heard that a stable boy tried to stop you from leaving King’s Landing,” I said. “So you stuck him with the pointy end of your little sword.”

She sat instantly upright and reached for her sword.

“What did you hear that?”

“From the boy’s grandfather. It destroyed his life. His daughter killed herself in grief. I promised to kill the slayer of Chadworth for what she did.”

She edged away, and her fingers stroked the hilt of her little sword.

“Dejah . . .”

“Do not worry, my sister. I will not harm Arya Stark. I have also killed an innocent and learned to regret it.”

I looked at Arya Stark.

“You do regret it?”

“Of course I do! I was scared and didn’t know what I was doing! But he should never have died because of it. It was not my place to give him the gift.”

I wanted to ask more about this gift of death, but Tansy understood my desire and re-directed Arya Stark.

“Are you the only Stark left?”

“I don’t know. I know my father is dead, I saw Illyn Payne take his head. And I know my mother and brother were killed at the Red Wedding.”

I hoped that she did not know about her mother’s life after her death. And who killed her permanently.

“I’ve heard that two of my brothers were killed by the Iron Born, and that my sister disappeared. The only one left would be my brother who’s at The Wall, and sailors in Maidenpool said he’s been
murdered, too. I don’t believe that. I want to go find him.”

I started to ask about this Wall, but Tansy put her hand on my arm to quiet me.

“I know about your brother Robb, the Young Wolf. Which brother was at the Wall?”

She told me silently that she already knew, and was testing the girl.

“Jon. Jon Snow.”

“Snow is a bastard’s name.”

“So what? He’s my brother and that’s all that matters. I don’t care if he’s a bastard. That’s a stupid idea anyway. I hate it. No one should be treated that way because of what their parents did or didn’t do! It wasn’t his fault!”

Arya was crying now. Tansy took hold of her hand. Arya leaned away but did not pull back her hand.

“You love your brother Jon.”

“Of course I do! My mother should never have treated him that way. It was hurtful and wrong.”

“I have to tell you something, Arya. It’s not an accident that you thought I looked like your sister and your mother.”

“What do you mean?”

“My father was Hoster Tully.”

“Hoster Tully had two daughters, and they’re both dead.”

“Two true-born daughters, yes.”

“You’re my grandfather’s bastard?”

“Yes. I was sent away because your mother wanted no bastards around her.”

“I know. I mean, I know how my mother treated my brother Jon. So you and I are family?”

“I don’t want to be a Tully, or play the game of thrones. Dejah is my only family. But I hope you and I can be friends.”

“Me, too.”

On the next night we once again picked our way deep into a small forest, in case our appearance in Maidenpool had been noted. Arya slept cuddled next to Tansy, making sure to remain on the opposite side of my sister from me. I was very tired and for once I was not the first to awake the next morning, and found that my sister and Arya had already made a small fire. I ate some cheese and bread we had taken from the tavern and felt somewhat better for it.

We followed the road northward, and I continued to ride in the style Tansy called “bareback,” as I had from Duskendale to Maidenpool as Ser Davos could not ride without a saddle. Tansy now brightened considerably; she made eye contact again, her shoulders no longer slumped forward, and she smiled. I knew she would never forget the terror of her brief captivity – I knew this first-hand –
but she took joy in living again.

I did not wish to intrude on her growing relationship with her niece, and in truth had little to say to a girl of this planet without giving away my strange origin. We are only “girls” for a very brief span on Barsoom, and those few years are given over to education and training for the adult responsibilities which come to us by our fifth year after hatching. As a princess I had been allowed more freedom in my hatchling years and had spent more time playing in the gardens and with pets than the children of the working classes would have been allowed.

As with Tansy, Arya’s thoughts did not intrude upon mine and I enjoyed the relative quiet. Her defenses were more formidable than my sister’s, despite her youth, but I remained confident that I could penetrate them if I found it necessary. She clearly found a mother figure in Tansy, appearing just when she desperately needed one, and I did not believe her a threat to my sister. She seemed more and more to be exactly what she appeared: a lost and lonely girl. Who had been taught to murder people.

I usually rode behind them, lost in my own thoughts. Seeing Tansy’s spirits revive had taken a great burden from my mind. I did not understand Arya, or children in general. Childhood on Barsoom is considered mostly an annoyance; I now began to see that it is a great gift, to be treasured and protected. I could tell that Tansy mourned Arya’s early loss of innocence, so much like her own.

Parents and children have a bond on Barsoom, but I began to understand that this connection was much more important here. My own mother Princess Heru loved me very much, as did my father, Mors Kajak. But I knew from an early age that this was most unusual and had much to do with my role as Princess of Helium. While still in the egg I had been selected for my high intelligence, and they groomed me for a future leadership position in the family. That made it imperative to strengthen the bonds between us. On this planet they break family bonds for reasons of state; on Barsoom, we create them for that same purpose.

John Carter considered himself a “gentleman of Virginia” and as such left many questions unasked. Knowing that the answers would trouble him, I never volunteered them. John Carter’s mind could not be read, by me or anyone else, but I had married him and to know some things I did not need telepathy. I know that John Carter loved me, at least he had once, but I also knew that he loved an idealized version of me. I am under no illusions that I saw him through clear eyes, either.

John Carter was my fifth husband. All four previous marriages were contracted for reasons of state. I suppose I did grow to love two of my husbands, but both died in battle. The others also died in battle, but I did not mind those losses so much.

Our son Carthoris and daughter Tara were the products of years of experiments and testing, to see if the seed of Jasoom could quicken an egg of Barsoom. I was proud of them both, and as they were selected for the ruling class we had a strong relationship by the standards of Barsoomian royalty. But I was always aware that they existed because my grandfather believed, correctly, that this would help bind John Carter to the service of Helium. I had had other sons and daughters become part of the royal family, and loved them as well. All had died, through accidents, battle or murder.

I never knew most of my offspring. Our biology allows us to quickly expand our population, and when war looms all females are expected to contribute eggs, even the princess. They are quickened with sperm assigned by our Breeding Councils, who in peacetime regulate the population – with lifespans of a thousand years or more, we could easily overpopulate our cities without some form of control. These eggs are force-incubated to produce warriors, who enter training at a much earlier age than those who are hatched in the usual way. The identity of these children, and their parents, is no secret. But I had never sought them out, nor had any of them ever attempted to contact me.
Once again, things were different here. I had not thought of Carthoris or Tara since my arrival. This was not the same mother-child bond as that I was witnessing arise between Tansy and Arya.

I awoke on the third morning sore from the hard ground, which usually did not bother me. For the first time since my arrival I did not feel energetic enough to undertake my morning exercises. The last of our food had run out the previous day, and so I took the hunting javelin I had carried since Harrenhal and walked into the forest to seek an edible animal. I soon found an abandoned farm, and detected two deer eating the remnants of vegetables in the overgrown garden. I crept to the top of the farmhouse, but when I threw my javelin I missed both deer and they bounded into the trees. Knowing the ways of farmers on all planets, I pulled up the floorboards of the small house and found a sack of potatoes; a few had a fungus-like growth so I threw those away and carried the rest back to my sister and her niece.

I napped while the potatoes roasted in the fire Arya had built, and after eating several I became less sore and had a little more energy. We rode northward, and I tried to stay close and pay attention as Arya told of her childhood home and her departure from Westeros.

She spoke quickly and, unable to probe her mind without possibly alerting her, I had a difficult time following her story. Apparently her father had been a close friend of the king, and had been called to King’s Landing to serve as First Minister – the same First Minister who had originally sent out the men who became the Brotherhood. He left his castle in the North with his daughters, leaving behind his wife and his sons. This did not seem very wise to me, but I knew that I had missed some of the details of the story.

Arya had not liked King’s Landing, spending her time running about in the streets when not practicing at swords with the teacher her father hired for her. She was away from the palace when the Lannisters moved against her father, and escaped them. She saw her father executed, then went North with recruits for a special police force known as the Night’s Watch.

Lannisters killed many of the recruits, trying to find a bastard of King Robert. She helped hide the boy, who had become her friend. I thought about my friend Gendry, and pondered how the old king must have fathered many bastards. Then I recalled Tansy’s fond memories of King Robert, and understood that it would not have been very difficult for him to do so. I hoped Arya’s bastard friend had escaped. Arya apparently had been captured by the Brotherhood at one point, and later wandered across the River Lands with a warrior known as the Hound. She eventually left him when he became injured, and took ship for the Eastern Continent.

She missed her family home, Winterfell. She had heard rumors that it had been attacked and burned, and many of its people killed. That only made her more eager to return, seek out survivors, and re-establish Stark rule there if indeed none of her family lived.

“Would it be possible,” she asked Tansy, “for you to come to Winterfell?”

“There’s war in the north. We were headed there anyway so Dejah could search for John Carter.”

“No, not pass through. Stay there. If I’m the last Stark, I’d like to have family with me. You could be a lady, Tansy, and I would protect you.”

“You’re very sweet, Arya. But that cannot be.”

“Why not? I don’t care about bastard birth. My brother Robb was King in the North, and if I’m the last Stark that makes me Queen in the North. And that means I can make you Lady Tully.”
“Arya. It can’t happen.”

“Why not?”

Tansy looked back at me. I could offer no guidance.

“What?”

“I’ve been a whore, Arya. I spent most of my life, until I met Dejah, trading my body for money. I can never be Lady Tully.”

“You ran the Peach!” Arya blurted out. “I spent the night there. I remember you now. You were. . .”

Her voice tailed off as she realized the effect of her words. Tansy was stricken. I thought to aid my sister and closed up to Arya’s opposite side.

“I have been a whore as well.”

“Once doesn’t count, and you killed the client before she paid you.”

“She?”

“Queen Cersei.”

“The queen paid you for sex? And you killed her?”

“As Tansy said, I killed her before she paid us.”

“Us? Both of you had sex with Cersei? Together?”

“Dejah will tell you the rest when you’re older. Won’t you, Dejah?”

“Yes. When you are older.”

“Tansy, Dejah wasn’t born as your sister but you made her your sister because you chose her and you love her. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes, it is.”

“So I love you and I choose you to be my aunt. And that’s the part that matters.”

Tansy looked away. I knew that tears ran down her face.

We passed through devastated farmlands and burned-out villages. I continued to have poor results from hunting, but we still had plenty of money. My skin tone and red eyes made me far too easy to recognize, so Tansy and Arya would approach what few intact farmhouses we encountered to attempt to buy food, after I scanned them to be sure no dangers awaited within. They were not always successful. I found myself growing hungrier with each day that passed.

After crossing the sea to the Eastern Continent, Arya had fallen in with a training school for a cult of assassins known as the Faceless Men. We have these on Barsoom as well. They recruit the lost and forgotten, teaching them how to blend into any social setting. And then kill. John Carter had once infiltrated such a cult, and the temple of death Arya described to Tansy sounded very familiar: Yet another similarity between the ways of the Eastern Continent and those of Barsoom.
Even I could see that Arya had lost much of her childhood. Tansy wanted so desperately to give it back to her. I wondered if she realized how much of her self she’d recovered in caring for Arya.

“Was there a boy you liked?”

“That was my sister’s game. I never had time for boys.”

“None at all?”

“I don’t want to talk about that.”

“It’s a rule,” Tansy said, smiling. “When women are alone, they’re only allowed to talk about men.”

“That’s not a real rule.”

She prattled on instead about her pet, apparently a very large beast called a dire wolf. Now this sounded like a proper predator that would be at home on Barsoom. Arya’s dire wolf was loose somewhere in these forests, and she hoped it would come to her.

“I drove her away,” she said. “I didn’t want Cersei to have her killed.”

“Why would the queen want to kill your pet?” Tansy asked.

“She protected me from her horrid son Joffrey, and scratched him. The queen wanted her dead so I drove her off. Cersei made my father kill my sister’s dire wolf instead.”

I felt better about having killed Cersei, and worse about having helped her receive orgasm.

Tansy worked hard to get Arya to speak of things other than fighting and killing, but even seemingly benign topics like favorite pets seemed to lead to talk of murder and death. The people here think very differently than we do, but even I could see how damaged this girl had been by the deaths she had witnessed, the deaths she had dealt, and her training to become a dealer of death.

I waited outside the small village while Tansy and Arya haggled for food. Five rudely-built buildings clustered around a muddy open area. Their livestock had long been taken by marauding armies, but like farmers on all planets, they had learned to hide some of their food and animals. We were all tired from a long ride, including the horses. When armed men approached on horseback, I rode into the village common and told my sister and her niece to hurry.

“Wait,” Arya said. “We’re almost done.”

The farm woman continued to argue about the price of her pair of chickens.

“Here,” I said, tossing the woman a silver piece. I knew this was far more than the chickens were worth. She considered me stupid, but smiled to my face. She had but one tooth.

“Let us be gone.”

The chickens still lived; they were tied by their feet. Arya took the chickens from the woman and one slipped out of its bindings. It began to race around the farmyard while Arya chased it.

“Leave it. We have to go now.”

We rode out of the village as the armored men rode in. They saw us and pursued. We pounded down the road and turned onto a pathway into a thick forest. I sent our fourth horse, the one without a rider,
ahead to pick out the trail. I could see through its eyes. Even so, the armored riders gained on us. Our horses were simply too tired, and theirs evidently were not. At a fork in the trail, I rolled off my mare’s back.

“Go. Go now. I will fight them.”

“No!” Arya shouted. “I’ll fight with you.”

“Tansy. Take her and go.”

They rode up the left fork, which led up a hill. The two of them stopped at its top and Arya struggled to return but Tansy clasped her reins firmly and I told the horse to obey Tansy rather than his rider. Then the men were upon me and I turned my attention to them.

The dirt trail was wide at this point. One of the riders, wearing elaborately-decorated armor, moved in front of the others and drew his sword. He planned to ride me down.

“Wait!” one of his fellows shouted. “It’s a woman. We can have some fun.”

“I’m newly married,” the rider laughed, “With two new serving maids to boot! I’m getting plenty of cunt at home.”

He dug his spurs into his horse’s sides. I tried to contact the horse, but it was caught in a battle frenzy. I gave it a stern command to stop, focusing my thoughts. It stopped, spilling its rider. He got up, embarrassed, and collected his sword. His helmet had fallen off and he left it on the ground. His men dismounted and ran to join him, swords drawn.

I drew my own sword. There were five of them, spread in a wide semi-circle, two on either side of the leader. He seemed very young and unsure what to do next.

“Back away and let me take her,” he told his men.

“Lord Dickon, your father ordered us to keep you from danger.”

“She’s no danger.”

I twirled my sword slowly, watching all of them. This Dickon was very confident. He had never killed an enemy in battle, his thoughts revealed, and he longed to please his father. He recognized me as the “crazed red bitch” said to have killed Cersei. Bringing in the corpse of such a notorious assassin slung across his saddle would finally bring the approval of his lord father.

He charged. I stepped to the side, clear of his flailing blade, and buried my sword in the top of his skull as he passed. It sank in deeply, and I kicked his rapidly-dying body aside to free the blade.

His comrades came in at once. All wore that odd ring armor although none wore a helmet; all but one carried a sword but only two had a shield. The man on the far right had an axe instead of a sword. I picked out the most confident, the man at the left center of the four, knocking his blade aside and slashing his throat open on the backswing. He fell to his knees, spouting blood. The man to the center-right closed, and I met his strike and spun to my left to avoid the warrior on the far right. I saw an opening under the arm of the second fighter and stabbed my sword in deeply. He gasped, and I pulled my blade free.

As the second man died I turned back to the warrior on my left. He came with his blade high and I slashed him across the belly, the splendid steel of my sword cutting through the rings of his armor as though they were cloth. He dropped his sword as his digestive organs spilled out of the now-gaping
cut, but I was already turning to face the last man.

He backed away slowly.

“You do not have to die here. Mount your horse and ride away.”

“Lord Tarly will find me and hang me. I let his only son die. He won’t forgive that.”

“You know that I will kill you.”

“I know. But I have to try.”

He charged, staking his life on a powerful swing of his axe that he hoped I could not block. I ducked under his weapon, dropped to one knee and ran him through.

All five were down, four of them dead. The man with the horrible belly wound had fallen to his knees, trying to push his organs back into his abdomen. I ended his pain with a stab to the heart.

“Dejah! You’re incredible!”

Arya clung to me like a sorak, the small creatures of Barsoom that some keep as pets.

“You killed five armed and armored men in less than two minutes. How did you do that? Will you teach me?”

Tansy had joined us on horseback, standing behind the smiling Arya. She shook her head.

“Help me collect their money, food and swords. The people in that village know that these men rode after us, and we do not need to leave any more signposts for the Lannister’s men. We will hide the bodies among the trees. Then we must be on our way.”

I cleaned my sword on a lacy white cloth I found inside the young lord’s bejeweled breastplate. I then took the folding digging tool, called a shovel, from my horse’s saddle and walked into the forest a short distance, carrying the fallen soldier’s axe as well to deal with tree roots. I came to an open area without too many trees and began digging.

It took me longer than I had estimated, and left me tired, but I had a deep pit dug, and we tossed all of the bodies into it along with their saddles and other identifying items that we did not take for ourselves. We covered them with dirt, and then covered the area with dead leaves and branches. I told their horses to run far away, in different directions. Hopefully, Dickon Tarly and his men had disappeared forever.

Arya could not stop talking about the fight in the woods. She had a new hero, and I was not comfortable in this role. I tried to divert her.

“The soldiers called their leader Dickon, the son of Lord Tarly. What do you know about him?”

“His father is, well, was, Lord Randyll Tarly. A great battle commander, they say. His lord supports the Lannisters, at least the last I heard. They change sides all the time.”

“The game of thrones.”

“The game of thrones. Dickon was his heir, and had just married the daughter of Lord Mooton, who rules Maidenpool. All I heard called him a spoiled brat, but his father’s favorite. His father sent his older brother to the Wall to clear the way for him.”
“You mentioned this Wall before.”

“How can you know so much and so little, all at the same time?”

“I am a princess. Humor me.”

“In the very north of the North is a huge Wall built of ice, maybe built with magic. The Night’s Watch patrols the Wall and keeps the wildlings on the other side.”

“Wildlings?”

“People who live in the frozen forest on the other side of the Wall, with no rules or order. The old tales say there are far worse things up there too: giant ice spiders, ice dragons, and the walking dead.”

“And the Night’s Watch fights them?”

“Sometimes they fight the wildlings. No one’s seen a White Walker for thousands of years. The tales say they’ll return with the long winter.”

I had come across this notion before that their civilization had lasted for thousands of years; I did not think this likely. They claimed ages for stone buildings that simply could not have stood in this weather for that long – assuming, of course, that their years matched those of Jasoom - and the claim also posited a remarkably stagnant civilization. I could craft a fine paper out of this.

“I escaped King's Landing with some recruits for the Night’s Watch. Bastards, orphans, rapers and such. All of the kingdoms send their unwanted to the Wall.”

“So a father sending his own son is a cruel act?”

“Probably.”

She likely believed that I asked about Dickon Tarly's brother, but my regard for this Stark family remained low following this news. How could Lord Stark have sent his son to this Wall, bastard or not? Was it just to please his awful harridan wife, as she had hounded her father into exiling Tansy years before?

John Carter told me once that those who talk the most about honor usually have the least. If he had still been alive, I might not have killed Eddard Stark, but I would not have liked him.

Around the middle of our fourth day on the road we reached a town known as Saltpans, where people dried sea water to harvest its salt. Or at least they had at some point in the past; when we arrived it appeared that most of them were dead. A few buildings remained intact, but most had been burned. The small fortress appeared untouched, and a lookout peered nervously over the walls at us as we approached.

“No closer!” he yelled when we were still some distance away. “I have a crossbow and I’m not afraid to use it.”

He was terrified of having to use it, for he had no idea how to wind it.

I rode up to the gate anyway, my sister and Arya behind me.

“You fear two women and a girl. Small wonder you let this town burn while you hid behind your walls.”
“Go away.”

The handful of people outside the little fortress hid in the ruins of their homes.

“Let us leave,” I said, softly so that only Tansy and Arya heard. “These people have lost everything and have nothing for us.”

As we turned I called up to the watcher on the wall.

“You are an evil and cowardly little man,” I said. “Should I hear of you abandoning your people again, I will return and kill all of you and your knight as well.”

“Go to hell.”

I considered smashing the gate of the little fortress, or setting it on fire. The attitude of the small garrison angered me. But I did not have time to set right all the wrongs of this place, nor was it my place to do so. We rode away from Saltpans; I fervently hoped that something terrible would happen to its garrison.

Three days after we left Saltpans, we reached the inn Arya identified as that once owned by Jeyne and Willow and their family. It apparently still operated, for I could detect two people within and smoke rose from its brick chimney.

“We stopped here on the way from Winterfell to King’s Landing,” Arya explained. “Later I came here when I travelled with the Hound, and I killed Polliver here and took back Needle.”

As always, when Arya spoke, someone died. I could not tell if she spoke the truth, nor did the names mean anything to me. As we walked through the door into the common room I began to ask, but a very fat young man shouted out before I could speak.

“Arry!” he cried. “Is it you?”

“Yes, Hot Pie,” she said, smiling. “I’m back.”

“But you’re already here!”

“What does that mean?”

“Look! You’re right over there!”

A young woman sitting alone at one of the tables turned to us and stood. She looked exactly like Arya.

“Hello,” she said. “I’m Arya of House Stark. Who are you?”

“Arya of House Stark,” our Arya said, drawing her little sword. “I know who you are.”

The new Arya pulled out a dagger almost as long as Arya’s sword.

“Not in here, please,” begged Hot Pie. They ignored him as Arya leapt across the tables to attack Arya. No other customers occupied the room, and Hot Pie ran through an open door.

Both girls were blindingly fast, almost as fast with their blades as I. They sparred with deadly intent, but neither could gain an advantage.
“You have to stop them,” Tansy said. “Please do something.”

I could think of nothing to gain their attention. I finally tilted one of the long, heavy tables onto its side and threw it against a wall, causing a loud crashing noise.

The girls broke apart and faced us. Neither had been seriously injured beyond a few shallow scrapes. They wore different clothing, of course, but otherwise looked identical. I pushed Tansy behind me.

“Do not trust either of them,” I told her, “no matter what they say.”

“I know my own blood.”

“You do not, and you are in great danger.”

She tried to struggle past me, but I wrapped my left arm around her waist and held her tightly to my side.

“One of them is an assassin here to kill the other. And possibly you as well.”

“Don’t keep me from . . . her.”

“She is not your daughter,” I did not need to read her thoughts to know the word she had swallowed unspoken. “I cannot say that she is even Arya Stark.”

The girls continued to eye one another, but watched me as well. The old Arya knew me to be dangerous; the other likely mimicked her attitude.

“She attacked me,” said the new Arya. “You saw it. What lies has she told you?”

“Lying bitch,” answered the old Arya. “I thought I’d killed you in Braavos.”

“You know her?” Tansy asked in a high-pitched, terrified voice.

“She’s one of the Faceless Men. I knew they’d want me dead for leaving them. I should never have joined up with you. She’ll try to kill you, too.”

“I don’t know who you are, but that’s not Arya Stark,” said the other. “She’s using you.”

“She’ll kill Tansy, Dejah,” the old Arya said. “Kill us both if you have to but don’t let her hurt your sister.”

I had seen this dilemma dramatized in very bad video plays, but those characters could screen their thoughts. So could these two, but not as well as a native of Barsoom. The girl on the left gasped and raised her hand to her temple as I broke through into her mind. She feared that I had long wished her dead and now had an excuse to kill her. That proved nothing. The one on the right simply stared back at me as I tore through her defenses. She did not care if I killed her, as long as I killed them both.

“You would give your life to kill Arya Stark?” I asked.

“What?” she asked, with a surprised look. “I am Arya Stark.”

“Who is Tansy to you?”

“I have no idea. She looks like my mother and my sister.”
“That is correct,” I said, and turned to the other girl. “You have failed.”

“I’m glad to die as long as she dies as well. Protect Tansy. Don’t let this bitch live.”

I kept my left arm tightly wrapped around Tansy and reached for my dagger with my right hand. The Arya on the left stiffened, her eyes wide, but said nothing. I threw the dagger backhanded into the chest of the Arya on the right as I pulled it out of its sheath. She stared at it for a moment, and then crumpled silently to the floor. Her thoughts showed regret at her failure; she was not Arya Stark. She would indeed have killed Tansy and me as well, along with Hot Pie.

The real Arya stood still and closed her eyes.

“Kill me too,” she said. “You have to be sure.”

“There is no need for excessive drama,” I said as moved to I retrieve my dagger from the corpse of the other Arya. “My sister would be angry with me if I killed her niece for no reason.”

The killer-girl had changed to become a grown woman with medium-length black hair, a snub nose and, though slender and short like Arya, a woman’s body with light brown skin, small rounded breasts and narrow hips. The dagger had struck her very high in the chest and she still lived. I knelt by her so that my sister and Arya could not see that I removed the blade, shoved it into her heart and then twisted it. Her last, deeply disturbing thoughts thanked me for bringing her the gift of death.

“Who is this?”

“They called her the Waif,” Arya said, her voice muffled against Tansy’s breasts as my sister wrapped her in her arms. “I never knew her true name. She trained at the House of Black and White with me, to be a Faceless Man.”

“She could change her entire body?”

“Not totally, you can’t gain or lose weight or height. But as long as the new form is close to the same size, yes.”

“You can do this as well?”

“No, I wasn’t as advanced. I can wear another face, one of skin, but I can’t change my own face or my body.”

“And do they train you in tactics as well?”

“Tactics?”

“How to plan an attack.”

“Not really. You’re supposed to figure it out yourself, with the aid of the Many-Faced God.”

“This Waif drew attention to herself. Not the wisest approach.”

“It’s complicated,” Arya said. “She was also sending a message.”

“If you were dead, the message would not matter.”

“It doesn’t always make sense.”

“Did you know this was Arya?” Tansy interrupted, her voice on the edge of breaking. She continued
to hold the girl tightly and seemed highly emotional.

“Yes,” I said, not telling the full truth. I had strongly believed that I had made the right choice, but I had not been completely sure.

“What if you’d been wrong?”

“I was not wrong.”

“You risked her life.”

“Her life was already at risk. This Waif would have killed her and you as well.”

“And that’s the only part you cared about.”

She spoke the truth; I had not wished to kill Arya Stark but I would have gladly killed them both to protect Tansy’s life.

“I will never apologize for protecting my sister. Never.”

I had become irritated.

“Tansy, please calm down,” Arya said. “I’m unhurt, and it’s because of Dejah.”

“Wait here,” I said, ready to be separated from both of them. “I will dispose of this Waif.”

Arya took Tansy’s arm and led her to a table. I scanned to see if anyone watched, and finding no one observing, took the Waif’s corpse by the collar of its tunic and dragged it outside, where I first smelled and then saw a large pen filled with pigs that lay well behind the inn among some trees. I stripped her of her clothing and tossed her lifeless body into the pen; the pigs immediately began to feed. The Waif had no belongings on her person other than the dagger, which I threw deep among the trees. I entered the inn through the kitchen door, knowing that Hot Pie still hid in the innkeeper’s quarters. I stuffed the clothing into the large stove where a fire burned, and went to join my sister and Arya in the common room.

In her emotional state I could read Arya’s thoughts more easily than usual and I knew that she had been trying to calm Tansy’s anger toward me, and had partially succeeded. A spread of food had been laid on the table and I sat down to eat; this Hot Pie person produced excellent bread and for once I was glad to see no bacon. Eventually he came out of hiding and sat beside me, facing my sister and Arya.

“She looked just like you,” he said without preamble. “She said she was you. I didn’t know.”

Arya looked at me while Hot Pie had his eyes on the table, and held one finger alongside her nose. I understood its meaning from her thoughts, though she was recovering her mental discipline, and nodded.

“She was a Faceless Man,” Arya said. “She probably thought I was dead and wanted to take my place at Winterfell.”

“She’d stayed here for days,” he said. “She was waiting for someone.”

“What did she say?”

“She knew stuff about you, enough to seem like you. I thought she was you.”
I had finished my food; I remained hungry.

“Could I have more, please?”

“Really? More? I, um, have to roast more chickens. I have two killed and plucked. But I have more bread ready now.”

“Please roast the chickens. I would like more of your bread. It is very good.”

He returned to the kitchen. Tansy continued to glare at me.

“Stop it,” Arya snapped at her. “Dejah fought for us, for you and me, against five trained soldiers. She doesn’t have to prove anything. The Waif was better than me. I knew she would come after me and I never warned you. She would have killed us both.

“Dejah is your sister and you need to remember that. Always. Never forget your sister.”

She began to cry. I could tell that she did so for effect, but I did not expose her.

“I was horrid to my sister. And now she’s gone. Don’t be horrid to yours.”

“I’m sorry,” Tansy finally spoke. “I’ve never been more frightened than I was for you.”

“We’re still together because of Dejah.”

“I’m sorry,” she said to me. “You did what you thought was best.”

I noticed that she did not agree that I had done the right thing by choosing one Arya and killing her, but I nodded and thanked her as Hot Pie returned with hot bread.

“Thank you,” I told him, eager to change the subject. “How is the Brotherhood?”

“I don’t know no Brotherhood.”

He certainly did, and had visited the caves two days prior, bearing fresh bread.

“My sister and I lived with them. I fought for them.”

“You!” he said, now impressed. “You’re the princess?”

“I am.”

“They said you was beautiful. And they said you fought like a demon from the seventh hell.”

I noticed Tansy’s fingers shaking where she spread them on the table, while her other hand stroked Arya’s hair.

“It’s true, then? You killed Strong Boar?”

“I defeated the Mighty Pig, but I left him alive. He survived and we met him in King’s Landing.”

“You’re a hero in these parts. I wish I could do something special for you.”

“Do you bake pies as well?”

“It’s what I do best.”
“I adore pie.”

He thought for a moment.

“Please stay the night. I’ll have cherry pie by tonight.”

Tansy remained withdrawn, so I decided we could stay the night. I remained tired and looked forward to sleeping in a real bed.

I did not understand my sister’s anger. I had tried to stay out of the way as best as I could, so that she could enjoy her time with Arya, and she had seemed to do so. I had made the right choice by killing this Waif person; that I did not doubt. She was murderously intense and I did not doubt that she would have killed Tansy once she knew her as a relative of Arya, and the hapless Hot Pie simply for having been Arya’s friend. She had already recognized Tansy as fitting the description of Arya’s mother and sister.

Again I grew frustrated. I would not have these problems on Barsoom, where I could simply open my mind to my sister and she would understand my feelings and my good intentions. And I would know her frustrations, and could attempt to correct my behavior if I had caused offense.

The cherry pie was indeed wonderful, and I kissed Hot Pie on his cheek, turning his skin as red as mine. That night Arya lay between Tansy and I on our room’s wide, soft bed. Tansy kept her arm around Arya and I felt very lonely on my side.
Chapter Sixteen

In which Tansy suffers a loss and Dejah Thoris encounters new friends.

Chapter Sixteen

We set out the next morning, leaving Hot Pie alone in the inn. I wondered how he managed to stay alive, given his lack of awareness regarding anything beyond baked goods, but reasoned that the Brotherhood must be keeping watch over him. He made the most wonderful pies, but certainly did not need to be on his own without supervision. That thought also applied to much of the Brotherhood, but I hoped Ned Dayne had improved things since our departure. I wondered if we should visit them, but had the impression that Arya would be distressed to return to the scene of her captivity.

Tansy remained unhappy with me, in turn upsetting Arya who made an effort to include me in their conversations. Two days after I had fed the Waif to the hungry pigs, Arya again asked if I would teach her some sword exercises. This time, I agreed. Tansy disapproved and scowled at both of us, but said nothing.

I still had the wooden practice swords I had used with Ser Davos, but first I made Arya show me her quickness. She had a great deal of natural ability that had been honed with additional training. I tossed a wooden sword to her and she assumed a position very similar to the initial stance of Helium. I remembered that the Mighty Pig had recognized and named it.

“You have been taught the water dance,” I said.

“Yes.”

“Show me.”

She performed very formal evolutions, apparently believing that doing so rapidly would confuse an opponent. Knowing the pattern, I waited for her to strike, stepped aside and plucked the sword out of her hand.

“How did you do that?”

“It is a pattern. Even the water dance is itself a pattern.”

“Of course it is. That’s why they call it the water dance.”

“Look. See what is really there. And you will see the pattern.”

“That’s the same thing Syrio said.”

Syrio must have been her instructor, but I could not read her thoughts without concentration, and seemed to have a hard time mustering that focus.

“Then you should have listened. Heard what he really said. You are not the only one looking, not the
only one seeing. Others can see patterns, and they will use that knowledge to kill you.”

I sparred with her a short while, then found myself becoming winded.

“That is enough for now. Let us ride.”

As we continued northward, I continued to find it hard to concentrate. My sister’s anger had obviously distressed me deeply. I could not let it affect me so, as both Tansy and her niece depended on my fighting skills to protect them in this lawless land even if neither wished to acknowledge this reality.

My lapse bothered me nonetheless. I had let Arya use a sword, a wooden one but a blade nonetheless, before teaching her the basic exercises. I corrected that oversight on the following morning, pretending as though I had intended to do so after working with swords. I do not think either Tansy or Arya noticed my confusion, but it concerned me. My sister needed me. I had to regain my composure.

We drew closer to the castle known as The Twins, and Arya became increasingly agitated despite the calming effect of the morning exercises. Her mother and her brother had been killed there in the so-called Red Wedding, and she longed to avenge herself against the Frey family who controlled the castle.

As she described them, I wondered what made them such a force for evil. I did not doubt their malicious conduct, but the Mighty Pig had had naught but disdain for the Freys and even the Lannister’s squire had scorned them. The Freys had been the object of their cruel jokes, and Crakehall had shown open contempt for Black Walder Frey when we met for single combat. How had such a bumbling pack of fools managed to conduct a well-organized plot without giving away their intentions?

The Lannisters. The Freys had not suddenly attained adequacy through the intervention of non-existent gods or magic – the Lannisters had planned the operation for them.

“The Freys do the bidding of the Lannisters?”

“I don’t know. What does that matter?”

“I have met Freys. They are far too stupid to create such a complex plan on their own.”

“The Lannisters didn’t make them kill my family. Didn’t make them hate us.”

“Why did they hate your family?”

I had heard some of this story from Thoros of Myr when he explained how Catelyn Stark had died the first time, but the details had confused me.

“I wasn’t there so I only know what I heard. I had just reached the castle when the killing started, and The Hound dragged me away before I could die bravely and stupidly.”

I nodded my understanding.

“So my brother Robb, the King in the North, needed to bring his army across the Green Fork.”

I knew the Green Fork to be the name of the river flowing southward, to our left on the other side of some forest.
“The Frey castle, called the Twins, controls the only bridge over the river. My brother agreed to marry one of the Frey daughters if they would let his army cross. Though that sounds more like something my mother would arrange. When my brother married someone else, Lord Frey took vengeance by murdering him at a wedding feast for my uncle, my mother’s brother.”

Such treachery is not unknown on Barsoom, but difficult to accomplish in a society of telepaths.

“They trusted the Freys?”

I would never willingly turn my back on the one Frey I had met.

“They had guest right!”

“Guest right?”

“It’s sacred tradition. When you take some bread and salt from your host, he’s obligated to protect you, not to murder you.”

“Why is it worse to murder someone after eating their bread rather than before?”

“Because you gave your word. They broke their word.”

“As did your brother.”

“Well, yes. He never should have given it, and then never should have broken it. That doesn’t mean he should have died for it.”

I thought about this for a few moments. On Barsoom, Robb Stark would have forfeited his crown for breaking a betrothal in this manner, and been cast out by his people. Had he any honor, he would have then killed himself. I would not have murdered someone for such an affront. I would have challenged them properly and slain them with sword or pistol.

I wondered why King Robb did not have his engineers build a bridge of their own, or at least build boats. I realized that the armies of these lands had no engineers, or very much organization, and were not properly “armies” at all but more like armed mobs.

“They killed many at this wedding.”

“Yes. Not just the Freys, but the Boltons betrayed Robb too. They killed Robb and our mother, and many others. Some might be prisoners; I just don’t know. But I’m sure Robb and Mother were killed. And Grey Wind, his dire wolf.”

I remembered the Boltons. Their soldiers had murdered Tansy’s sex workers and burned her brothel. I did not mention this to Arya.

“The Boltons are a Northern house.”

“Yes. I should have killed Roose Bolton when I had the chance. I was his cup-bearer.”

That confused me; by my understanding, the Starks ranked higher than the Boltons. But she seemed to believe it to be true.

“I want to kill them all,” Arya said, in a calm and reasoned voice. I wondered if I sounded so nonchalant about dealing death to strangers. “All at once. Winter will come for House Frey.”

“I wish you’d let this go,” Tansy finally spoke up. “I worry about you.”
Arya turned quickly to face Tansy, and this time I caught her thoughts; she almost reminded Tansy that she was not, in fact, Arya’s mother, but stopped herself before the words were spoken and could not be taken back.

“I can change faces. I learned how among the Faceless Men. I’ll take Walder Frey’s place, summon all of his male relatives for a grand feast, and then poison them all in a special toast to the family’s greatness. I’ll let the women go unharmed.”

I have lived for 441 of Barsoom’s long years and this was, quite possibly, the stupidest plot of which I had ever heard. Tansy appeared to agree with my assessment.

“You’ll pretend to be Lord Walder and arrange the feast,” she said, “including finding, what, buckets full of poison? That the Freys just leave lying around because they’re evil. And then send out ravens to summon all the Freys home, wait for them to arrive, then poison them? Only the men. All the while staying in character?”

“First I’ll kill Walder’s sons and bake them into a pie, and serve them to him before I kill him. Then the feast of death.”

I wondered if Arya were delusional, or if wild fantasy was somehow a product of the extended childhood of these people. I could only read scattered thoughts from her most of the time; they did not appear insane though I suspected that she could easily become a pathological killer. She seemed to regret killing people even less than I did.

“You mentioned before that you can make yourself look like another person,” I asked. “But you are not as skilled as the murderous Waif.”

“Their face, anyway. We learn to peel the skin of their face off the dead and affix them over our own.”

“Would it not just look like a dead face?”

“We’re not supposed to speak of it.”

“You left them, did you not?”

“You’re right, I did. We were taught to say nothing of what went on inside the House of Black and White. There’s a bottle of special oil that preserves the skin, another oil that helps your muscles move the face lining your own, and a magic spell to work as well.”

I assumed that this “magic spell” served to help concentrate the mind and make involuntary muscles move semi-voluntarily.

“What about the rest of your body? The Waif changed hers, but you said you did not learn these methods.”

“They taught us costuming techniques, just like in a theater. Padding, elevated shoes, that sort of thing.”

“I do not like this plan,” I said. “My sister likes it less.”

Tansy nodded, still unhappy with me but even less pleased with Arya’s idiotic scheme.

We rode on, and now both Tansy and Arya seemed upset. Finally we approached the castle. The
Twins consisted of two matching fortresses on either end of a stone bridge crossing a wide river. The Frey family apparently profited by charging tolls of passing merchants; had Robb Stark shown even a little patience he could have blockaded the road leading to the Twins and starved them of income. His foolishness had ruined many lives besides his own. Apparently his younger sister shared his impulsiveness.

“If you don’t like my plan, do you have another?” Arya asked me. “Can you break into the Twins and help me kill Lord Walder?”

I still believed her plan to be stupid, but knew I could not dismiss it out of hand without simply reinforcing her determination. I looked intently at the castle. Men with weapons Arya identified as crossbows patrolled the gates and walls. These threw a bolt that would pierce a knight’s armor; they would do far worse to my exposed flesh. I had been fortunate so far to avoid the dangers of arrows and bolts, but I clearly could not storm this fortress by myself.

So far I had made little effort to use my scientific knowledge. I knew how to make the complex chemical crystals used in our firearms including the cannon on our flying warships. It is a very powerful explosive – John Carter had believed it had to be powered by radium – but it is still a nitrogen-carbon formula. It requires a sophisticated industrial base for its manufacture; these people did not even use steam power and lacked the social fabric to industrialize.

I knew a simpler formula that could produce explosives of much less power using easily-obtained carbon, sulfur and the potassium salts these people used to preserve food. Or by reducing the nitrates out of animal urine; I believed that could be done here as on Barsoom. The chemistry of life was nearly identical else I could not have eaten their food. But while I call these simple, they still would require more labor and resources than I was likely to find without a great deal of help; these were certainly not items I could obtain in secret and mix in some hidden laboratory. I would not be able to deploy Barsoomian super science to destroy the Frey stronghold. My sword remained my weapon of choice.

“Dejah?” Tansy asked. “Are you with us?”

“Yes. I cannot kill them all with my sword before they kill us.”

“You two can wait here,” Arya said. “I’ll go in to kill Lord Walder, and then come back. It won’t take long.”

“Arya,” Tansy tried to soothe her. “You can’t devote your life to bloody vengeance.”

“They killed my mother. My brother. Your sister. Your nephew. I don’t have to kill the entire family, just Lord Walder. I’ll go in there and take the place of a servant, kill Lord Walder, and come back out. You two can wait for me out here.”

“It’s not a matter of whether you can. It’s whether you should. Killing someone else kills a part of you, too.”

“It doesn’t hurt Dejah.”

“Tansy is right,” I said. “I am not the woman I was.”

“Are you alright?” Tansy asked, looking at me closely for the first time in several days.

“I am very tired. And very hungry.”

Tansy placed her hand on my forehead.
“I thought she’d been sulking again but she’s burning with fever. Arya, we have to take care of Dejah.”

I had not been sulking. At least I did not think so.

“It won’t take long. I promise.”

“Which is more important? Dejah or vengeance?”

“Dejah. She’s your sister. Family comes first.”

“That’s the right answer. Dejah protects us, and now it’s our turn. She needs us. We go north, to your father’s lands. Who will be loyal still?”

“I don’t know. So much has changed there. But Howland Reed was his best friend. He rules the swamp lands just north of here.”

“Then we’ll take Dejah to the swamp lord. And you will be home, or at least on your way there.”

When we came upon a tavern outside a small village, we did not avoid it. We all wanted to bathe, and I needed food. A great quantity of food. I argued that they should buy food and bring it to me, so that I was not recognized. But my mind was hazy and they ignored me. This far to the north, Tansy and Arya claimed, there would be no more Lannister patrols and the Freys feared the men of the swamp lord. I wanted food and sleep so badly that I agreed.

We were wrong. They had been waiting in the village, and in my hunger and exhaustion I had not scanned for hostile thoughts beyond the tavern itself. Men wearing gray cloaks with blue castle decorations poured through the door of the tavern. I pushed Tansy’s head down.

“Get under the table.”

She pulled Arya with her, and I saw the girl struggle in her grasp.

“They call me Black Walder Frey,” said their leader. “I have a writ from King Jaime for the arrest of two whores. The charge is the murder of his royal sister, Queen Cersei, First of Her Name.”

I stood, pulled back my hood and dropped my cloak onto the table. I drew my sword and stepped in front of the armed intruders.

“I killed Cersei. Alone.”

“Good on you, girl!” one of the men at the opposite end of the room shouted.

“You! You’re the Queenslayer?” Black Walder had recognized me from the fight with the Mighty Pig. “Jaime Lannister wants his sword back. Surrender now, you and your perverted lover too.”

“That will not happen.”

He had not drawn his sword, so I shoved him backward into the mass of his men behind him. I cut down the first two men still on their feet before they could react, and then it became a real fight.

There were six men still standing, plus the knight on the floor. Two more were outside holding their horses. They could only attack me two at a time, because of the press of tables and benches, and even then they easily became tangled together. I killed one man with a powerful upward stroke that opened his chest and throat and removed the bottom part of his face. The man next to him hesitated.
and I cut him across the throat.

I pressed forward against the next two men. One of the men behind them tried to climb onto a table to jump on top of me, and I stabbed him in the groin. He dropped his sword and fell backwards holding the wound with both hands. The other man behind those I had engaged chose not to repeat the maneuver.

The fight had not lasted long, but already I tired. My sword felt heavy in my hands for the first time since I had pulled it out of Brienne’s broken heart. One of the remaining Frey fighters pushed the others back to give himself more room. I met his stroke and forced his sword backwards hard enough to drive it into the wooden table next to him. It stuck there. While he struggled to pull it loose, I ran him through.

Two Freys were left on their feet but I picked up the thoughts of two more entering through the tavern’s lone window. I had no time. I cut the legs out from under one of my foes and he fell; my boot crushed his throat and he gagged. He would die soon. The second man, seeing his own life soon to end, put up a furious defense but could not match my speed even in my reduced state. He met my strike and I pressed his sword back toward his face. As his eyes grew large I felt the thoughts of Black Walder; he was up off the floor and had his dagger out to stab me in the back.

I twisted but felt so tired. The dagger took me in the upper part of my left shoulder instead of the center of my back. My shoulder burned with the pain, yet I had no feeling in my left arm. I struck Black Walder in the face with my right elbow on the back-swing and stabbed the last Frey soldier through his heart. All of them were down, but I was moving very slowly now.

Black Walder lay on the floor looking up at me. Blue droplets fell on the gray tunic covering his armor, matching the blue castle sewn there; something in the back of my mind screamed that this was a very bad thing. He raised his hands and said, “I yield,” managing to cover his ulsio’s face with a sneer as he did so. His thoughts said he did not mean it, so I stabbed him through the heart as well. He voided his waste and died. I had been wrong when I first met Black Walder; I did not enjoy killing him.

“Arya! No!”

I glanced backward and saw that Arya Stark had scampered out from under the table to confront the Frey soldiers who had climbed through the window. She cut down the first with her little sword and disarmed the second. He punched her in the face before she could finish him, dazing her and knocking her against the back wall of the tavern. I rushed to help her but it seemed as though the air had become very thick. She had dropped her little sword on a table, and the soldier picked it up and ran her through.

Tansy jumped on the soldier, smashing his head into the edge of a table. They collapsed on the floor. I put my sword on the table and pulled Tansy off him with my remaining good arm. She leapt over to Arya. The soldier was groggy but alive, so I lifted my sword again and stabbed him through the heart. He grunted and died. I staggered back to my sister and the girl. Arya had fallen into a sitting position against the wall, leaving a wide streak of blood on its dirty surface. I joined Tansy on my knees next to Arya.

Arya looked down at the sword hilt still sticking out of her chest, her eyes wide. I now could clearly read her thoughts; she had thought herself invulnerable.

“He . . . he stuck me with . . . the pointy end.”

“You fought well.”
“I had your back, Dejah.”

“I know.”

Tansy cradled the girl’s face in her hands and looked at me. I shook my head. She was dying, and now spoke very slowly and with great effort.

“I wish . . . I’d known . . . my aunt . . . longer.”

“And I wish I’d known my niece.”

Arya tried to speak again, but her gray eyes became cloudy. She relaxed and now stared sightlessly at a point somewhere above my sister’s shoulder.

“What did she say?”

“I love you, Aunt Tansy,” I choked out.

“And I love you, sweet Arya,” Tansy said, her voice breaking.

Tansy’s speech became harsh.

“She wanted to fight just like you do.”

“I am sorry, Tansy.”

“Are you? Now you have what you wanted. You have me all to yourself.”

Stricken, I slumped forward, catching myself with my right hand. A pain far worse than that inflicted by Black Walder’s dagger seemed to crush my chest. I knew she had been unhappy with me, but the depth of her anger struck me like a physical slap and caught me by surprise.

“Dejah! You’re hurt!”

I remember very little of what followed. I know that the men who had watched the fight now ran out the door, and that Tansy argued with the tavern-keeper who did not want to help her. I recall lying face-down on one of the rough wooden tables, staring at an ale pitcher right in front of my nose. I would have liked some. Tansy boiled wine, poured it over the wound and sewed the deep cut closed while I screamed. I believe that I screamed a great deal. I think I heard her talking with a male voice about whether they should pull the dagger out or not. Somehow she bandaged my shoulder and got me onto a horse, and put Arya’s body, wrapped in a cloth she found somewhere, across another horse.

We rode for a long time. I think we veered off the road to hide among the trees at least once. I was not quite unconscious, but it felt like a dream. A very long, painful and unpleasant dream. Finally we stopped. Some short men gently helped me off the horse and carried me into a large wooden building, using a stout cloth they held tight. They lay me in a bed and people came and went, some of them poking and prodding me, others forcing me to swallow things.

My first clear recollection was of a tall, slender young woman with brown hair pulled into two long braids, wearing a green tunic and sitting next to my bed. I had never seen her before. She was beautiful; having found myself unexpectedly alive, I likely would have found anyone beautiful in that moment. A younger woman in an identical tunic with similar braids sat next to her, reading from a book. The bed frame had been filled with furs, in the style of Barsoom.
“Do you know who you are?”

“I think so.”

“Close enough. I’ll go tell them.”

The two women left quietly, after the elder one patted me gently on the upper arm. They soon returned with an older, broad-shouldered woman along with a short man and Tansy. Tansy sat on the edge of the bed and took both of my hands in hers. She had been crying.

“I’m so sorry for what I said. I was frightened and angry and I just lashed out. You will always be my sister.”

Sometimes it is best not to remember.

“I killed Black Walder and the rest of his Frey men. Someone stabbed me in the back. Arya Stark died. I screamed. That is the last I remember.”

“I was so worried. You barely moved by the end.”

The short man dragged a foot across the floor.

“I’m sorry. This is Maege (she pronounced it Mah-Eezh, like a name of Helium) Mormont, a military commander and one of the great lords of the North, her daughters Lyra and Jorelle, and Howland Reed. He rules this place, and he tended your wound and your fever.”

“Thank you. Will I recover?”

“You were already growing very ill before you were stabbed,” Lord Reed said. “Your fever was terrible, but seems to have broken. Your wound should heal with rest.”

I looked at Maege Mormont, who smiled back.

“I did not know that women here went to war.”

“They do on my island,” she said. “But I don’t know that I’ve ever met a killer princess.”

She seemed to approve, but it made me feel uneasy.

“Please do not call me that. I am very good at killing people, but I do not like it. The killing.”

She took the seat next to the bed that her daughter had occupied when I awoke. The swamp lord bowed and left the room along with the younger Mormonts.

“Second thoughts?”

I understood the concept in her mind.

“No. I have no feelings at all in battle, and that disturbs me. And I only regret some of the killing. One of the killings.”

“That’s all it takes.”

Tansy climbed into the bed and put her head on my uninjured shoulder. I could tell she had done this before. Maege Mormont made to leave as well. I reached out for her hand.
“Please come back soon. I would enjoy speaking with you.”

Her thoughts indicated surprise, but she promised to return and meant it. I liked what I found in her mind: she and her daughters had taken turns with Tansy watching over me, and she was genuinely concerned. For a stranger. She feared I would think they had been standing guard.

“You killed Black Walder?”

“Yes. I broke his pointed weasel nose and then stabbed him in the heart.”

“Thank you.”

She left without explaining. I could not yet focus well enough to probe her mind for more. Meanwhile Tansy raised herself on one elbow and stroked my hair.

“I thought I’d lost my sister.”

“I think you almost did. Micro-organisms are ever the bane of invaders from Mars.”

“You’re not right in the head yet, are you? I was talking about Arya.”

“I am sad that she died.”

“I was cruel to you. I was only angry that she’d died. I didn’t mean what I said.”

“I only remember that my sister protected me. I remember you carrying me, and sewing my wound.”

“You’re far heavier than you look. I couldn’t have done it alone. The innkeep ran away but I had help from the man who cheered you for killing Cersei. He boiled the wine, found the needle and thread, and helped me carry you and get you onto the horse. I never got his name.”

“You brought me here.”

“You couldn’t ride alone so I rode behind you and held you in place. I headed into the swamps and Lord Reed’s men found us and guided us here.”

“Where is here?”

“A wooden castle called Greywater Watch. It somehow floats on a swamp. It’s north of the Twins, on the way to the North itself. The people are called crannogmen, and they’re decidedly odd but they’ve been very friendly. We didn’t just find them by chance; they were already looking for us. Somehow Lord Reed knew who we were, and knew that we needed help.”

“They healed me here?”

“Lord Reed treated you, and the Mormonts all helped.”

“And you never left me.”

“Well, sometimes, but Lyra was always here if I wasn’t. She’s a very good woman.”

She paused.

“Dejah, I think they know.”

“Know what?”
“About you. Who you are. What you are. That you can read their thoughts. You spoke in your sleep, and you lost a lot of blue blood.”

“Are you worried?”

“I think we can trust them. I think we have to trust them. They could have done whatever they wanted and I couldn’t have stopped them, but they’ve been nothing but kind. And I really like the Mormont sisters.”

“I will trust your judgment. Thank you for protecting me.”

“You’re my sister and I love you. I’m sorry I forgot that.”

Maege Mormont came often, and I did enjoy speaking with her. She told me about her eldest daughter, named Dacey, who had fought alongside Arya Stark’s brother as one of his personal guard.

“You remind me of her. Tall, fierce and dark-haired. But still a woman.”

“What happened to her?”

“She was murdered at the Twins by Black Walder’s father, during the Red Wedding. You’ve heard about the Red Wedding?”

I nodded.

“I was glad to hear you’d killed Black Walder.”

“Does that make you suffer less?” I did not mean to be sarcastic, and she did not take it that way.

“No.” She sighed. “They call me the She-Bear, and I carry a bear’s worth of rage and hatred for what they did. Those feelings are burning me away inside.”

I picked out the image of a huge, ferocious animal from her mind. It was also the symbol of her house; she wore it on her clothing.

“And I worry that I feel so little.”

“Maybe I envy you that. I’m not sure. Dacey was full of feeling, full of life. She was the best of me. I think you were like that before all the killing, weren’t you?”

“I think so too. I had killed before, many times, but never in these numbers and never with this coldness of heart.”

“She had killed too, in battle, and maybe she was spared the hardening that would have come after. I’ll never know. But I miss her terribly.”

“I have no daughters,” which was not true, but I did not know how to explain the difference in relationships, “and have struggled to understand Tansy’s loss. She grieves for Arya Stark as the daughter she never had.”

“You don’t bear children the same as we do, do you?”

“What do you mean?”
“I’ve seen you naked. You’re not like other women.”

“No, I am not. We have children but the process is very different and the bonds that result are not as . . . intense.”

“I can’t really explain, then. It feels like they’re part of you, but even more important. I’ve heard it called the perfect love and I think that’s true. You give them love and you expect nothing in return. And you don’t even think to expect anything in return.

“I have other daughters who I love fiercely, you’ve met two of them, but Dacey was my first. She made me a better woman.

“I’ve spent a good deal of time with your sister while you were sleeping. I think she’s better now, and appreciates what she does have.”

“Thank you.”
Chapter Seventeen

The Lord of Greywater Watch came to visit regularly and check on my healing. He told me I needed to rest, so I stayed in bed and rested. An adventure hero would want to get up and begin more adventures before her wounds could heal. I stayed in bed. There was bacon, too, but no pie.

He lingered one day, taking the seat next to my bed. He had brought a large two-handled pitcher filled with a thick liquid food called soup, tasty with pieces of meat and vegetables. I put aside the bowl he offered and drank it down straight from the pitcher. His eyes were green, a darker green than those of Cersei.

“I had never seen you before you arrived here.”

An odd way to open a conversation.

“And I had never seen you.”

“I have visions, that we call the greensight. It’s not always reliable, and often it must be interpreted. I had seen your friend who you call sister, and knew her as Hoster Tully’s daughter.”

“Do you see me now?”

“Yes. Your arrival in our world changed many things. You’ve killed people who would not have died, at least not yet, or helped bring about their deaths. You’ve saved others who should have died, or at least changed the manner of their deaths.”

“What do you mean, my arrival in your world?”

“We’re alone here. I will keep your secrets. I know you can read thoughts; you spoke in your fevered sleep, answering questions that had not been asked. You are not from this world. That wound went deep, but caused more harm than it should have. You’re not constructed exactly the same as we are.”

He stated it as fact, not a question. I simply nodded. Black Walder’s blade would have come close to my heart, offset to the left rather than centered as in this branch of humanity, had it gone deeper.

“Beyond that, you were gravely ill. That fever would have killed most women. Even so, you were very hot and had to be cooled. I bathed you with wet cloths. I had to undress you for that. I know your body isn’t like that of other women. Don’t worry, Lady Mormont, her daughters or my wife was always present.”

Since we are often unclothed on Barsoom, I could not very well object. And I was highly grateful to this small, curious man for my continued life.
"And then there was your wound. I had to replace the stitches your sister placed there and clean it to prevent infection."

"Thank you."

"Your blood is blue."

Small wonder the innkeeper ran away.

“What do you see of me now?”

“You have a terrible destiny.”

“So I have been told.”

“By whom?”

“A Red Priest named Thoros called me Azor Ahai, and said I must place my sword between the breasts of my beloved. I will allow this entire world to perish rather than harm my sister.”

“Tanith Tully is tied to your destiny, but I cannot see whether it is she who makes that sacrifice. I think it likely.”

“There will be no stabbing of breasts.”

“My greensight shows you fighting, and shows you running your sword through the heart of a red-haired woman. That doesn’t mean it will happen, only that it is likely.”

“I understand. Who does your god want me to fight? And should I fight this person or creature?”

I liked this man’s gentle, evenly flowing thoughts and trusted his judgement. Though I did not yet know if I would follow his advice.

“Someone, or maybe something, we call the Night’s King. I believe a good and gentle young man named Jon Snow will be killed and rise in this new and terrible form. At one time I believed he had a great destiny, though he believed himself an unwanted bastard. Some believed him to be the son of a prince, and heir to the Seven Kingdoms. Others thought he would become Azor Ahai. I once shared this view, but have come to believe otherwise. He will die, rise and bring an end to this world if he is not stopped.”

“I have seen this before. Do the dead often rise in your land?”

“No. It has begun to the North. Creatures we call the Others or White Walkers can raise the dead and make them their slaves. Those risen have no will or power of speech. You’ve seen the dead rise?”

“A woman they called Stone Heart. She could speak, but not well, and had a will of her own. She hated all living things. I killed her with my sword, and the blade caught fire. That is when Thoros called me Azor Ahai.”

“She was once Catelyn Stark.”

“Sister to Tansy and mother to Arya. I know. She had become evil.”

“She was my friend and I loved her deeply, but I believe that to be true as well. So it is with Jon Snow. The Night’s King will lead the armies of the dead and give them direction. It will be up to the reborn Azor Ahai to stop him. The hero who saved the world once must do so again.”
“I am not a hero. I am a princess who kills people. A combination of privilege and murder. That is not heroic.”

“But it is necessary. The strands are coming together. Your sister Tansy and the Mormonts are part of this story. And you know you likewise came here for a purpose.”

“To find John Carter.”

“That was your purpose. How has your search progressed?”

“Not well. I do not believe this is his world. But I believe someone from my world has been here. The queen recognized my title when I spoke it in my own language as I killed her.”

“Mayhap you didn’t come here by accident, or for the reason you believed.”

“I will think on this.”

He left me to my thoughts. I did not believe in gods. We are hatched, we make our own path, and then we die. Once I believed differently, and then the goddess Issus tried to kill me. Yet it could not be argued: I raised my hands to Jasoom, and then I appeared on this planet as if by magic. I had read once that a sufficiently advanced technology cannot be distinguished from magic. But who would deploy such advanced science simply to send me to this strange place to stab people with swords? Could not my unseen manipulators simply incinerate those they wished dead? Or teleport them into the airless depths of space? Why did they need me?

And what about the changes to me? Not only had my body been transformed into a killing machine, with enhanced strength, speed and toughness. So had my mind. Before I transited space, I was a kind and gentle person. I know this in my heart. The people of Helium loved Dejah Thoris and I loved them back. I cared for lost animals, I sought out the poor and wretched to give them aid. I gave love and it came back to me a thousand-fold.

Now I killed people without regret. And not just the screaming woman in Harrenhal. I did not hesitate to stab Cersei Lannister with a spork between her gravity-defying breasts – presented with unusual tableware, I turned it into a weapon. I killed the archer on the bridge and his comrade in the cellar in utter indifference. I slaughtered the sick. I killed Black Walder as he lay helpless. I stabbed Taena Merryweather in the back and thought only to steal her clothing. I killed Dickon Tarly who only wanted to please his cold father. I killed the murderous Waif, unsure if she might not be the real Arya. And the list went on. One could argue each individual case, that they had tried to kill me or someone else, or that they were very bad people. That did not remove the fact that I had ended their lives.

And there was more. I ordered men hanged, and strangers leapt to do my bidding. I cried for Brienne’s lost dreams when I first arrived on this planet. Yet I had never cried for the death of little Arya, who wanted to be just like me, who my sister thought of as the daughter she had never and could never have. Had I hardened so much by then? Was all of this simply preparation to meet the Night’s King, to drain any compassion out of me so that I would not hesitate to kill this Jon Snow?

I fell asleep still pondering these questions, and awoke in darkness to find Tansy curled up with me, her leg thrown across my body. I loved my new-found sister; at least one good thing had come of my stay on this planet. And was that simply a prelude to sacrificing her?

I had breasts as well. I would sacrifice myself before I harmed Tansy. I kissed the top of her head, and fell back into sleep.
In the morning there was bacon.

Maegé’s daughters sometimes brought my food and checked my wound, and several days after Howland Reed’s discussion of my destiny the older of the two young women came with the usual cleaning cloths and bowl of hot water. Lyra Mormont smiled as she changed the bandage over my shoulder.

“Lord Reed says you’re much better,” she said. “How do you feel?”

“I think my mind is finally clear of the fever, and I am very hungry.”

“Now that’s a shock,” she said. “Would you like to finally leave this room?”

Tansy, sleeping alongside me, stirred and looked up.

“Go with Lyra,” she said. “You need the exercise.”

She rose and helped Lyra bring me first to a sitting position on the edge of the bed, and then to my feet. After only a few moments I pulled my arms back from their shoulders and stood on my own.

“Try a few steps,” Tansy said.

I wobbled across the room, but did not fall.

“There’s a whole roasted sheep in the castle’s great hall,” Lyra said with a sly smile. “Fresh bread. Boiled lobsters.”

“Lobsters?”

“A shellfish,” Tansy explained. “Very tasty but sailors won’t eat them. Around here they probably have the freshwater kind. They’re edible; that means you’ll like them.”

“You will come too?”

“Of course. But we should probably wear clothes.”

I saw in Lyra’s thoughts that she meant for me to walk to the great hall and thought it would be good for me to do so, but she was not joking about lobsters. She believed them to be very good to eat.

Lyra had brought clean dresses for us to wear, undecorated and brown, what she called “homespun.” She helped me pull mine over my head and checked its fit over my chest.

“This isn’t Bear Island,” she said. “We can’t have men seeing the side of a breast and going mad with lust.”

“Why not?”

She pondered my question, tempted to pull off her own similar dress.

“So as not to cause difficulties for our host, Lord Reed.”

“I can accept that.” I smiled. I liked Lyra very much.

“Bear Island is your home?” I asked.

“Yes, well to the north of here, amid ice-filled seas and wind-swept waves.”
“The Mormonts rule there?”

“How from Mormont Keep, our wooden fortress of solitude. The men fish, the women fight. Actually everyone fights, when the Iron Born or the wildlings come raiding.”

“Do you miss your home?”

“Not as much as I miss my other sisters.”

After she adjusted my dress, I walked slowly down a long corridor to the great hall, with Lyra and Tansy on either side of me but I did not fall. I was tired when I reached the large open room filled with tables and benches; I took a seat across from Tansy while Lyra went to fetch some food for us.

“I’m glad to see you so much better,” Tansy said. “You had me worried.”

“What about you?” I asked, since Lyra was still in the kitchens. “I know it hurt you deeply to lose your niece.”

“I’ll never get over it,” she said, simply and directly. “I’m starting to learn to live with that. Maege and her daughters have been very kind. Actually everyone here has been.”

“I should have . . .”

“Hush,” Tansy cut me off. “I almost lost you, too.”

“I did not mean to sulk. I was glad that you found your niece. I only became unhappy when you seemed angry with me.”

“I wasn’t truly angry with you. I was angry with everyone and everything. I felt so empty after the pirates took me, so worthless, and suddenly finding Arya seemed like a miracle meant to fill that hole in my heart.”

“You have done a great deal of thinking.”

“A lot of talking, with Lady Maege for the most part. Lyra as well.”

“They brought my sister back.”

“She never really left you. I’m sorry for the way I treated you.”

Lyra returned before I could answer, followed by three short women bearing large platters of food. Rather than the armored fish I had expected, a lobster turned out to be an insect about twice the size of my hand, with four legs along each side and two large claws. It had eyes on the end of stalks, but Lyra told me not to eat them.

She sat beside me, opposite Tansy, and showed me how to crack open a lobster and dip its white flesh into the little pot of melted butter she placed in front of me. It amused her that I could shatter the lobster’s shell with my fingers. She was right; I liked the flavor and texture very much. It felt like it melted on my tongue. We have nothing like this on Barsoom; our insects look much like lobsters though some are much larger and their flesh tastes like shit. I have eaten them nonetheless when stranded in the deserts that cover most of our planet.

I looked around the hall. A few soldiers ate in one corner, and servants filled another table. All seemed satisfied in their work, and both tables talked about preparations for a coming wave of colder weather. The hall itself had wooden walls, decorated with heavy tapestries showing scenes of nature
– all of them swamps. We have swamps on Barsoom, thick and filled with deadly plants and creatures. These looked little different, except for the oppressive green everywhere.

The dampness in the air helped feed that feeling of oppression. Even the wooden table seemed to have a thin film of water on it. The air felt very heavy, and a pervasive smell of rot underlay the pleasant aroma of roasted meat. The daughter of a very dry and, if truth be told, dying planet, I felt very uncomfortable in this place. Yet the people here evoked completely different emotions. For the first time since arriving on this planet, I felt very safe.

“She does this,” Tansy was telling Lyra. “Dejah has a very active conversation going on in her own head, and sometimes she ducks out of the real world to give it her full attention.”

“I am sorry. Did you speak to me?”

“I asked if you liked the lobsters,” Lyra said. “Not that I needed to ask.”

The remains of at least six destroyed lobsters overflowed the wooden platter in front of me and littered the table as well. I noticed that I had not yet sampled the roast mutton, the bread or the other dishes. I looked around for a place to discard the lobster carapaces.

“You can just push them aside,” Lyra said. “We can clean up when you’re done.”

“We? Not the servants?”

“They work hard enough as it is. Mormonts clean up their own messes.”

I pondered that thought. It had not been our way in Helium, where a small army of servants tended to every whim of a princess. I would not repay the kindness I had received here with pettiness.

“I will learn the Mormont way.”

Lyra looked across to Tansy.

“You were right. I like her.”

“You have made a friend,” I said to Tansy.

“I suppose I have. Bonded over cooling your fever. I haven’t had many friends.”

“I have,” Lyra said. “But there’s room for more.”

I slept away the rest of the day, this time a deeper, restoring sleep. In the morning Lyra’s younger sister Jorelle, known as Jory, woke us for First Meal. She was not as tall as her sister, but had the same dark-brown hair, blue eyes instead of Lyra’s brown and somewhat plainer features than Lyra. I knew myself prejudiced toward attractive people, an arrogance common among royals, yet I had already come to like the Mormont sisters and hoped they would become my friends.

“Lord Reed says you need to walk now,” she said. “Lyra said I should tempt you with bacon.”

“Bacon is tempting,” I agreed. “Is there coffee?”

“No coffee this far north,” she said. “I’ve never tasted it. Is it delicious?”

“It has an awful taste,” I answered as I pulled myself into a sitting position. Tansy hovered over me but did not help. “Like pieces of burned wood that have been ground up and boiled.”
“Why drink it then?”

“It is a stimulant.”

“A stimulant. You mean it’s a drug?”

“I suppose so. I have shown you my weakness.”

She laughed.

“From what I hear, there’s no weakness about you at all. Can you stand on your own?”

I did without trouble. Jory handed me another clean brown dress, and I pulled it over my head without help.

Tansy and Jory flanked me, but this time I only stumbled once on my way to the great hall. I helped collect the food and bring it to a table for us – bacon, biscuits, butter and ale.

“So,” Jory began, sitting across from Tansy and I. “You two are so different. How did you come to be sisters?”

“Our mother carried us as twins,” I said. I had heard of twins, but not yet seen any, and the concept fascinated me. “It was a difficult birth.”

“No, really,” she was very earnest. “I’ve always had sisters. Been surrounded by sisters.”

We had told many people we were sisters. Some accepted this, some did not. But no one had ever asked about it.

“We separately fell in with a band of outlaws,” I said.


“I saw no fighting for freedom,” I said. “But some pigs were stolen.”

“An outlaw princess?”

“Yes. I stole no pigs. I did eat several, and defeated one in single combat. I stopped a crowd of angry women who wished to beat Tansy with sticks. We became friends. And then sisters.”

I hesitated, then plunged ahead.

“You know that I can read the thoughts of others.”

“Yes, but Mother was adamant that we were to tell no one.”

“We?”

“Lyra was there too when we figured it out.”

“Thank you. Among my people, we learn from an early age to keep our thoughts to ourselves. People here usually do not do so; they have no reason to even consider restraining them. To someone like me it is like hundreds of people are shouting all at once. It has taken me a great deal of effort to learn not to hear that shouting.

“Tansy is one of the few people I have met who does keep her thoughts to herself. I was comfortable
in her presence, when others still made me uneasy and anxious. I was lonely and very far from home, the only person like me in all of Westeros. Tansy wanted to be my friend when I desperately needed one.”

“Why did you join the outlaws?” Jory pressed on.

“They were the first people I met when I came to these lands. I knew no one else, and they let me stay with them. I think they were afraid I would kill them if they did not.”

“That’s exactly why they took you in,” Tansy said. “You killed their leader.”

“She wanted to murder innocent people,” I said. “I did not want to be involved but I could not allow that.”

“Why were you there, Lady Tanith?”

“It’s a complicated story, but the short version is that I wanted to kill their leader. She had murdered people I cared about and I’d stopped caring about anything.”

“You are no killer,” I said. “I am glad you did not kill anyone.”

“Mother says you’re a great fighter, and you killed Black Walder Frey. His father murdered my sister Dacey.”

“I do not like killing people, but some people need killing. Black Walder was one of those.”

“I don’t know if I could have done that.”

“You do not wish to be a warrior?”

“Dacey and Lyra are the fighters,” Jory said. “It’s not for me. Alysane loves being a mother, but I don’t think that’s for me either. I think my youngest sister, Lyanna, would be most at home as Queen of the North.”

She had fought, briefly, in several battles. The idea of having to do so again terrified her. She feared death, and loathed the idea of killing someone else, but she did not want to disappoint her mother or shame her family.

“What do you love?”

“Horses. Dogs. All of Bear Island.”

“I love horses as well.”

“I know. I’ve been taking care of your horses. That large chestnut mare is a wonderful mount.”

“She is my favorite, but please do not tell her so.”

“I think she knows. What’s her name?”

“I do not know. We do not name our mounts in my land.”

“But they have so much personality, it seems like they should.”

I pondered this; she spoke good sense but I found it hard to overcome a lifetime of habit.
“You have exercised them?”

“Every day. There’s not any real open ground to let them run, but I ride each of them along the swamp paths as best I can.”

“I hope we can ride together soon.”

“I’d like that. Do you ride, Lady Tanith?”

“I’ve told you before, just Tansy. I rode with Dejah to King’s Landing and back, but I started as a girl and loved horses ever since.”

“I think that’s the first thing that you two have in common. You’re so different but still, sisters.”

“Is it not that way with your sisters as well?”

I felt stronger with each passing day. Jory took us riding along swamp trails; Lord Reed set his warriors to watching over us. Had I not been able to track their thoughts, I do not know that I would have seen any of them. They had mastered the arts of camouflage, though despite a lifetime in the swamps they detested burying themselves in the cold water and muck.

“You have seen the swamp men guarding us?” I asked Jory one morning as we saddled our horses.

“Sometimes,” she said. “I take it they’re always there?”

“Yes. Lord Reed is careful of his guests’ safety. And very interested in how they spend their time.”

“Can anyone sneak up on you?”

“Not if I concentrate, but it takes a great deal of concentration to search for hidden people only by their thoughts. And I am sometimes easily distracted.”

“I hadn’t noticed.”

“I am extremely focused in battle,” I said, catching her sarcasm as I swung into the saddle. “That is a greater reason for my success than strength or speed. When I am not fighting, my mind becomes filled with many other thoughts.”

“Mine too,” Jory smiled. “Except on horseback. Then it’s like I don’t have any thoughts of my own.”

We rode down the swamp trails through hanging vines, our horses’ hooves cracking through the frozen puddles that dotted the way. When we drew alongside a hidden swamp warrior, I called to Jory to stop.

“You can ride with us if you would prefer,” I said, knowing how the man suffered in the freezing water.

“Our lord won’t permit it, milady,” he said. “He’ll be angry enough that you spotted me.”

“Thank you for watching over us,” I said, and we rode on. As Jory had said, we could not bring the horses to anything more than a trot, but I relished getting back on my horse again.

“Did you train your mare yourself?” Jory asked.
“She trained me. I had seen pictures of horses, drawn by my husband, but knew little about them. I first learned about horse care and riding from her thoughts. Sometimes she lies.”

“Like what?”

“She would have me believe she should only eat carrots, never wear a saddle and never have her hooves picked out. Tansy taught me how to actually care for horses.”

“Do horses think the way people do? Are they smart?”

“That is complicated,” I said. “They are intelligent in their own way. They know a great deal about the things that matter to them, and think about these things more emotionally than we do. They do not think about things that do not matter to them, which is very different than people. They know that there are stars in the night sky, for one example, but they do not care.”

“Do they read thoughts?” Tansy had caught up with us. “Sometimes they seem to just, you know, know.”

“Not the way a telepath does, a thought-reader like me. They can feel the emotions of people and if they know the person well can feel the outlines of what the person wishes of them.”

“What about dogs?” Jory wondered.

“I do not know. I have had little experience with dogs. The foul being known as ‘cat’ can read and send thoughts, and attempts to enslave humans.”

“I think she just hates cats,” Tansy told Jory. “Some people do, you know.”

“I do not like cats,” I said. “You should be wary of them as well.”

After I had been on my feet for several days, Lyra took me to the castle’s practice yard and handed me a wooden sword. She had changed her hair to a single heavy braid, and given me a soldier’s tunic to wear with an emblem of a swamp reptile on it. I would have preferred to practice without it, but remembered her admonition to remain modest out of respect for Lord Reed.

“On your guard,” she said.

I slid to my left and parried Lyra’s attack; nothing seemed out of place. I shifted the wooden sword into my left hand and struck at her, feeling no pain from her parry. Eager to test my limits, I quickly spun inside her guard and tapped her left breast with the wooden sword.

“I have killed you,” I said. The words bothered me even as I spoke them; I had quickly come to like Lyra very much and disliked even pretending to bring about her death.

“I never saw it coming.”

“The spin move hides the blade.”

“I don’t think I can spin fast enough to try that without getting skewered.”

“It is not for everyone.”

“How do you counter it?”

I showed her, and worked with her every day on improving her stance and blade movement. She had
been trained by men to fight like a man, and taken to the lessons well. But women are not men; they are stronger in the upper body and we in the lower. The differences are subtle, but a woman should use her advantages and not fight exactly the same way as a man.

With my enhanced strength I could now fight like a man, but all of my experience lay in the female style and I had retained it in all of my battles since arriving here. I could probably overpower most if not all of my opponents, but I could not be sure of this where I was very confident that none could match the speed of my foot- or blade-work. And it is always an advantage to show your enemy moves that he or she does not expect; in Westeros few women fight and those that do, like Lyra or Brienne, fight in the same way as a man and count on their unusual size to make up for the difference in physical strength.

I taught Lyra some standard moves of Barsoom that would maximize her strengths and compensate for weaknesses, and we also practiced the style of fighting as a pair, something I had missed since leaving my home. She proved very adept and eager to learn, and as she almost exactly matched my height and size we made a formidable team. We could not employ the full paired style, as Lyra could not read my thoughts, but since she knew that I could read hers she practiced alerting me of her intentions. That allowed us to make use of at least some of the paired tactics, and I knew that we could be very effective fighting together.

I did not look forward to entering combat again, but Lyra had apparently felt somewhat ashamed of hiding at Greywater Watch while other members of her family fought and died. She hoped that I would remain with House Mormont, and the thought tempted me greatly. I enjoyed her company very much and when Jory offered to braid my hair into a single heavy rope like Lyra’s, I gladly accepted. It had grown much longer since my arrival on this planet, and Jory cut off the ends which had become rather tattered, using a sharp blade called a razor.

“Do you enjoy fighting?” I asked one day after we finished our swordplay. Lyra mopped her face with a cloth, but we of Barsoom do not sweat.

“I enjoy my time out here with you,” she said. “Or do you ask about actual combat?”

“The latter.”

She sat on a sawed-off piece of a dead tree and thought about her answer for a moment.

“Yes and no. I don’t like the terror. The killing, the fear of being killed, having to see people you’ve known for your entire life bleeding theirs out into the mud and the shit. It’s awful.

“But it’s not right to say that I hate it, either. Or at least it’s not honest. I suppose I like having fought, as opposed to fighting. The feeling that I’ve fulfilled my role as a Mormont woman. That I defended our people, that I fulfilled my oaths, my family’s oaths. That part is very satisfying.

“And you?”

I took a place beside her on the dead tree.

“Like you, I was raised to fight. And for some of the same reasons. We have vast privileges, the royal family, and sometimes we pay for them with our deaths. On my home world, I fought and I killed, with swords and with more powerful weapons unknown here.”

Something that should have been obvious before now became clear.

“You know that I can read others’ thoughts.”
She nodded.

“So that’s why you can’t be beaten.”

“It helps greatly, I will not deny it. But a good fighter, like yourself, makes decisions instinctively. They come so fast that your opponent’s thoughts give you their plan for the fight beforehand, but much less help when swords actually cross.

“We can screen our thoughts from others like us. And at no time is that more important than during battle. You cannot give your foe any warning of what you intend.”

“And?”

“On my home world, I usually could not feel an enemy’s thoughts while she died.”

“And here you’ve felt them all die.”

She wanted to say something comforting, but knew that no platitude could help. Instead she laced her fingers through mine and sat quietly beside me, holding my hand.

I liked Lyra Mormont very much.
Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Summary

In which Dejah Thoris returns to battle, and conquers the unconquerable.

Chapter Eighteen

Over the days that followed, Lyra and I worked together every morning after going through the daily exercises with Tansy and Jory. I felt fully healed; I could use my left arm with no twinges or weakness. I enjoyed the time with Lyra, and knew that Tansy often visited Maege or tended the horses with Jory while we practiced. She would never recover from Arya’s death; no one ever truly does so. But Maege had been a mother to five women of this society and knew better than I how to address such deep and personal pain without the aid of telepathy. I felt a small degree of guilt for passing this task to Maege, but my sister did not seem to blame me for doing so and at least outwardly Tansy began to seem more like herself.

I had started to become restless when Lord Reed invited my sister and I to dine with him, his wife, the Mormonts and Lord Galbart Glover. I had not yet met Lord Glover, a large, brown-haired and friendly man who apparently had also been injured and treated by Howland Reed. We exchanged apologies for our simple clothing while servants brought out an opening course.

Tansy, having been a courtesan, knew proper table etiquette and kept watch over me with silent instructions. I thought I maneuvered through the preliminary small talk and the soup quite well, the odd habit of eating soup with a spoon instead of drinking it notwithstanding. It felt very comfortable acting in concert with my sister again. This was not, she explained, a true formal dinner as we wore the simple brown dresses Lyra had gifted us and the Mormonts wore their green family tunics and tight black leggings. I enjoyed the food, even the meat of the amphibian creatures known as “frogs” that repelled Tansy and the Mormonts. Since I found all edible animals here to be strange, I could not understand what made frogs stranger than lobsters, chickens or sheep. I had eaten far more disgusting creatures on my home world.

I had been seated between Lord Reed, who occupied a raised chair at the end of the long table, and Lord Glover, with Tansy across from me and Maege to her left. Lord Glover found me beautiful and seemed very interested in learning of my exploits in battle.

“Is it proper to ask you about the war?” I asked him in turn, during the break between courses. “I am very curious to learn of my husband.”

“No problem at all,” he said. “You are married?”

“Yes, my husband is named John Carter and commands the military forces of my city. I fear he is somewhere in Westeros, perhaps without his memory. He is a highly skilled commander and fearsome warrior, but suffered a brain injury and sometimes forgets his identity for a time.”

I was quite proud of that lie.

“You believe he may have participated in the fighting?”
“Fighting attracts him. If he is here, I am sure he would have ended up somehow involved in the war.”

“I’ve never heard the name, I’m sorry. What else would mark him?”

“He is a large man, tall and broad-shouldered with black hair and very pale skin. He is an exceptional swordsman, unusually fast and strong, unwilling to lie or to kill without need, but very deadly in combat.”

“Unwilling to lie. That would make it unlikely he fought for the Lannisters.”

“I am quite serious.”

“So am I. All armies commit crimes against the common folk when soldiers get out of hand, as I’m sure you know.” He paused to see that I nodded. “The Lannisters order them as a matter of policy.”

“You are correct. He would not have participated in such, even without his memory.”

“No one such as you describe fought with us.” I looked at him with what I thought was a quizzical expression. “With King Robb of the North,” he clarified. “I’m sure I would have heard. King Robb collected the fiercest warriors for his personal guard.”

His voice faltered.

“I’m sorry, Lady Mormont,” he said to Maege, who was listening.

“Dacey was one of the king’s companions,” she explained. “There’s no need to walk on eggshells, Lord Glover. But thank you for the courtesy.”

“If not with Robb or the Lannisters, might he have fought elsewhere?”

“Possibly with Stannis. The remnants of his army are in the North. Or the Tyrells, in the Reach.”

“The Reach?”

“Well to the southwest of here.”


“Correct, Princess. Stannis holds fiercely to what he considers his code of honor; the Tyrells waver with the wind. There are also the Boltons in the North, but they may be worse than the Lannisters.”

“They murdered my sister’s friends.”

“That fails to surprise me. I’m sorry for your loss, Lady Tansy.”

“Thank you,” she said. She did not mention that she actually blamed Catelyn Stark.

“You fought with King Robb?” I changed the subject.

“I did, until just before the Red Wedding. The king sent me north along with Lady Mormont and her daughters as a guard of honor for Ned Stark’s bones. I’d been wounded by a lance to the thigh and nearly drowned besides, so it was more of a command to rest and recover.”

“Dacey refused to leave Robb’s side,” Maege added. “Part of me wishes she’d come with us, part wishes I’d stayed.”
Lyra massaged her hand. I had refused Arya Stark’s request that I help kill this Frey family, but now I also wished all of them dead.

““My apologies, I don’t wish to bring gloom to your table, Lord Reed.”

The servants were laying out the main course, a roasted meat that Lady Reed called “lizard-lion,” apparently a large swamp lizard. It was very tasty.

“You are going to the North?” I asked Lord Glover.

“I think that is a good introduction to the subject I wish to discuss,” Lord Reed interjected before Galbart Glover could answer. “I suspect that both Lord Glover and Lady Mormont will approve, and I hope the Princess will aid us as well.”

“I owe you my life,” I said. “I will help you however I can.”

“Thank you,” he said. “We march to war.”

Lord Reed explained that Sansa Stark, Arya’s sister, had gathered an army of Northern loyalists and knights from the land known as the Vale. They had defeated the troops of House Bolton and recaptured Winterfell. She now called on Howland Reed to gather his troops, drive the Bolton garrison out of a key fortress that controlled the road to the North, and join her at Winterfell.

“We will answer her call,” he said. “Lords Mormont and Glover have their own mission to complete, and I believe this will aid in yours as well, Princess.”

“You think John Carter can be found in the North?”

“I do not. You have a destiny to fulfill. It lies to the North.”

“We shall see,” I said. “What do you wish me to do?”

“I don’t know as yet. If you would ride with the Mormonts and be ready when we meet the enemy, that would be most appreciated.”

“I will do so.”

“Thank you. Lords Mormont and Glover have the bones of my friend, Ned Stark, to return to Winterfell. That carries enormous meaning for us, princess, to have the bones of our family interred in their ancestral home.”

“I understand. It does with us as well.”

This was only partially true; we do honor the remains of those who died in victorious combat. We leave the defeated for the scavengers. And John Carter had only recently ended the horrific suicidal sacrifice of many who had reached 1,000 years, only to be eaten by the depraved followers of the false goddess Issus. I did not think these tales would meet Tansy’s definition of pleasant dinner conversation.

“We also have the bones of Arya Stark,” Lord Reed continued, “which will be important to her sister. And her aunt.”

Tansy grasped my hand tightly across the table, but kept the expression on her face neutral.

“Normally only the Lords of Winterfell are buried in the crypts, but that is a choice for Lady Stark to make. We burned the body while you slept, as is our custom.”
“There are also our own children.” Lord Reed’s wife, Lady Jyana, spoke for the first time since our arrival at Greywater Watch.

“They are dead?” I asked, immediately regretting my words.

“No,” their father said. “Not yet, anyway. They went north to aid young Brandon Stark, following their own destiny. I regret allowing this, and would have them back.”

“I will help you,” I said impulsively.

“I have seen this,” he answered. “Thank you.”

Howland Reed then explained that we would march through the swamps, laying out his intentions for march routes, march order and provisioning – the usual arrangements for war. They seemed very similar to those I had helped prepare for Helium’s forces, though the reliance on animal transport made things much slower and gave less margin for error. I would get to ride with Jory and Lyra, which pleased me, though I resolved that I would find some reason to keep Jory with Tansy and away from any fighting.

Lord Reed had already called for his followers to join us at Greywater Watch, but still it took many days for his troops to gather. I continued to practice at swords and ride my horses, and when the swamp lord indicated that the time had come I was ready to depart.

Most of our little army marched on foot or paddled in wide, very-shallow-draft boats. I rode my mare, with Tansy, Jory and Lyra on my other horses – the Mormonts had arrived by ship and had no horses of their own, though Lord Reed had provided a very fine mount for Maege. A guide led us across small pieces of solid ground but also had us wade through shallow watery swamp, explaining that deep bogs could swallow an entire horse and rider without much warning. This sounded extreme, but the man believed what he told me and had apparently seen it happen himself.

The weather had turned colder during our stay at Greywater Watch, and a thin layer of ice covered the swamp each morning. The Mormonts lent us fur-lined cloaks to help repel the growing cold of the dusk and dawn hours, but I felt comfortable without mine. At night we camped on tiny bits of more or less dry ground, laying down waterproof sheets to keep the water pressed out of the soil by our weight from soaking us. I continued to serve as bedwarmer for my sister, Lyra and Jory, and enjoyed the feel of their flesh against mine. On Barsoom we sleep in this fashion in the nursery; both men and women continue to enjoy this arrangement and I suppose it comforts us to pile together once again as adults. I slept deeply and well despite the pervasive dampness.

The crannogmen seemed to enjoy the march, while most of the men and women from the North looked to be quite miserable. Lord Reed’s soldiers brought us hot food and helped find dry campsites at each halt; I knew these to be the sort of courtesies extended to noble women of these lands and did not mind accepting them. Their lord had told them that I had unusual powers of perception and great fighting skills, and they gladly helped me with the mundane details of swamp survival.

We made progress despite the harsh terrain and deteriorating weather, and after several days Lord Reed called a halt to confer with his commanders, summoning me to join them. He explained that we approached a decaying fortress known as Moat Cailin, though it had not had an actual moat – a ditch filled with water – for at least a century. He considered this a very formidable obstacle, but his greensight had told him that I held the key to its capture. What that key might be, I could offer no clue.

As Lord Reed described Moat Cailin, I came to understand that much of its strength rested on its
reputation. Perhaps in the deep past it had been a formidable fortress, but now it consisted of three decaying stone towers from which archers and crossbowmen could loose projectiles at anyone coming up the elevated roadway from the south. Maege and Lord Glover had camped there while marching south with Robb Stark’s army, and confirmed that it had few intact walls or other fortifications.

I could think of several ways to attack the towers. We could set fire to the heavy wooden doors Maege described, or I could climb the tower at night and wreak havoc on the garrison from above. I would need to see this place to gain a better idea of what could be done, but I felt confident that we could capture such an old and decrepit location.

Early the next morning Lord Reed led a small group of us through the bogs amid the rising daylight; I could detect a few swamp warriors around us but no Bolton scouts. We reached the edge of the trees and crouched behind the large exposed root of one of the swamp trees, a root known as a “bole.”

A stone tower stood in front of us, leaning bizarrely toward the right. Lord Reed explained that it was known as the Drunkard’s Tower. From its fighting positions, even a small garrison armed with bows or crossbows could devastate any force trying to make their way up the causeway leading north.

I concentrated and found that it had a garrison; I counted 42 men within including two lookouts at its crest. Both had crossbows. Two more guards stood at the single, heavy door leading within the tower, and a fifth at a large window above them, with its heavy wooden shutters open.

Looking at the tower, I estimated that perhaps half of the garrison could aim their weapons at the causeway at once. I had little experience with their primitive weaponry, but understood that the archer whose pants I had stolen on first arriving here had been considered exceptionally skilled. He could probably loose an aimed shaft in six of what these people termed “seconds,” or ten per “minute.” That would equal perhaps 200 shafts per minute, or maybe 400 over the time it would take to rush the tower with our armored foot soldiers. Not all of the archers would be as expert.

Many of those arrows would miss their target while others would be deflected by shields or armor. Clearly, Moat Cailin depended on an outdated reputation – a determined attacker could certainly capture this place, were she willing to accept losses. Still, that meant that men and some women would die. Possibly including Lyra Mormont, or me. I did not wish for this to happen if I could avoid it.

Lyra crouched next to me behind the bole.

“You have been inside that tower?” I whispered.

“Yes. When we marched south.”

“It is in good condition?”

“Terrible. Interior doors won’t close because the tower’s sagged. Takes four or five men to close and open the outer ones. Supports are collapsing and someone’s shored them up with added wood. There’s widespread rot in the floors and wooden support beams. Stones fall off of the top. That’s true for all three towers.”

We ducked back out of sight and I considered what I had learned. An idea formed, and I waved to Lord Reed to show that I wanted to discuss our plans. We retreated some distance back into the swamp, to a long-collapsed stone fortification where we could speak without giving away our
position. I sat on a fallen stone along with Lyra Mormont, Lord Reed and several soldiers from all three houses.

“There are 42 men within, most of them asleep,” I said. “Five guards on duty: two at the door, one right above, two on top of the tower.”

“What do you suggest?” Lord Reed asked.

I thought for a moment, and saw that one of the Glover fighters carried a war hammer.

“Might I use your hammer?” I asked him. He looked surprised, but handed it over. I stood and chose one of the fallen stones on the opposite side of the fallen wall, so that fragments would not strike my friends. I struck it with as powerful an overhead swing as I could muster; it shattered into several pieces.

The hammer did not seem damaged. I resumed my seat.

“May I use this against the tower?”

“Whatever you wish, Princess,” the fighter said.

“You plan to attack the tower itself?” Lord Reed asked.

“Yes. There must be only a few keystones keeping the tower from collapse. I will slither through the mud to the tower, rise up and smash those stones. The angle is so steep it does not appear that they can shoot at me from the tower.”

“They can pour out and attack you as soon as they feel the hammer blows,” Lyra pointed out.

“We will need help from the swamp bowmen,” I said. “They will need to suppress the Boltons trying to exit the tower.”

“That can be arranged,” Lord Reed said. “Would you not rather wait for nightfall?”

I thought on that suggestion.

“They do not know that we have arrived,” I said. “That leaves a full day for them to notice us. Let us attack now.”

A short time later, Lyra had applied mud to my entire body, and stuck a few swamp plants into my harness. I felt very dirty, but enjoyed her touch; as had happened at Harrenhal, the soldiers enjoyed watching us. I gathered a number of extra daggers for throwing from the nearby fighters, plus a second war hammer in case the first broke under the strain. I reluctantly left my sword with Lyra.

Slowly, I slithered forward through the mud, keeping close watch on the thoughts of the guards on watch. When they looked away, I crawled forward a short way. That slowed my advance, but eventually I had reached the low wall in front of the tower. I stretched my arms and legs, then waved to the waiting lords to signal my readiness.

The swamp warriors advanced out from their hidden positions, each Bowman accompanied by another fighter, often a Mormont or Glover soldier, bearing a shield. When they started loosing arrows at the guards, I hefted both hammers, vaulted over the wall and raced to the tower’s overhang. No one within saw me.

As Lyra had said, the tower had not seen repairs for years, perhaps decades. The sun rarely shown
underneath the leaning structure, and the building stones were covered with small plant life and very wet. Much of the mortar had crumbled away over the years, and many of the stones had deep cracks within them.

I chose what seemed to be the central stone, rubbed my hands, and crashed the hammer into it with a level swing backed by as much power as I could muster. And that was quite a lot; the once-smooth stone immediately turned into fragments. The tower began to groan and lean over toward me; I prepared to strike it again but the structure had clearly begun to fall. For reasons I did not understand I snatched up the second hammer before I leapt out of the way and scrambled back over the broken wall. Again, no one within the tower saw me. I pressed my body tightly to the wet ground, inadvertently taking some mud into my mouth. I spat it out.

The tower’s garrison had other things on their mind than looking for me. A few tried to run out the door, only to be shot down by the swamp fighters’ arrows. Most succumbed to panic and ran about screaming, shouting and arguing. They went down with the tower, which fell across the road with a terrible crashing noise. I felt a powerful pulse race through the ground as the structure collapsed, then rose to admire the destruction I had wrought.

A massive cloud of dust shrouded the remains of the tower, which now thoroughly blocked the causeway leading north. No one had survived uninjured; several swamp fighters began to sort through the wreckage and finish off the wounded.

Lyra joined me, handing over my sword. I gratefully took it and slung the belt over my shoulder. I returned the war hammers and daggers to their owners, several of whom slapped me on the shoulder.

“Impressive,” Lyra said.

“I only struck it once,” I said. “I do not think it would have lasted for much longer in any event.”

“I’m still impressed. Remind me not to anger you.”

“You could never do so.”

“You’d be surprised. Let’s have a look at the other towers.”

The wreckage of the Drunkard’s Tower lay within range of the Bolton troops in the large structure known as the Gatehouse Tower, and now bolts and arrows began to land on the stones. Lyra and I climbed atop the small wall behind which I had sheltered, but advanced no further.

Panic had now taken over the Gatehouse garrison, which numbered over 100 men. They continued to rain their projectiles on the corpses of their comrades and the ruins they had defended, and I could detect furious arguments under way within their fortification. Some held that the Drunkard’s Tower had collapsed of its own accord and they had nothing to fear; others claimed that they were faced with some new weapon and should withdraw immediately.

I knew that we needed to attack them, somehow, as quickly as possible before they calmed themselves. Yet I could not think of any means that would not result in my being shot full of arrows. I explained my thinking to Lyra.

“We have shields,” she said.

“The crossbow bolts will go through . . .” I heard my voice trail off as I lost that thought, my eyes fixed on the heavy wooden door that had once protected the Drunkard’s Tower.

“But they will not go through that,” I finished.
The rain of arrows had ceased, so I cautiously moved forward to pick up the door and bring it back behind the wall. It had heavy bolts that I could grasp to hold it in place, and though heavy, I could heft it over my head. Lord Reed joined us as I shifted its weight to find the most comfortable angle.

“I will cross to the Gatehouse Tower under cover of this door,” I told him. “Advance your archers behind me as you feel best, but do not risk their lives without need. I will smash in the door to the tower and we will storm it before the Boltons have regained their wits.”

“I’m coming with you,” Lyra said, taking a shield and a heavy axe from a Mormont soldier.

“I would like that. Stay under the door, you will not need that.”

“I will if they come out of the tower to shoot at us from ground level.”

I should have foreseen that problem myself. I nodded.

We set out across open ground, very wet with some patches of deep mud. Arrows and bolts struck the top of the door, most of them bouncing off due to the angle but a few sticking. None came close to striking us.

I could not run while carrying our protective cover, but found a long-striding pace I could manage. Eventually a pair of enemy archers came out of our target’s heavy door and loosed arrows at us; I stopped so that Lyra could cover us with her shield but both arrows went well wide of us. Their second shots were little better.

We reached the heavy doors to the tower just as the archers scrambled back inside and slammed them shut. Someone pulled open a small armored window in the door and pointed a crossbow out; I rested our cover on the ground, grabbed the crossbow’s stirrup and yanked it forward as hard as I could. The crossbow’s wielder crashed into the inside of the doors and fell to the floor badly injured.

I kicked the door repeatedly with my hobnailed boots; it shuddered and its hinges began to weaken. Lyra offered me the battle axe, but I would have needed both hands to wield it and someone had started dropping rocks and other objects on the door I held over my head so I dared not put it down. The armored slot in the tower door opened again and this time someone tried to look out at us; Lyra jammed her sword into the opening and the observer screamed.

I detected five more crossbowmen awaiting us while the tower’s commander gathered ten men with swords to meet us. Two injured men slumped against the inside of the doors. When the tower doors seemed ready to give, I smashed our own door into them, knocking the tower doors off their hinges and crushing the injured men underneath. I shoved our door away, pulled Lyra to the floor and threw myself over her as five crossbow bolts whirred over us. We leapt to our feet and I let out a lengthy and very satisfying scream as we charged into the tower’s wide lower room. And then Lyra and I were along the Boltons. The crossbowmen ran up the stairs, leaving their comrades to face us.

We fought as we had trained, in the paired style of Helium. I took the lead and Lyra covered my flanks. The Boltons hesitated, and I slashed the first man across the throat while Lyra stabbed his neighbor in his unarmored chest. The next man I faced raised his sword, but I knocked it down before he could strike and Lyra stuck her blade into his exposed face, then disarmed the man to her right with an unexpected back-swing that sent his blade tumbling out of his hands. I ran him through with my sword in my right hand while my left foot crushed the instep of the man to my own left. When he bent over in pain, I grabbed the back of his head and smashed it into my upraised left knee, snapping his neck and leaving me with a painful bruise.

In a few breaths we had killed seven of the ten swordsmen attempting to stop us. Two of them turned
and ran, while their commander remained to face us alone.

“Yield,” Lyra said.

“Fuck you, bitch.” He charged with a wild swing. I side-stepped his attack and ran him through just as the first swamp warriors surged through the shattered door.

“She doesn’t like that word,” Lyra told him as he died.

“Watch for ambushes,” I shouted to the crannogmen. “They have crossbowmen waiting.”

I pulled my sword free of the Bolton commander’s chest and flexed my arms, sore from carrying the heavy door through a muddy morass. Lyra reached over and gently slapped my face with a bloody hand. She said nothing, but smiled.

“That is not your blood?” I asked, prepared to become upset.

“No, I’m fine. You?”

“Tired from lifting that door, but also unhurt.”

“How’s your shoulder?”

“It seems solid. I think I have fully recovered.”

We decided that we deserved a drink of wine, but the tower had none. We waited until the swamp warriors reported the tower cleared, then climbed to the watch-posts on its roof. From there we could see the last occupied fortification, known as the Children’s Tower.

“You have a plan to take that one?” Lyra asked as we leaned out of the gaps in the wall surrounding the top of the tower, openings known as “crenellations.” “What are they thinking?”

I concentrated, moving from one man’s thoughts to another.

“There are thirty of them, some from House Frey and some from Bolton. They do not like one another. They are not sure that this tower has fallen. Some wish to surrender, some wish to force us to starve them out. They are very angry with one another.”

“Angry enough to fight?”

“I believe so.”

She called to a pair of swamp warriors atop the tower with us.

“Can you find a large banner? As large as you can, and bring it up here.”

They nodded and hurried down the stairs into the tower.

“Is there anything you can do to agitate them further?”

“No. I can understand their thoughts, but can only project thoughts to another telepath, one who can also read them.”

“Can we do the door thing again?”

“I do not think I could carry it that distance without some rest first.”
The two fighters returned with a very large banner displaying a swamp lizard trying to bite its own tail. It was swamp green, which meant that it blended with the coating of tiny plants that made the tower a similar shade of green. We slung the banner off the edge of the tower and weighted it in place with loose stones I pulled out of the rampart.

“Do they see it?”

I scanned the other tower.

“No. The lookouts atop the tower have commenced fighting one another. No one is watching us.”

“Care to pay them a visit?”

“Let us go.”

We climbed down the tower’s stairs and then walked across the open ground between the two towers. Lyra had retrieved her shield, in case someone noticed us. A few swamp fighters began slowly sneaking forward as well, using every tussock and stone to hide their advance. But no one saw us, and soon we had arrived at the tower’s door, yet another heavy wooden barrier reinforced with iron bands and large bolts like those on the other towers.

I pounded on the door. The slot opened and someone looked out; Lyra once again stabbed the watcher in the eye. I wondered how we would smash our way through, and pushed gently on the door to test its strength. It swung open with some scraping and creaking; it had not been barred.

Directly in front of us, a man in Frey clothing wrestled one wearing a pink overcoat with a corpse on it that I believed to be the Bolton insignia. They grasped each other tightly, each with a dagger in one hand, and I ran them both through. The men died while still trying to stab one another.

I put my foot on the back of the Frey man and shoved the two combatants forward to clear my sword. No one else seemed to notice us; all of the men remained locked in their own dances of death. I stood in the doorway to block their escape, while Lyra went outside to wave the swamp warriors forward. When our allies arrived they began shooting down the Freys and Boltons with arrows, turning their battle into a scene of mutual death within moments. The Reed soldiers then swept through the tower, killing several more men and capturing the garrison’s commander, a short, fat and very dirty man named Nage.

Lyra and I cleaned our swords and awaited our sisters; I had picked up Jory’s approaching thoughts. They brought wine, and the four of us climbed to the top of the tower to share it. Despite her youth Jory had been on battlefields before and stepped over the dead without showing very much reaction.

“Lord Glover said the two of you are mad,” she reported as we marched up the stairs. “Something about charging the Gatehouse Tower with only a door as a shield?”

“It was a very thick door,” I said. “I held it over our heads. Lyra had a shield in case someone shot at us from ground level.”

“And you chopped down the Drunkard’s Tower?”

“It was close to collapse already.”

“And stormed this one, the Children’s Tower, again you two alone?”

“They were already fighting themselves. I killed two of them but the rest never noticed us.”
“They sing songs about heroes who did less.” Jory smiled, unsure herself if she were jesting.

“You’ve had a busy afternoon,” Tansy said as we each climbed atop one of the upright segments of the fortified wall atop the tower, known as a “merlon.” “And you smell bad.”

She handed me a skin bag filled with wine, and a cloth to wipe some of the mud off my face. “Lord Reed said no one had ever captured this place coming from the south.”

“I find that hard to believe,” I said. “The towers could not support one another, and had no linking fortifications between them. Not for many years, at least. No sentries outside the towers, no patrols. The commander here was extremely careless.”

“I’ll trust your judgement on matters military. But the legend exists nonetheless. Now it includes you.”

I had agreed to help in the assault out of friendship and gratitude; I had not intended to become a minor legend. I had succeeded thanks to my training and experience, along with my enhanced strength and a healthy portion of good fortune, but I still did not consider myself a warrior.

John Carter, on the other hand, had far more skills than I, an instinctive talent for battlefield decision-making along with extensive experience, and at least on Barsoom had even greater strength than what I had been granted here. I had captured a garrisoned castle, assassinated a crowned ruler, sunk a pirate ship and now conquered an unconquerable fortress.

No tales of even greater exploits by some mysterious outlander had come my way. Neither Queen Cersei nor Galbart Glover had heard of anyone like John Carter. While some other armed factions remained to be investigated, the probability of finding him in their ranks seemed remote.

A swamp fighter came up the tower stairs, searching for me, and bade me join the Lords Reed, Glover and Mormont in questioning Nage, the commander of the Bolton garrison. They had secured him in a small room within the Children’s Tower apparently used as an office, only two levels below the roof.

“Apologies for taking you from the other girls,” Maege said, smiling. “Our prisoner is not very talkative.”

“What do you wish to know?”

“Whatever he does.”

“That is a large request.”

“Chiefly, what does he know of the situation in the North, and the Bolton plans.”

“Whether the Bolton army approaches?”

“Yes.”

“Leave me with him.”

The lords and their accompanying soldiers filed out. I took the chair behind the office’s desk and propped my boots on its surface. Mud dripped onto the papers scattered about. Wishing to look nonchalant, I picked up a document and pretended to read it, casting it aside when the prisoner’s thoughts showed that I held it upside-down.
"I won’t talk,” the prisoner said when we were alone. He was tied firmly to a wooden chair, placed
to face the desk. “Anything you do to me, Ramsay will do worse.”

“That is likely,” I agreed. “Therefore I will not bother to torture you.”

He was slightly relieved; he feared me though he could not understand why I was coated in stinking
swamp mud.

“Ramsay Bolton has been defeated in the North, and retreats southward. You were ordered to hold
this place until he arrived, gathering supplies, and then join the remnants of his defeated army on a
march to the south in an attempt to reach the Lannister army. You do not know how many men
survived, but based on no actual evidence believe the number to be small. You have collected no
additional supplies and your troops were on the point of mutiny over their lack of pay.”

“You learned none of that from me.”

“I learned all of that from you. I can read others’ thoughts. I cannot extract information if you do not
think of it but you helpfully made a list in your mind of those things you would not tell my friends.”

“You lie.”

“I do not lie. And my mother was a princess, not a demon.”

“You . . . get out of my head.”

“I am afraid I cannot do that. Do you have any other useful information?”

“No.”

“You appear to tell the truth. The Bolton family did not trust you with their plans.”

“I stood by Lord Roose through all the campaigns in the South.”

“And then his son murdered him? Why do you stand by him?” I probed for the obvious answer.
“Because he will tear off your skin if you do not.”

“Bitch.”

“You are not the first to so name me.”

I could tell that the lords and their guards waited outside the office door. I called loudly for them to
enter, and repeated what I had learned.

“He wishes to murder me. Please have him executed immediately, or I will feel it necessary to throw
him out the window.”

“Take his head,” Lord Reed told the guards. “Burn his body like the others.”

Two of the swamp fighters dragged Nage away; he said nothing more.

“How did you manage that without torture?” Lord Glover asked.

“I have many skills.”

“That became obvious when you cut down one tower and captured two others, single-handed.”
“That is not fully correct. Lyra Mormont was with me.”
Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Summary

In which Dejah Thoris battles an angry chipmunk.

Chapter Nineteen

We camped at Moat Cailin for two more days, while the soldiers built large fires to burn the dead and dragged the wreckage of the Drunkard’s Tower away from the Kingsroad. Howland Reed hoped to meet Ramsay Bolton’s advance while still amid the swamps, where his men would have the advantage of familiarity of terrain, and so was in no hurry to move on.

I took over a chamber on the top level of the Gatehouse Tower, along with Tansy, Lyra and Jory. We probably should have helped with the work, but instead we rested, ate and drank and took long baths in a large metal tub someone had left in the room. My escapade with the door had left me somewhat sore, so I had a small excuse for shirking. Before leaving Barsoom it would never have occurred to me to even consider that I might participate in physical labor, let alone feel guilt for failing to do so.

When we finally set out, our little army marched directly up the Kingsroad, with a cloud of scouts covering all four flanks. The road leading north from the swamp lands remained a rutted track, but at least the ground had hardened from the frost and we did not have to deal with mud.

Now that we had reached a real road, we could ride more easily and I spent a good deal of time alongside Jory Mormont. She taught me about the lands through which we passed: their animals, trees and plants. Very few people lived here, and according to Jory, this remained true throughout the North, though the population would not be as sparse everywhere.

As Jory chattered I watched Tansy and Lyra riding side-by-side ahead of us. I had realized that in place of reading thoughts, these people often relied on reading what they called “body language.” That seemed far less effective, and prone to misinterpretation. As far as I could tell with my limited experience, Tansy appeared at ease with Lyra, laughing as Lyra told a story accompanied by broad hand gestures.

“She’s so much better now,” Jory said, following my eyes.

“Am I that obvious?”

“Yes, but I don’t blame you. She didn’t laugh like that when she first brought you to Greywater Watch.”

Seeing Tansy’s happiness lightened my own spirits. For once, I did not feel the depressing weight of my actions, nor feel myself a lonely outcast. Tansy was not an outlier – other women of this world accepted me, even knowing me to be an alien who had cut a swath of murder and mayhem across Westeros.

“I owe the Mormont family a great deal.”

“No, you don’t. That’s just what friends do.”
“Things are so much easier when thoughts are open others.”

“I’d imagine there are just as many added problems.”

I thought about that for a moment.

“I suppose that there are. It is easy to prefer what you know.”

“Or despise it. I like Bear Island. My cousin couldn’t wait to escape, or so I’m told.”

“It is like these lands?”

“They’re all part of the North. The trees look much like these, but the heavy winds off the ice make them grow far more slowly. The seas can be huge – big gray waves pounding against the rocks. It’s beautiful.”

“You wish to return.”

“I do. I can spend whole days just looking at the trees, finding birds’ nests in the rocks. Like that one,” she said, pointing to a collection of small pieces of wood and dead leaves jammed into a tree.

“They give birth there?”

“Not exactly. They lay eggs there and then protect them until they hatch and then until they can fly on their own.”

“They defend their young?”

“Fiercely.”

We had left the swamps behind us, but still had no contact with Ramsay Bolton’s army. We encountered no travelers, but on the fifth day after leaving Moat Cailin a Reed warrior rode up and asked me to join the scouts at the front of our little column. I nodded to Lyra and she rode with me; we dismounted where the soldier indicated and followed him to where one of his fellows lay at the top of a grass-covered hill, dropping to the ground and wriggling forward to the crest.

“Lord Reed says you have your own sort of greensight,” the soldier who had summoned us whispered. “What do you see, Princess?”

I looked out at the ground below. The road passed through a wider open area than it had during our march, and there a tiny army had arrayed itself to block passage from the south. They spanned the open area between the forests on either side, with about 500 men in three ranks. I scanned carefully for any other enemies.

“It is an ambush,” I said just as softly. “There are men in the woods to both sides.”

“We spotted them,” the soldier said. “Perhaps 200 on each side?”

“I agree. They have bows and arrows. Did you encounter scouts?”

“Not that I’d call scouts. Pickets, more like, too close to the main body for us to take any prisoner. Can you tell what’s behind them?”

I concentrated again. I found no reserves behind the small enemy army and only a few horses at the very edge of my range. I picked out a few individuals and sorted through their thoughts. They
expected us, but had no accurate count of our forces. They were all hungry, and apparently had eaten most of their horses in the recent past – more than one man was angry at having had to march on foot.

I sought their commander, but could not find him. I did find that the men in the woods had been ordered to remain hidden until their comrades on the road became engaged with the approaching Reed forces, then attack them from the flanks. They had been ordered to send out no scouts, so as not to give away their ambush.

“They have only what I believe to be their command group’s horses, and no reserves. They stake all on their ambush. Let us tell your lord.”

The Lords Reed, Mormont and Glover awaited us. I knelt and drew the enemy alignment in the dirt, the swamp scout nodding his agreement and adding some comments on the nature of the forests and condition of the ground.

“They have no mounted troops,” I said. “And no reserve.”

“What do you suggest?” Lord Reed asked.

“What my husband would call a ‘double envelopment.’ We divide our forces and strike from either flank, taking their hidden forces from behind. Our best-armored troops advance straight up the road to hold their attention.”

“Bold and dangerous,” Lord Glover mused. “Dividing our force in the face of the enemy is generally frowned upon.”

“Fortune favors the bold,” I quoted John Carter, in turn quoting some famed warrior of Dirt.

Lord Reed pondered; his thoughts showed him unwilling to risk his men needlessly but realizing that a quick victory would actually lessen the bloodletting.

“You’re confident?” he asked me.

“You saw her at Moat Cailin,” Lyra put in.

“I will lead the Northern fighters up the road,” I said, drawing in the dirt with my finger. “We will halt out of range and insult them. I will challenge their lord to single combat, which he will refuse but that will provide additional time. Split your swamp fighters to attack both of the hidden groups from the rear. We will kill them all.”

Howland Reed looked to the other lords.

“It’s your command,” Lord Glover said. “But King Robb would have liked this plan.”

“I trust the Princess,” Maege added. “After Moat Cailin, the men will follow her anywhere.”

The swamp lord nodded.

“Let’s make it so.”

Jory helped me dress. I put on her coat of ringed armor and underlying padded tunic; they fit me and must have been very uncomfortable on her smaller frame. The armor fell to a point between my knees and waist; the padding only went to a little lower than my ass. I also took her shield but not her helmet. I hoped I would not need the protection, but taking it from Jory assured that Maege would
keep her with Tansy and the horses well behind our troops, and this eased my mind. I also wore the
garment Jory called a “surcoat,” which covered the armor and had a picture of a bear on it.

Lord Reed had assigned me all of the Mormont and Glover warriors, the better-armored Reed
soldiers, and stragglers from other Northern houses who had gathered at Greywater Watch after
parting from Robb Stark’s army. In all I had about 500 men and perhaps 30 women, all of the latter
from House Mormont. All were experienced fighters, and when I asked them to form a shield wall
they did so quickly and expertly.

I placed Maege and Lord Glover behind our ranks, to keep them ordered. Galbart Glover had briefly
objected that his place was in front of his men, but allowed that not all of us could lead from the front
and someone needed to direct things from behind our formation. His thoughts said he had hoped to
impress me with his valor.

I stood in front along with Lyra; Tansy and Jory remained with a guard of swamp fighters with our
small number of horses and our baggage train. And then we marched down the road. Lord Reed and
his men had already set out, and I kept track of his thoughts though he soon moved to the very edge
of my range.

“Stay with me,” I told Lyra. “The soldiers need to see us before the battle. We will fall behind the
line before it makes contact, so the soldiers can still hear us. Do not become tied up in individual
fighting; we will go wherever we are needed.”

“I’ve done this before,” she said, smiling.

“I know. I only confirm that we have the same plan.”

“Sticking with you seems a pretty good plan.”

We soon spotted the waiting Bolton army. I called our troops to a halt well beyond the range of
enemy arrows, and ordered them to fall into their three ranks for battle. Our line did not quite reach
the forest on either side. I would have preferred a thicker line, but did not wish us to be easily flanked
in case something went wrong with our battle plan.

I walked out toward the enemy, with Lyra beside me. I left my sword in its scabbard and Jory’s
shield slung over my back. Two knights walked out from the enemy lines to meet us; as they drew
close I saw that they wore a black horse’s head on an orange background as the symbol on their
surcoats. They wore ringed armor like ours, but no other protection. Lyra and I halted and let them
approach; I did not want to rush this meeting so that Lord Reed had time to launch his attack before
we had to fight.

“Two Mormont bitches,” one of the knights said. They looked almost identical to me; definitely
brothers and possibly twins, which fascinated me – we have no twins on Barsoom. “Part of the She-
Bear’s gigantic litter. Which ones are you?”

“Lyra Mormont,” Lyra said. “You’ve heard of my sister, Dacey.”

“I’ve heard she’s dead.”

“You heard wrong. Apparently you’ve been told many lies, ser, and forgotten your courtesies.”

I had not expected Lyra to name me as her dead sister, but understood that she wished to undermine
the brothers’ confidence in their leader.

“Ser Roger Ryswell,” the first knight said. “My brother, Ser Rickard.”
“You serve Roose Bolton?”

“Roose is dead. We follow Ramsay.”

Their thoughts showed uneasiness about following Ramsay Bolton, but they feared they would be killed out of hand by the other Northerners for their treason. That was certainly Lyra’s desire.

“And why is he not here to speak for himself?”

“Because he sent us in his place.”

“We’re all of the North,” Lyra said. “Surely we need not shed Northern blood today. Join us.”

“It’s gone too far for that,” the knight said. “You chose to follow the Starks. We chose the new order.”

“You chose poorly.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not.”

“You wish to march south,” I finally spoke. “We will not allow this.”

“You’re no Mormont,” his brother now spoke as well. “And we’ll go where we please. Bend the knee to Lord Ramsay, and he’ll spare you.”

“That will not happen,” I said. “So fight us. Paired combat. Two brothers, two sisters. The army of the losers will submit to the winners.”

“How chivalrous. You know neither side will submit.”

“I do. But it will assure me of the chance to kill you personally.”

He laughed.

“Go tell the men,” he told his brother.

The other Ryswell walked toward his own army, shouting to them that we would now hold a duel. Lyra did the same for our troops. From Lord Reed’s thoughts, I knew he was moments from launching his attack, while the man he had sent to lead the attack on the left flank only awaited his lord’s signal.

“It’s nothing personal,” Roger Ryswell said, sneering as he slowly drew his sword.

“It is for me,” I answered, drawing my own sword. “You should not have called me ‘bitch’.”

“Valyrian steel. You know how to use it?”

“No,” I said, stepping forward and raising my left knee sharply into his unarmored genitals, which are far more vulnerable to such attack than those of a man of Barsoom. He fell to his knees with a howl and I brought the pommel of my sword down on the top of his uncovered head, stunning him. I placed my sword’s point in the hollow at the base of his throat and jammed it home. John Carter would have taken him prisoner; that option did not occur to me until he was already dead.

“Roger!” the other Ryswell shouted, charging at me with his sword drawn as I pulled my blade free of his twin’s corpse. I awaited his attack and parried his strike much harder than I had intended, sending his sword flying away. He stood dumbfounded as I ran him through while Lyra rushed
forward at the same moment and with a wild scream delivered a two-handed stroke that removed his head. Almost immediately, men came crashing out of the woods, running in panic with arrows flying after them. I signaled to our troops to advance.

Our line ran over Ramsay Bolton’s fleeing bowmen, killing those who had survived the swamp warriors’ arrows. Lyra and I fell behind our third rank. When our shield wall reached the enemy’s the Bolton line – mostly Ryswell soldiers, I now understood – had already begun to crumble under attack on both its flanks.

I shouted to our troops to keep their formation, and we steadily cut down the disordered enemy. Many now tried to surrender, but our own fighters, bitterly angry over what they saw as treason, cut them down or speared them where they knelt. Had I spared the Ryswell, our men would have killed him anyway. Our troops tried to run forward individually, but Maege and Lord Glover kept their sections in order while Lyra and I rushed about shouting for discipline. Only when I was sure that Lord Reed’s men had closed completely around the Bolton army did I release the first rank for a general pursuit, but I kept the second and third ranks in line.

Within a short time the battle had ended. Ramsay Bolton himself and a few followers escaped on their handful of horses. The Northerners took no prisoners.

With my sister, the Mormonts and Lords Reed and Glover I sat at a fire built by the swamp fighters, while they collected the dead and burned them. We had lost less than twenty men, mostly Reed fighters cut down by unlucky arrows, and counted over a thousand dead Bolton and Ryswell soldiers.

“I won’t doubt you again, Princess,” Lord Glover said as I took my place nestled next to Tansy. “Not even King Robb had that sort of mind for battle.”

“Was he trained for it?” I asked.

“As far as I know, no more than any other hightower warrior.”

“We study war in my lands – the outcome of old battles, how they were fought, how the armies maneuvered, and most importantly how to keep them supplied. My husband commands our forces, but as a princess I had to learn of these things.”

“King Robb spoke of old battles when giving his orders, and seemed inspired by their lessons.”

“That is our way as well. The past does not repeat itself, but one can learn from similar situations.”

He thought wistfully of how Robb might have survived had he married me instead of a fairly stupid merchant’s daughter, then realized that I was probably ten years older than his king – an estimate that was only short by about 750 of their years. He had been loyal to King Robb, but genuinely liked him as well.

“What is next?” I asked Lord Reed.

“Dispose of the bodies, collect the spoils, and then camp a little north of here tonight.”

“And Ramsay Bolton?”

“I’ve already sent scouts to seek him. He likes to attack unprepared enemy camps, so we will be extra watchful as well.”
Two days later, we descended into a small tree-filled valley that the swamp lord called a “glen.” Snow had begun falling on the previous day. I detected thoughts ahead: the remnants of Ramsay Bolton’s army, less than fifty men, waited in the trees for us. I told the swamp lord to halt our column.

We dismounted and left some of the men holding the horses, while the rest of us spread out and entered the forest on either side of the road. Tansy remained with Maege and Jory among the horseholders, while Lyra and I joined the Mormont fighters. We vastly outnumbered those who would ambush us, and I hoped we could finish them.

As I crept through the trees, my foot struck something under the snow. I reached down to feel for it and picked it up. It was simply a rock, ovoid-shaped and about the size of a just-laid thoat egg. I still had it in my hand when I spotted a small group of people in a clearing ahead.

In the center of them stood a man whose thoughts identified him as Ramsay Snow. As telepaths know, one usually obtains a stranger’s name in their first thoughts because Barsoomian etiquette calls for them to send it if for some reason they are unable to speak. Otherwise, few people ever think of their own name. And even the strongest telepath can only read what is in the thoughts of another – if they don’t think about it, there is nothing to read. But it is difficult for an untrained mind to avoid thinking of pink zitidars.

Ramsay Snow thought of how his real name had become Ramsay Bolton, the head of House Bolton now that he had killed his father. He continued to speak of himself in the third person in his rambling internal monologue, sometimes as Ramsay Snow and sometimes as Ramsay Bolton. He would destroy all of his enemies, including those about to be ambushed on the road now. He told the three young women around him that he would capture our leaders and take his vengeance on them, flaying the skin from their flesh. He hoped to capture women in particular to torture; the anticipation aroused him. He waved a small knife to emphasize his words and thoughts.

He was quite insane.

Each of the young women stared adoringly at him, drinking in every word. Their thoughts revealed two hoping to be chosen to receive orgasm; the third hoped she and one of the others would be chosen to pleasure Ramsay Snow together. Each was easily as insane as her master, and each held the leash of a large, angry and very hungry dog.

All four of them stared as Lyra and I stepped into the clearing. Ramsay Snow considered which of us he would rather rape. I wanted to draw my sword, but still had the rock in my hand. I almost dropped it, but instead hefted it and considered throwing it at him before using my sword. He noticed my indecision.

“I’ll wager that you throw like a girl,” he taunted.

That decided me. I hurled the rock at Ramsay Snow as hard as I could. I aimed for his face, but it struck him at the base of his throat. He dropped his little skinning knife and his arms began to flail wildly about as he fell to his knees. He grasped at his throat, where the rock had become lodged, and tried to pull it free as blood spurted from the wound. Then he fell forward into the snow. His body continued to jerk spasmodically, but I could tell he was already dying.

“I do throw like a girl. A fast and deadly girl.

His friends dropped the leashes of their dogs, which charged at us making their “bark” sounds and sending out great clouds of spittle as they ran through the snow. The women came running behind them, wildly yelling and waving swords.
I moved closer to Lyra and drew my sword. I tried to contact the dogs telepathically, but they were consumed with battle frenzy. Fortunately I wore the heavy gloves I had taken from Brienne, leather with thick padding over them and an outer layer of very well-made “mail” armor with small and very flexible links.

The dogs had opened a lead over the women, and when the first one reached us I rammed my armored right hand into its open mouth and sharply snapped its lower jaw downward, breaking it. The dog whimpered and fell to the ground as I slashed the second dog, coming in from my left, across its forelegs, taking off its left leg and damaging its right. As it howled I spun right and sank my sword deeply into the flank of the dog charging at Lyra.

Lyra kept her blade in ready position and the first of Ramsey’s women to reach us simply ran onto her sword. She was rather fat, with a plump face and large breasts squeezed into a tight black corset with their pale, soft flesh spilling over the top. She dropped her sword and fell onto her back, her battle cry instantly silenced.

The other two women rushed at me, but did not try to coordinate their movements. Both were dressed like their friend, though they were considerably less fat. I backhanded the one to my left with my armored gauntlet across her face, sending her sprawling. The other took a wild swing at my head; I ducked under it and then rose with a two-handed swing of my own. She had brown hair, similar to Lyra’s though cut shorter, and a round red-cheeked face that reminded me of the small woodland creature known as a “chipmunk,” now contorted with rage.

I mistook her black corset for a breastplate and swung hard into her left armpit to shatter her armor; instead my sword cut through the flesh of her shoulder and neck to take off both her arm and her head. The head rolled away; the arm dropped to the ground while the body collapsed to its knees and then fell forward.

I stepped over the fresh corpse to where the third woman lay on her back, holding her broken nose and groaning. With my foot I shoved her sword away from her hand.

“What in the seven hells was that?” Lyra asked, cleaning her sword with the cloak she had ripped from the fat woman’s corpse. She walked over to stand beside me and look down at the woman lying on her back in the snow.

“The man is named Ramsay Snow,” I said. “Or sometimes Ramsay Bolton. He thought of himself under both names. He was quite insane, and wanted to rape us and then peel our skin from our flesh. He apparently had done such things before, and these three helped him.”

The woman moved her hands away from her bleeding nose. She was tall with long silvery-yellow hair, broad shoulders and small breasts. She had probably been pretty before I ruined her face.

“We’re Ramsay’s Bitches,” she said, her voice muffled by her injury. “We help him skin the weak and if we’re good, we get to fuck him.”

I probed her thoughts. She had a weak grasp of reality, hating me for killing Ramsay Snow yet hoping to receive orgasm from him soon.

“She’s mad?” Lyra asked, looking at me.

“Absolutely,” I said. “She is eager to kill us.”

“She probably should have learned to use that sword before trying to kill people with it.”

“You killed Ramsey, you bitches,” the woman said. “I’m going to kill you until you’re both dead.
Slowly, like he’d want it. Deliciously, with your skin peeling off just a little at a time. I’ll start with your tits. He’d like that. But I won’t kill you right away, so you can each see me peel the other bitch and hear your lover scream.”

Like her friends, she wore a black corset tied tightly with leather laces; it looked extremely uncomfortable. I placed the tip of my sword on the exposed flesh between the laces at the center of her chest, as Howland Reed emerged from the trees.

“Not the heart,” he said. “Take her head. We can’t have her rising, and we don’t have the dry wood to burn all the bodies. Take all the heads, and make sure they’re well-separated from their bodies.”

“You know about these women?”

“I’ve heard stories. They’re said to be as murderously insane as Ramsay Snow.”

“He’s Lord Ramsay Bolton, and he is your liege lord!”

“He looks like just another bloody corpse to me,” Lyra said. “Please shut her up.”

“As you wish.”

“Bitch!” she screamed, but I did not give her time to say any more. I pulled her head off the ground by her hair’s long, heavy braid and sliced through her neck, then used the braid to hurl the head deep into the nearby trees. I kicked the head of the chipmunk-woman I had already beheaded away from her body, and saw Lyra removing the head from the fat woman’s corpse and giving it an underhanded toss into the branches of a tree.

“Perhaps it would be best not to mention this to Lord Glover,” Howland Reed said, gesturing to the chipmunk-woman’s headless corpse. “I believe this woman was a Glover relative.”

Lord Reed left us, but the dogs I had injured remained nearby, whimpering. They did not try to attack or flee as I approached; they expected to die. I did not know if they could rise, but took off their heads and threw them away just to be sure, while Lyra did the same to the one I had stabbed in the heart.

Next I walked across the clearing and removed the head of Ramsay Snow. Taking it by its long and greasy hair, I tossed it gently in front of me and kicked it as hard as I could, as in the ball games we sometimes play on Barsoom. It sailed over the trees and out of sight. I found this strangely satisfying. If he became an undead creature, he would be severely limited in his capacity for further evil.

I checked all of the corpses for money; the women had none but I took a large sack of gold coins from Ramsay Snow’s corpse. I shared them with Lyra.

We rejoined Howland Reed in a large clearing where his soldiers had met and killed the rest of Ramsey Snow’s men. They were removing the heads from the corpses and dropping them through a hole in the ice covering a nearby pond.

“Does taking their heads prevent their rising?” I asked.

“I truly do not know,” he said. “But reason tells me that it should at least make them less capable evil beings if they can’t tell where they’re going or who they’re attacking.”

“Reason tells me,” Lyra said, “that the dead are supposed to stay dead.”

“That’s a fair point,” Lord Reed conceded. “But without fire, I don’t have a better idea. Do you?”
“Slice off their hands and feet?” Lyra offered.

“Not a bad plan.” He nodded and walked away, calling out new instructions to his men.

“You have seen the dead rise?” I asked Lyra.

“No. But it happens in the old tales of the North. If Lord Reed says it can happen, we should take it absolutely seriously.”

I hoped cutting off the heads and hands would be enough, that the heads would not be able to reunite with their bodies, crawling about on small spidery legs like the Kaldanes of Barsoom.

That night we stopped in a large forest clearing and camped under the trees; Maege had an impressive tent but I slept under the stars beneath a large fur with Tansy, Lyra and Jory all clustered around me, happy for my excessive warmth. I felt very comfortable with them near, and stared up at the very clear, cold sky long after they had all fallen asleep.

I had come to like the Mormont sisters very much; I knew that I would fight to defend Jory as fiercely as I would Tansy. And I had felt completely at ease with Lyra when we fought at Moat Cailin, against the Ryswells and when facing Ramsay’s Bitches, a feeling I had but rarely known on Barsoom, and treasured when I had.

I remained an alien in this world: my body, my thoughts, my ways all remained inherently different from those of these people. But something within me had changed yet again, and this time it did not leave me with a feeling of self-loathing.

Nowhere in the beautiful black skies did I see a red planet move. Would I ever return to Barsoom? Even if I could see Barsoom, could I teleport back? I felt Jory snuggle more closely against my flank, and I put my arm around her shoulders. Did I want to return?

I did not like many things about this place, other than its food. I found many of its animals repulsive, like the inherently evil creature known as “cat,” though I loved horses. I missed the open, dry plains and red rock and sand. I missed the sweet tones of our speech, and the closeness engendered by telepathy. I missed the powerful rhythms of our music.

Oddly, I did not miss my privileges – either those of my station, or those conferred by Barsoom’s superior technology. I supposed I might feel differently were I to be injured or fall ill again with some hurt beyond the skill of Howland Reed to heal.

I had teleported through interstellar space to find John Carter. Instead I had found people I loved, who accepted me as I was. My cravings for acceptance, for belonging, had been answered. Now I rode toward a climactic battle with a powerful evil being, in which I might well die, and could only think of their safety. I would fight for them, and I would defend them, and I would sacrifice none of them.
Chapter Twenty

In which Dejah Thoris fights for justice. And a new purple gown.

Winterfell loomed out of the mists, a castle somewhat smaller than Harrenhal but as with that huge
ruin, one could see from some distance away that much of it had burned. Only a handful of guards in
gray cloaks protected the gates; they greeted the swamp warriors with great enthusiasm.

An army camped outside the gates, and a much smaller encampment stood clearly separate from the
main gathering. Most of the smaller army’s tents were empty, and someone had erected a large pile
of wood with a wooden pole thrust upward from its center. Tents had been ranked closely together in
the larger camp, surrounded by snow packed down by countless footsteps, with cookfires dotting the
site.

The smaller camp had but one fire, with several poorly-dressed men huddled about it for warmth.
Curious, I tested their thoughts and found them broken and bitter, abandoned by their leaders who
apparently sheltered within the castle and left the men outside in the cold.

A small party met us just inside the gates, led by several men and women in Mormont family garb
including a woman who looked very much like a younger version of Maege. She was pretty and
brown haired, but shorter than Lyra or even Jory and much broader across the shoulders. She ran
forward and embraced Maege tightly, then did the same to Lyra and Jory. I dismounted and Maege
introduced us.

“My eldest daughter, Alysane,” she said. “Princess Dejah Thoris, and her sister Tansy. They have
become intimate friends of the Mormonts.”

She embraced me, and then Tansy.

“Then you’re my friends, too. Come.”

Alysane led us, along with Lords Glover and Reed, into a building she called the Great Hall, where
the Lady of Winterfell greeted us very formally. Sansa Stark looked very much like a younger
version of Tansy, not quite as tall but with the same slender build, strong shoulders and large breasts,
and with more red in her hair. Next to her stood our friend Davos Seaworth.

We were introduced to many people. The tiny camp belonged to a man named Stannis. He had been
Davos Seaworth’s king; clearly something had changed. Stannis had probably been an attractive man
in his youth, tall and broad-shouldered, but now he looked like he suffered chronic constipation. By
his side stood a woman dressed all in red named Melisandre. She was beautiful, with red eyes though
not as dark as mine, and I could not avoid looking at her. She kept casting glances at me as well, yet
I found myself unable to read her thoughts.
I recalled Ser Davos’ descriptions of Stannis Baratheon. He had been brother to the former king, and declared himself king when his brother died. Stannis had discovered that his brother’s son was actually the child of Cersei and Jaime Lannister, and had risen in revolt against the Lannisters and their offspring. Stannis went on to lose battles, though everyone called him a great commander, and to alienate potential supporters. For some reason he fought a battle with Ramsay Snow in which most of his army was wiped out. The remainder deserted, and now formed the majority of Winterfell’s small troop of guards. Stannis was a very angry man and resented everyone in the room for denying him his due. None of his troubles, he believed, were of his own making. He reminded me of Cersei without the magical breasts.

After Stannis had been routed, Sansa Stark brought an army from the Vale and defeated Ramsay Snow’s troops, but not before he murdered her youngest brother. We had killed the last survivors of Ramsay Snow’s army. She had just taken over the castle, which had been ruled by her father, a few days before calling on Howland Reed to march north. The Vale lords wished to return home as soon as possible.

Now Howland Reed explained that we had killed Ramsay Snow and his men. And then he told them that we had brought the bones of both Arya Stark and her father, Lord Eddard Stark, to be buried here. Sansa Stark sat unmoving; her thoughts revealed her to be crushed that she had come so close to re-uniting with her sister yet had been denied.

Howland Reed went on to introduce us, naming Tansy as Tanith Tully rather than Rivers, and openly declaring her aunt to Sansa and Arya. Sansa said nothing to correct him and welcomed Tansy to Winterfell in a flat, unemotional voice. She thought only of her sister.

“How did Arya die?”

Howland Reed told the story of the fight in the roadside tavern just south of his lands. Only respect for the swamp lord kept many from voicing their disbelief. Sansa Stark’s guard captain, a man named Hallis Mollen, could not hold his words.

“You, alone, killed Black Walder Frey and ten of his men? All armed, armored and alert?”

“Nine of his men. Arya killed one.”

“My lady, I find that hard to believe. One woman killing one of the fiercest fighters in the Seven Kingdoms and nine armed men besides?”

Sansa Stark shared his doubts.

“You would have to have extraordinary skill with a blade, were those claims true.”

“I do. They are.”

Davos Seaworth stepped forward.

“Lady Stark, if I might?”

She nodded.

“I saw Dejah Thoris fight the pirate king Aurane Waters. She stormed his flagship alone to rescue her sister. It had a crew of over three hundred men. When she was done Waters was dead, his crew dead or scattered, and his ship a burning hulk.

“Threaten those the princess loves and reap the whirlwind.”
“You believe these stories?” Sansa asked Howland Reed and Maegh Mormont.

“She led our forces into battle against Ramsay Snow,” Howland Reed said. “She killed both of the Ryswell brothers in single combat, and she personally killed Ramsay Snow, who styled himself Ramsay Bolton.”

“I saw her capture Moat Cailin,” added the She-Bear. “Practically single-handed. From the south.”

“The word of Lord Reed and Lady Mormont is enough for anyone in the North,” said Sansa Stark. “Welcome, Dejah Thoris, and thank you for the wounds you took in defense of the Stark family. We owe you a debt.”

“There is no debt,” I said. “She was niece to Tansy. It was my duty as Tansy’s sister.”

I placed my fist over my heart and bowed my head, the gesture we use to show respect in Helium. Sansa imitated it very solemnly.

After the ceremony, Davos Seaworth took Tansy and I to the Winterfell kitchens where we sat at a large table. He asked the cooks to bring us a steady stream of food, including bacon and wonderful pies. He showed me how he still had his sword, and slid it slightly out of its scabbard to prove that he had kept it well-oiled.

“It is so good to see you girls. And I know how you like your bacon, princess.”

I smiled. Davos Seaworth had a fatherly affection for us, not knowing that I was at least 750 of their years older than he. I ate heartily, and Davos explained how he came to stand alongside Sansa instead of Stannis. He had taken ship to White Harbor as he planned, and there evaded the lord of White Harbor’s men to join with Stannis and his army. The army became trapped in a winter storm, and began to run out of food. As the men starved, it seemed the entire army would perish. At that point the Red Priestess Melisandre offered up Stannis’ own daughter as a sacrifice to her god.

“Royal blood has some sort of special meaning to her demon-god. They erected a pyre and burned the girl alive. She called to me for help, but Stannis’ soldiers had firm hold of me and made me watch. She was clutching a toy I carved for her.”

He paused and wiped his eyes. We each took one of his rough, hardened hands. He nodded his thanks and continued.

“The snows stopped and the frost kept the ground hard enough to permit the army to march. Stannis’ wife had urgently pressed for her own daughter to be burned in the ritual fires, but a day later she hanged herself in remorse. Fat lot of good that did.

“Stannis did nothing to stop it. Stannis agreed to allow sweet little Shireen to be murdered by the Red Woman. I objected, I screamed, I cursed. I did everything I could think of, even offering to burn in her place. The king had me imprisoned, but it was only a tent. I slipped off my bindings, stole a horse and rode here. I loved that girl. I could not serve that man any longer.”

“You are very good at escaping.”

“Aye. It comes from having been a smuggler before I was the Onion Knight.”

“And now Stannis is here. How did he escape?”

“The Red Woman has powers; that I can’t deny. I suspect she somehow concealed his identity. They arrived together, with a handful of soldiers. All of those soon deserted. It’s been uncomfortable at
times, but Sansa Stark rejects Stannis’ demands to have me executed. I’ve been helping her integrate stragglers from Stannis’ army into her own Winterfell guard. Soon I’ll take my son home and forget the game of thrones.”

“Your son?”

“Devan. He was squire to King Stannis, and arrived here with him. He’s left the king’s service as well.”

Davos had not forgotten my quest; he had asked about the warriors in Stannis’ army as soon as he arrived, but only heard the usual exaggerated tales of the knights’ own great deeds. No one had encountered a warrior anything like John Carter.

“Wait. The Red Woman killed a girl?” Tansy asked. “Stannis’ daughter? And he let her?”

“Yes. And I saw the way she looked at your sister here. Predatory. You two be wary of her. She is far more dangerous than she looks. You saw the bonfire she’s built outside the walls? She wants another sacrifice, and you have royal blood, princess.

“And the princess was right about something else. There are no gods. But there surely are demons.”

We spent the rest of the day caring for our horses and looking about the castle while Lyra and Jory reunited with their sister. The work felt good; I had only rarely done such things as a princess and now they had become routine.

“What will you do now?” Tansy asked as we brushed down the animals.

“Finish here and perhaps see if we can bathe before Evening Meal.”

“No, I mean, now that you know John Carter won’t be found in the North.”

I straddled a very finely-made saddle stand that must have belonged to one of the Stark family and somehow had not burned during the sack of the castle. I thought for a moment and looked at Tansy.

“I do not care, as long as it is with my sister.”

She came over and embraced me. “Me, too,” she told my neck. Then she let me go.

“But really, what will you do now? What will we do now?”

“Howland Reed believes I should fight some monstrous mythical being, the Night’s King. I do not know if I must to travel to the North or await the enemy here, but either way I am inclined to do so.”

“Why?”

My sister looked at me and then answered her own question.

“Lyra Mormont.”

“Yes. Jory also. And Maege. And Ser Davos. I am no longer disconnected from this world and its people.”

“Whatever you choose to do, I’ll be at your side.”

“Thank you.”
“So we stay here?”

“I suppose so, until we hear more of this Night’s King.”

“It feels strange to be in her home.”

“You older sister?”

“You are my sister. Just ‘her’ will do.”

“You are not comfortable here?”

“I’m alright. You’re here. And Lyra. I don’t suppose I like her quite as much as you do,” she looked at me sideways, smiling, “but she’s become a real friend like I haven’t had since childhood. And Maege is here, and Jory. I wish I’d been born a Mormont instead of a Tully.”

“I do like Lyra.”

“I know. Does she?”

“She likes us both very much, as does Jory. But she is not attracted to women, and does not see my attraction to her nor does she return it.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Only a little. You know that we do not crave sex as your people do. Does it bother you?”

“Only a little,” she smiled. “In the adventure stories, women like women and men like men, whenever the storyteller wishes it so. Reality isn’t quite like that.”

“It amuses you.”

“It’s good to see that you have a few human failings. Are they as good as they seem?”

“The Mormonts? Yes. They think me odd, but like me and are awed by my fighting skills. They adore you, all of them do but Maege does in particular.”

“It somehow feels like cheating, to preview others’ thoughts.”

“It makes for honesty in relationships. This can be very painful as well.”

“No doubt. Do they know what I was?”

“Maege suspects. I doubt any of them care. They like you. It is always on your mind?”

“Always. I’m not used to being liked. By women, anyway.”

“You do have a small number of qualities beyond your beauty.”

“Thank you. So do you. So we stay here?”

“What else would we do?”

“Go back to the beach, lie in the sun all day and have sex all night?”

“You said Winter would bring storms and make it too cold for the beach.”
“I wasn’t serious. You’re a hero now, and a monster is coming. And I won’t be separated from my sister.”

Sansa Stark assigned us a room in a tower that was only somewhat damaged, and came to visit several days later along with a friend she introduced as Myranda Royce. Myranda was a pretty woman of an age older than Sansa but younger than Tansy, and much shorter than any of us. She had dark hair and breasts the size of Cersei’s but without their gravity-defying powers. She wore a dress cut lower than any I had yet seen on this world.

Servants followed carrying heaps of clothing of many colors. Sansa apologized repeatedly for her seeming coldness upon meeting us; having found her brother alive only to see him killed before her eyes, followed by news that her sister had been on her way to her when she had also been killed, had nearly overwhelmed her.

“I am to be formally invested as Lady of Winterfell,” Sansa explained. “And I want you both to attend. That means you’ll need proper attire. I know it’s presumptuous but I really do want family there. Myranda has convinced me that we should not be wearing mourning colors for the feast and dancing. There’s been too much of that here.”

“We get to play dress-up,” Myranda added. “This will be fun. Send the maids away, Sansa.”

Myranda Royce, Randa as she preferred, wanted to be friends with both of us. I found that I liked her very much already. She had me stand still in front of a long mirror while she placed dresses in front of me, while Sansa did the same for Tansy. I felt stiff and awkward.

“Surely you did this as a little girl?”

“I practiced with swords. Sometimes I played with my pet.”

“Well, we’re going to make you beautiful. More beautiful. Let me find the right colors to go with that tanned skin.”

Sansa had found a gown for Tansy, and had her sit in front of a mirror while Sansa brushed her hair.

“I used to do this for my mother. You have hair a little darker than hers, but it reminds me of her. I am so glad to have found you. My actual aunt, I mean, my . . .”

“It’s alright, I know what you mean.”

“My Aunt Lysa tried to throw me out of a trap door over a thousand-foot drop.”

Meanwhile Randa went through several long dresses with full sleeves, called gowns, and placed one in front of me made of a fine, smooth material she called silk. It was red, and I liked the way it highlighted my eyes. I liked it more than I had any clothing I’d seen on this planet, except perhaps Taena Merryweather’s pirate-queen outfit, but Sansa did not.

“Those are Lannister colors. I should have had it burnt.”

Randa frowned and went back to one in gray.

“Stark colors, Sansa?”

“That’s better. Try it on her.”

I was wearing a shapeless garment they called a “shift.” I took it off and stood naked in front of the
mirror. I had lost some weight, I noticed. I needed to eat more.

Randa looked me over then turned to Sansa.

“You were wrong. The tan goes everywhere.”

She looked at me again.

“There’s no shame in nudity in your land?”

“None. It is simply a body.”

“Simply? Ifmine looked like that, I’d walk around naked all the time too.”

“We usually wear more than that under our gowns,” Sansa said. “Let me get you some smallclothes.”

She gave me white underclothing, made of a smooth cloth called “silk.” I pulled it on with only a little direction, and then Randa put the gown on me.

“That gray doesn’t work, Sansa.”

“Do you have anything in black?” I asked.

All three of my companions stopped as if suddenly frozen, and stared at me.

“It would match my hair and . . .” I began, before realizing that I had committed some sort of cultural trespass.

“We don’t wear black,” Sansa said. “It’s the color of death and mourning.”

“I am sorry,” I said. “To us it is just another color, suitable for all occasions.”

I felt ashamed at having darkened the mood in the room, even inadvertently. My telepathy had given no warning, but I could have been more careful before blurting out my question.

“It’s alright,” Randa whispered. She pulled out another gown, but I saw what I wanted and pointed.

“That one. Purple.”

“Objections, Lady Stark?”

“None. Dress her in purple.”

Having fitted Tansy in a color she called turquoise blue, Sansa left us while my gown was still only partially complete. Tansy looked truly beautiful, with her reddish hair now fully combed out and flowing down the front of the gown. Randa continued to pin my gown’s silk and satin into place. She gently took hold of the panel covering my chest.

“This seems much too modest,” she said. “How do you feel about losing it?”

“A woman of my country is proud of her breasts,” I said. “Show as much of them as you feel appropriate.”

She laughed. It was a good, throaty laugh.

“You’re my kind of woman. I like to show mine, too.”
“I had not noticed.”

“I appreciate a dry wit. Hold still.”

She deployed a very small cutting instrument to remove the panel, and Tansy pinned the edges back where Randa indicated.

“Sansa doesn’t have a maid who can really do fine work like this, so I may have to do this myself. You don’t do sewing or needlework, do you?”

“Needle work?”

“I didn’t think so. We’ll hem this like so, and give you really fine cleavage. You don’t even need a corset. I might regret this; the Vale knights may stop looking at me.”

She reached into the gown and cupped my left breast in her hand.

“How do you get them to stay so perky?”

Explaining the side effects of Barsoom’s lower gravity seemed inadvisable.

“Diet and exercise.”

She let out another of her wonderful laughs. I liked Randa very much. But then Sansa’s lone lady-in-waiting, a slender woman named Jeyne Poole who rarely spoke, threw open the door.

“Randa,” she said, breathing hard. “Come quick. Sansa’s in trouble. At the entrance to the godswood.”

Myranda ran out the door. Tansy and I gathered up our skirts and followed. I kicked off the shoes Randa had put on me; even so, it was difficult to run in these heavy dresses with still more skirts under them. I do not know how the women of this planet can tolerate them. We kept Randa barely in sight, and at the edge of the castle’s big courtyard we found a group of angry people milling about.

Sansa stood to one side, surrounded by her Winterfell guards, some of Howland Reed’s swamp warriors and the House Mormont fighters. Maege Mormont stood between Sansa and a thin man with an even thinner line of hair along his top lip. His hair was black and oiled straight back. I did not like him. Behind him stood a number of the Vale fighters, but some seemed more eager to fight each other than to engage the Winterfell men and their allies.

Maege had her mace in one hand, slowly dropping its head into her open palm. She was the only person actually displaying a weapon, but many hands had been placed on the hilts of swords. I desperately missed my own blade and felt foolish for having run out of the castle wearing only my pretty new purple gown. I carefully held its edges away from the dirty ground.

Tansy identified the thin man as Petyr Baelish, the Lord Protector of the Vale. She hated him; so did Randa. He had apparently just arrived in Winterfell with a small entourage. His first act had been to march into the Great Hall and attempt to drag Sansa into the small forest where the Northern people worshipped their tree-god, and forcibly marry her there. It seemed that he had brought Sansa under his will while he had held her captive, and was surprised when she rejected his demands for immediate marriage upon his arrival in Winterfell. Baelish proceeded to marry her anyway, but had been stopped by some of the Vale lords from the army camped outside the walls. Other Vale lords, it appeared, supported Baelish. Some political intrigues I did not understand were also involved.
And then we had arrived; Sansa had not been out of our sight for what they called an hour before drama had erupted. Sansa seemed upset, and Randa had gathered her into her arms.

“You’ve gone too far, Baelish,” said an older man wearing bronze armor. “The Lords Declarant have already suspended your powers in the Vale. What did you think to do, seize the North next?”

These “Lords Declarant” apparently were leading nobles who had overthrown Baelish’s rule in the Vale. The bronze man’s anger made it difficult to tease out more detail from his thoughts; he kept imagining cutting off Baelish’s head.

“Sansa Stark is my betrothed. I have done no more than to claim what is rightfully mine.”

“You’re a fugitive, Baelish,” the bronze lord went on. “You’re already sought in the Vale. You should have escaped to the Free Cities, enjoyed your brothels and forgotten about Catelyn Tully.”

Catelyn Tully? The Stone Heart?


I remembered. Petyr Baelish had carried unrequited love for Catelyn Tully from an early age and later paid Tansy to pretend to be her older sister in his sex games. Apparently he had transferred his unrequited love to Catelyn Tully’s daughter after she died. Once again, this seemed to be the only sort of love these people knew.

I decided to kill Littlefinger at the first opportunity.

“Lord Royce,” Sansa addressed the bronze lord. “I thank you for your intervention. Any marriage conducted under duress would have been invalid by law.”

“Or by instant widowhood,” Maege added.

“Yes. That as well. Be that as it may, we must deal with Lord Baelish, and I want to bring an end to this now.”

Sansa Stark was young, less than ten of their years older than Arya, but faced Petyr Baelish bravely.

“I am the Lady of Winterfell. And I charge you with kidnapping and fraud, and with the murder of Robert Arryn and Lysa Arryn, and with conspiracy in the murders of Jon Arryn, of Joffrey Waters and Ser Dontos Hollard.”

“That is quite a list of evils, my lady. I assume you have proof? Witnesses?”

“I do. I witnessed much of it myself.”

“And you are also the one laying charges. But I will make this simple. I demand trial by combat.”

“King Tommen outlawed trial by combat,” said the bronze lord.

“His laws went out the window when he did. It is my right and I demand it by right. And I name Ser Lyn Corbray as my champion. Who will fight for you, my lady?”

Baelish smiled an oily smile. I liked him even less.

A tall knight, also slender, strode out from behind the Vale men to stand next to Baelish.

“As the challenged,” he said in a loud voice “I name the sword as the weapon of choice. All here
know my sword.”

His thoughts showed supreme confidence; he had fought often in single combat and seemed eager to be rewarded. He then thought very graphically of his rewards: young boys delivered for his pleasure by Baelish. It appeared that the Holy Hundred were not alone in their twisted sexuality. Had I landed on a planet where only the perverts fulfilled their desires and everyone else mooned away for the love they could never have?

The small cluster of Winterfell soldiers looked at one another uneasily. By their thoughts, this Lyn Corbray was a renowned killer of men. Sansa’s thoughts showed deep disappointment that one of the Vale knights did not step forward to fight for her, a stocky man with gray hair and a smashed nose. She tried to catch his eye but he looked away. His thoughts indicated shame, and the anticipation of a large sum from Baelish in exchange for his inaction. It seemed that Littlefinger had planned ahead for all contingencies.

Maege Mormont pulled me to her side.

“Princess?” Sansa Stark asked.

I had not come here to play their game of thrones, but I felt a heavy guilt for encouraging Arya to fight, even if it was by example rather than by word. And Sansa appeared to have no one who stood a chance against Lyn Corbray. If I said nothing, a loyal man would die for her today, and an evil man escape punishment. It was a poor exchange, but I could give her a life for a life.

“If you kill Corbray,” Maege whispered, “Littlefinger will be executed.”

I saw in her thoughts that Tansy had shared the story with her as well. And now the fight became personal.

“I will kill this raper of boys.”

“You?” Baelish sneered. “You don’t even know how to wear a gown. Do you know this is a fight to the death?”

I looked down. My neckline was indeed crooked, still bearing the pins Tansy and Randa had placed in it, and my bare feet showed under the bottom of the very wide skirt.

“I defeated the Mighty Pig. I killed the Lord of the Waters and sank his pirate ship. I killed Black Walder Frey and the Ryswell brothers. And I will kill you, Lyn Corbray.”

“The Mighty Pig?” Baelish now laughed. Corbray and some of the Vale knights joined in.

“Strong Boar Crakehall,” Tansy clarified. “Heard of him?”

The Vale men grew silent. I felt a jolt of fear run through Petyr Baelish. He knew that Strong Boar had fought an unknown woman, and lost. He also knew that Aurane Waters and Black Walder Frey had each been killed by a woman, but had not known that they might all have died or been defeated at the hands of the same woman. He chose not to share this information with his champion.

“She’s insane,” Baelish said instead. “You would let a madwoman die for your foolishness, sweetling?”

Sansa stepped over to me and quietly asked, “Can you win?”

“Yes,” I replied in an equally hushed tone. “I am very good at killing people. Let me do this for
“This woman is not of the North,” Baelish spoke up, grasping for any reason to disqualify me from this fight. “She can’t represent you, Sansa dear. She has no standing to fight for you.”

“She and her sister are adopted daughters of House Mormont,” Maege shot back. “No House is more of the North.”

I was now her daughter? I felt a tightness grow in my chest and throat.

“Sister?” Baelish asked, looking at Tansy. “I know you. One of Chataya’s whores, wasn’t it? ‘Finest tits in Westeros,’ that was your claim. Did this ‘sister’ of yours and her own fine tits work with you?”

He did not seem aware that Tansy was actually Catelyn Tully’s half-sister, only that she greatly resembled her.

“If you live, Baelish, you’ll have to deal with me,” Maege said. “I won’t tolerate such insult to my house.”

“You did that yourself, claiming these whores as your daughters. I suppose they fit in well with the rest of your spawn.”

Maege made to advance on Baelish, but I placed my hand on her arm.

“You know who I am,” I said to Littlefinger, locking my eyes onto his. In his thoughts, my red eyes terrified him; that seemed a common reaction here. “And you know what I will do to Lyn Corbray. Spare his life and confess your crimes.”

“I’ve never seen you before,” he said, clearly nervous. “You have no squire. Do you even own a sword?”

“I will squire for my adopted sister,” Lyra Mormont, Maege’s daughter, moved next to me and placed her hand on my shoulder. “Here we stand.”

I understood that each noble house had its own motto, called its “words,” and these had special meaning. Lyra’s reciting “Here we stand” confirmed my Mormont status.

“Don’t worry, Baelish,” Corbray said. “I’ll kill the bitch. Both bitches, if you’d like.”

That word again.

“Princess Dejah Thoris is accepted as the Champion of Winterfell,” Sansa declared in a surprisingly strong voice. “Lady Lyra Mormont as her squire. Combat to take place in the main courtyard in two hours’ time.”

Tansy and Lyra followed me back to our room. I wriggled out of my gown and hung it very carefully, then began to put on my leather fighting harness and leggings as I had for the match with the Mighty Pig.

“Is it true,” Lyra asked Tansy, “what that rat-fucker out there said?”

“Yes.”

She put both hands on Tansy’s face.
“You heard my mother. We’re sisters now. I don’t care what you were. Only what you are.”

“Nothing I haven’t heard before. Focus on Dejah.”

Lyra turned to me.

“I have never been so eager to see someone die.”

“He will die,” I said. “Both of them will die.”

“Good. I think I need to send for my armor.” Lyra wore a simple green tunic with the brown bear of her, now our, house, stitched on the front, over tight black leggings. “It’s in our rooms.”

“You should match Dejah,” Tansy said. “I have a leather harness like hers. It should fit you. If you’re not too modest.”

Tansy smiled slyly.

“I see we have some work to do before you two are fully Mormonts,” Lyra said very solemnly, then laughed. She reached down and pulled off her tunic; she wore nothing under it. She was very pale and very fit, with full breasts but several scars. I had seen her unclothed before, briefly, and felt her press against me during the night, but had not had such a view. I could not allow myself to be distracted, and checked my sword instead. It was, of course, in perfect condition.

“Have you fought in such a battle before?” I asked Lyra, who seemed unaware of my gaze.

“No, but I’ve watched them.”

“Who will you fight? Do we fight together, or separately?”

“I probably won’t fight at all. Corbray’s squire has the right to challenge me when his knight is killed. It doesn’t change the verdict, but it allows the squire to leave the field with his honor intact.”

“And if I am killed?”

“You won’t be; I’ve sparred with you and fought by your side. I’ve never seen anyone as fast or as strong, man or woman. And I’d be really shocked if Corbray’s squire wished to fight me. He’s a boy of maybe a dozen years, small and not even pimpled yet. Corbray took him on for the money – the boy’s family paid well to have him squire for a famous knight.”

“You knew this when you stood by me.”

“Well, yes. Randa told me. But I would have stood by you anyway. ‘Here we stand’ and all that.”

“What are the rules of this fight?”

“Well,” Lyra began slowly. “It’s said to be to the death, but you can yield. The opponent isn’t required to accept it but they almost always do. Corbray named the weapon, swords. Other accoutrements are up to the participant, you know, a shield or armor.”

“I use neither,” I said. “Only the gauntlets.”

“We can send for Jory’s mail again if you’d like.”

“Thank you, no. He carries a Valyrian blade; ringed armor will make no difference.”
"You should wear this more often," Tansy told Lyra as she finished adjusting the harness. "It really shows you off."

"It’s a little much even for a Mormont," she said, then blushed. "Sorry."

"Not at all," I said. "I know my ways are different."

Tansy hefted my hair, still worn in a single heavy braid like Lyra’s, then dropped it.

"Probably best to leave it this way," she said as she weaved a blue ribbon - the color of Helium - into the braid. She added a matching blue ribbon to Lyra’s similar braid.

"Anyway," Lyra continued. "I feel better with armor on. I wouldn’t want to wear a full suit but I like to feel a little mail and plate between my skin and the enemy."

"Does it not slow you down?" I asked.

"We were fast enough when we faced Ramsay Bolton’s army."

I almost answered, but paused and considered her point.

"That is true, but we faced enemy arrows. There will be none today."

"It’s only an opinion," Lyra said. "Don’t change what makes you comfortable."

I pulled my sword belt over my shoulder and shrugged it into place as Sansa’s lady-in-waiting knocked on the door.

"I’ll need my sword," Lyra said. "Wait for me inside the tower. We need to enter the yard together."

Tansy and I stood inside the large wooden doors leading into the heavy stone tower called the "keep." The large entry hall was empty except for us and Sansa’s very quiet lady-in-waiting, Jeyne, who sat nearby but did not speak. I stretched the muscles in my arms and legs while we waited, scandalizing the silent Jeyne with my unladylike motions. Lyra soon rushed in, holding her sword in her hands. She pulled its belt over her shoulder to match my style.

"How do we look?" she asked Tansy.

"Like sisters," she answered, adjusting Lyra’s sword-belt. "Twins, almost, except for Dejah’s skin and darker hair."

"Good," she nodded. "Sansa needs us to make an impression." She turned to me. "We’ll walk out together, and I’ll accompany you into the fighting area. It’s called a ‘ring’ but it’s probably not round. Leave the marked area and you lose both the fight and your honor."

Jeyne made a coughing sound. We all turned to look at her.

"Lady Sansa bids her aunt Lady Tanith to join her on the reviewing stand."

"Dejah?" Tansy asked.

"Lyra will be with me, and I would rather have you away from the actual fight."

"I need to be with you if . . . you know."

"I trust Lyra, and I will fight better knowing you to be safe. Watch over your niece."
“I will,” she smiled, “but I haven’t forgotten my sister. Sisters.”

She turned to Jeyne. “Is it time?”

Jeyne nodded, and they left. Lyra faced me, clapped her hands onto my shoulders and looked into my eyes. Few women of this planet had the height to do so.

“We’re family now,” she said. “Let’s show them how Mormont women fight.”

She shoved the doors open and we walked out in step, shoulders back and taking long strides. I knew from the thoughts of the large crowd that we appeared beautiful and deadly. That made me calm and confident.

People filled the castle courtyard and also looked down from the walkways along the walls, the windows of buildings and towers and even from some of the rooftops. The Winterfell servants had set up posts connected by rope to mark off the fighting arena. Red ribbons had been tied to the rope to make it more visible. Lyra pulled the rope upward and I ducked under it; she followed and stood beside me.

Lyn Corbray wore no armor, only a tight-fitting white tunic with black birds clutching a red shape embroidered on it, and tight white leggings. He had white lace around the cuffs of his sleeves and his collar.

Sansa Stark marched firmly to the center of the open arena and again read out the charges against Petyr Baelish, and affirmed that the fight would be either to the death or until one combatant yielded. She returned to a wooden platform set at the edge of the arena where one of the large chairs from Winterfell’s Great Hall had been placed. Petyr Baelish sat next to her in a smaller chair, with Mollen standing behind him. Davos and Howland Reed stood to either side of Sansa, with Tansy, Lord Glover and Maege nearby.

“You may begin,” Sansa said.

Lyn Corbray’s thoughts exuded extreme confidence. He still did not believe that I was a fighter at all, assuming that I really was insane, or possibly a freak-show performer hired by Sansa Stark. He waved his sword through complex evolutions, and I discerned that they most definitely did follow a pre-determined pattern. I stood at ease watching him as he walked to the center of the arena with small, mincing steps.

I shrugged my sword-belt off my shoulder and held the scabbard in both hands with my sword still inside; it would not do to have it hang up awkwardly when it came time to draw. Lyra stood two steps to my right and two steps behind, mimicking my stance. She now took her own sword in her hands. Her thoughts revealed some concern for me, but she had confidence in my fighting skills. She liked me. That made me happy, but I thrust those feelings away — I had a man to kill.

Corbray proceeded to give a speech about his sword, which he named Lady Forlorn. It was of Valyrian steel just like my blade, but he was not yet aware of that — I did not wish Corbray to know that I wielded a Valyrian sword. He spoke of the many foes he had killed with Lady Forlorn, and the many foes killed by his ancestors wielding the sword. His thoughts still radiated sheer contempt; he planned to toy with me, humiliate me, and possibly cut my harness away before forcing me to beg for my life but running his sword through my heart, or where he believed my heart lay, anyway. The idea of killing a woman aroused him. My very existence, a woman claiming that she could fight, offended him as did Sansa Stark’s pretension to rule here. He would put us both in our places.

Other thoughts showed Baelish fighting to hold back abject terror, while I picked up a number of
Mormont and Glover soldiers placing large wagers on the outcome of the fight with the Vale men. They had great confidence in me, having seen me dispatch the Ryswells and destroy Moat Cailin.

I knew from Corbray’s patterns, his lack of armor and his plan for the combat that he considered himself extremely fast with the blade. I probably could match his speed, and I had a great deal of experience given that I had lived at least 10 times his lifespan, in a culture every bit as violent as his. Beyond that, I had been tutored by the greatest swordsman on two worlds.

Even so, taking one’s opponent lightly is the path to an early death. I had already been down the River Iss once and had no intention of taking whatever mythical journey these people embarked upon after their lives ended. I studied him and chose my response: a tactic John Carter called the “bull rush.”

As Lyn Corbray continued his speech, he struck a pose with his sword extended toward me in his left hand; like me, he could fight with either. I charged directly at him, drawing my sword as I moved forward, dropping my scabbard and striking downward on his blade all in one motion. The tip of his sword dug into the ground and he had no time to react as I lowered my right shoulder and crashed into his chest. He fell onto his back and I swiftly pinned his sword arm with my right foot. I ran him through with my blade as he lay before me, twisted it and pulled it free with an involuntary snarl. Not counting his posturing, the “fight” had lasted less than ten seconds.

The crowd stared in utter silence.

“That was ill done,” the bronze lord was the first to speak. “He had no chance to yield. She gave no warning that she also wields Valyrian steel.”

I stood over Corbray’s corpse and stared directly at the bronze lord, locking my eyes onto his. To his credit, he held my gaze at first though like Petyr Baelish during the earlier confrontation his thoughts revealed terror. Then, knowing that he courted death, he looked away. It was a petty gesture, and my satisfaction quickly gave way to shame.

Now the hubbub resumed as people argued over what they had just seen. Corbray voided his waste while I wiped my sword on his white tunic. Corbray’s young squire approached tentatively, looking to see if his master lived and trying not to cry. Lyra joined me.

“Well?” she asked the squire as her fingers danced on the hilt of her sword. He shook his head, turned, and fled into the crowd.

My own squire put her hand on my shoulder and leaned into my ear as I finished cleaning my blade and returned it to its scabbard.

“You,” she whispered, “are a true Mormont.”

I picked up Corbray’s weapon; Lyra detached its scabbard from Corbray’s sword belt and handed it to me. I slammed the blade home with a satisfying smack and stalked back to the tower containing our bedchamber. Lyra fell into step beside me and the crowd parted for us. Behind us, I heard Sansa proclaiming a sentence of death for Petyr Baelish.

Chapter End Notes

Notes: The trial of Petyr Baelish is a modified version of a chapter from the original
edition of this story, written long before Season Seven of the TV show. I like this end for Littlefinger better than theirs.
Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Summary

In which Dejah Thoris finds herself less invulnerable than she believed.

Chapter Twenty-One

Tansy, Sansa Stark and Myranda Royce entered our chamber soon afterwards. Lyra left to put away her sword.

“Dejah, that was . . .” Sansa floundered for words. “Unbelievable. Thank you. Thank you so much. I am free of Petyr because of you.”

“He is not dead yet.”

“The execution will take place at dawn tomorrow. I could not have done this without you. I never meant to see you dragged into this; I was sure Ser Lothor would fight for me. I owe you so much.”

Apparently Ser Lothor was the Vale knight expecting to be paid for staying out of the trial by combat. Sansa had believed him attracted to her during her stay in the Vale. It pleased me that he would now collect none of his expected gold.

“You owe me nothing. I cannot forget that your sister died trying to aid me.”

She hugged me all the same, tightly. And then she hugged Tansy. And then Myranda started hugging us all.

“Mollen wishes to formally apologize for doubting you. Please accept it, he did not mean any disrespect.”

“Of course. I was not offended. A guard without suspicion is worse than no guard at all. How did the Vale men react?”

“Stunned. They accept the verdict, and no one mourns for Corbray, but they weren’t happy that you killed him on the ground. The code of chivalry demands that you allow a fallen foe to yield. It’s the law of war.”


“I’m glad she’s on our side,” Randa said. She looked at Tansy. “You expected this?”

“I saw her cleanse Harrenhall of the Holy Hundred and wipe out an entire pirate crew. That prancing ponce was dead the moment Sansa named Dejah her champion.”

“He was dead the moment he called me ‘bitch.’”

“That was you at Harrenhal?” Sansa asked, her eyes wide. “We heard that no man survived.”

“I only killed twenty-one of the eighty-six. I had help from the Brotherhood.”
'Why did you kill Corbray?' Randa asked. She seemed genuinely curious.

"Why would I not? I was trained to kill my enemies. It is not a game."

"My father said the same," Sansa said quietly. "But then he hesitated, and he died."

"As bloody and terrible as it all is," Randa said, "they do think it's a game."

"Should I have spared him?"

"No," Randa said decisively. "Sansa is young, and a woman, and seen as a weak ruler who needs to be married to a strong man who will then rule the North in her name. You sent a message today on Sansa's behalf, and it's that much stronger because you're a woman yourself."

"So I played the game of thrones today."

"Yes, but you did it in great style."

Sansa ordered her servants to bring a large dinner to our chambers, explaining that she felt it best to keep me separated from the Vale lords. As I did not wish to kill any more of them, I readily agreed.

Lyra returned with her sister Alysane, wearing their Mormont tunics. She brought another such tunic and a set of black leggings, and handed them to me.

"You're one of us now," she said. "I saw you eyeing these."

Actually, I had been eyeing her breasts, but I smiled and thanked her as though she were correct.

"Have you one for my sister?"

"Our sister. And yes, I do."

I pulled off my harness and sat on a chair to put on the leggings. I do not normally like tight clothing, it feels so unnatural on my skin. But these were surprisingly soft.

"How can you stand seeing her naked?" Randa asked Lyra.

"You didn't see Lyra dressed like Dejah?" Tansy countered, as Alysane helped pull off her gown.

"She and Dejah really could be birth-sisters."

"Surrounded by big perky tits . . ." Randa muttered.

"Mother said you know little of our ways," Lyra said to me.

"That is true," I said. "Some things are the same as in my home city, but there are many differences that seem strange to me."

"You have adoption?"

"Yes, though it is rare."

"It is here, too. Mother is the head of House Mormont, now that my uncle is dead and cousin disgraced. That gives her total power over family affairs. When she declared you and Tansy adopted, in front of witnesses including the Lady of Winterfell, that was the final word. You are both Mormonts in the eyes of the law."
“And our eyes too,” her sister added.

“Yes, in our eyes too,” Lyra agreed. “I am very proud to call you a Mormont.”

“Thank you. I have only a tiny grasp of the honor you all have done us, and I am overwhelmed by it.”

“You know that I’m . . . “ Tansy began.

“A bastard?” Lyra completed her thought. “By Southron law, so am I. That means nothing on Bear Island.”

I nudged Tansy. “That makes us sisters by law, too.”

“Not that it ever mattered,” she answered.

The mirror still stood where Tansy and I had studied our new gowns such a short while before. I walked over to admire myself in black and green, holding out my legs one at a time and flexing them and my feet; the others somehow thought this amusing. The green did not really flatter my skin tone, but I adored the tight black leggings. They fit perfectly, even over my ass. We have nothing like this on Barsoom.

“Join us,” Sansa said to the Mormont sisters as the food and drink arrived. “We all deserve wine.”

She poured a large cup and handed it to Tansy.

“She’s still my aunt, you know,” Sansa cautioned Lyra, playfully. “You can’t have all of her. Only sometimes.”

“From no family to two,” Tansy mused. “All in the space of days.”

“We’ve all lost so much,” Sansa said. “We have to take back what we can. I used to daydream that Lyra and I would be sisters one day.”

“Really?” Randa asked. “How’s that?”

“We’re close to the same age, I think Lyra is . . . one year older?” Lyra held up two fingers as she drank. “Alysane is older than we and even has a child.”

“Two children!” she laughed, pouring wine for herself. “Do keep up!”

“Lyra played with us whenever the Mormonts visited Winterfell. My brother Robb was older, and he had eyes only for Dacey even though he was younger than she.”

Alysane leaned over to nudge Randa with her elbow and whispered loudly.

“Our oldest sister. Imagine a woman with Lyra’s figure, even taller . . . but actually pretty!”

The Mormont sisters laughed, and the rest of us joined in; Alysane’s thoughts showed that she had meant her comment ironically. I would have been upset with her had she not.

“Dacey was a beauty,” Sansa agreed. “Just like Lyra. And wild and fierce. Also like Lyra. Despite the age difference I was sure Father would arrange a match with the Old Bear, Jeor Mormont, or Lady Maege.”

“Our mother’s elder brother,” Alysane explained. “Head of our house, until he left for the Wall when
I was a child. Mother likely would have been the one to contract a marriage for Dacey with Robb.”

“In the old days, the Northern houses all intermarried,” Sansa went on. “I would have married some Northern boy, maybe Cley Cerwyn, maybe Smalljon Umber. I wanted a prince, but I would have ended up in some Northern holdfast. To my misfortune, I got the prince.”

She looked into her wine wistfully, her thoughts playing the game of might-have-been. She recovered with a visible start.

“Father’s father feared the mad king’s reckless insanity and so he started playing the game of thrones, sending Father to foster in the Vale where he became friends with Robert Baratheon. That led to Father marching south years later to join the war when Robert rebelled against the Mad King.”

I had heard scraps of this history.

“Fostered?” I asked.

“A noble child is sent to live with another noble family,” Randa explained. “It promotes ties between the houses. And also provides a hostage. Either way, it’s a crucial ploy in the game of thrones.”

“People liked to say that Father had no wish to play the game of thrones, but that’s not really true. He just wasn’t very good at it. He never considered marrying any of us to Northern houses. Only to the great houses of the South. Robb would never marry Dacey. I wish he had.”

“They would still live,” Lyra said, softly. “Castle, children. All the happy things.”

“Instead they both rot in some unknown Riverlands swamp,” Sansa said harshly. “Look at us. We had such silly dreams – you, me, Jeyne, Beth Cassel. Knights and princes for us all. And now Jeyne and I are broken. You carry a sword and you’ve fought in actual battles. Beth . . . she was here when Winterfell was taken. Gods alone know what happened to her.”

“Sansa. We’re alive. We have new friends and we’ll make new lives.”

Randa, shorter than any of us, even Alysane, stood.

“Sansa, no more morbid talk,” she said, raising her cup of wine. “We’ll drink to Robb and Dacey and Beth and what never was, and then it’s time for happy things. The princess won. Baelish is doomed. You’re free.”

We each drained our cups, and then proceeded to eat a variety of fine meats and drink wine late into the night. No more talk of fighting: it was an evening of what Randa called “girl talk.” I greatly enjoyed the tasty dishes, including roasted meats, birds and fishes and delicious pies, and ate far more than I spoke.

“Does she always . . .”

“This is pretty restrained for Dejah.”

I was so pleased to see Sansa at ease with Tansy, forgiving Arya’s death and treating Tansy as a member of her extended family. I told her so.

“Petyr taught me a great deal,” she explained. “I was forced to live as a bastard, pretending to be his daughter. Now that I’ve seen it from the other side, I am so deeply sorry for the way I treated Jon Snow when we were children. He was my brother and I should have been as a sister to him. Instead I acted like he was something foul I needed to scrape off the bottom of my shoe.
“Tansy, you’re my aunt. I want us to be friends, and I want us to be family. I don’t have much family left, and I don’t want to lose you now that I’ve found you.”

“I told Arya, I can’t be a lady. You heard Baelish. Everything he said was true. I ran a brothel. I was a whore.”

Sansa looked a little startled. I saw the Mormont sisters eye one another and shrug. Randa laughed.

“You think we’re not?”

“Randa!”

“Fuck them for money or fuck them for power. Have your maidenhead sold off by your father to some lordling you’re never met to raise your father’s standing, never asking a by-your-leave. Sounds a lot like whoring to me.”

“At least all of my girls were paid.”

“I should have worked for you instead of my father.”

We laughed and drank more wine. A servant brought me more meat.

“This is why Mormont women fuck bears instead,” Alysane said, very seriously. “The smell’s better and they make sure you finish, too.”

Here as on Barsoom, alcohol made jokes funnier though I had to read Randa’s thoughts to understand that “finish” meant “to receive orgasm.” I thought to ask if women often failed to receive orgasm from their lovers, but realized just as I was about to speak that such a question might betray my origins. And so I laughed. We laughed; all of us except Sansa.

“I was sold to Joffrey,” Sansa said slowly. “Then passed on to Tyrion. And then I was sold to Ramsay Snow. I neglected to thank you for killing Ramsay Snow, Dejah. He raped me. No one cared. Because he’d bought and paid for it.

“Tansy, I listened to the stories as a girl. I believed them with my whole heart. Knights noble and true protected their honored ladies. And now? Fuck the game of thrones.”

We all stared at her. Lady Sansa had said “fuck.”

“Besides, I think anyone who calls you a whore is going to end up like Lyn Corbray.”

“Yes,” I said. “I will always defend my sister. All of my sisters.”

“Here we stand,” the Mormonts said together, clanked their cups on the table twice and then drained them, all in unison.

“Is this a drinking game?” Tansy asked.

“Yes. Try it.” We did. It took several tries to perfect the rhythm. The wine did not help.

“You did not wish to marry?” I asked Alysane, after I had consumed a great deal of wine.

“No,” she said.

“Me either,” Lyra added.
“Why not?”

“Things go wrong when a Mormont leaves Bear Island,” Alysane explained. “Our cousin met and married a greedy, vicious woman who led him into debt and dishonor. Our aunt fell madly in love with a knight and married him; he was a good man but she died in her childbed right here in Winterfell. The Old Bear murdered by his own men, Dacey by the Freys . . . we belong on our island.”

“Yet here we stand.”

“‘We.’” Somewhat drunk herself, she gently tapped the end of my nose as she quoted me. “That’s exactly how you’re supposed to think now. Good girl. We swore oaths. We know one king in the North, the Little Bear would say, and his name is Stark. Her name is Stark. You know what I mean.”

“Little Bear?”

“Our youngest sister has a flair for drama,” Lyra explained. “You’ll see when you meet her.”

“And she’ll tell you all about our oaths. We swore to fight for the Starks, and so we did, even though it meant coming to the mainland.”

“I don’t deserve that loyalty,” Sansa said. “I have to earn it. I went south as a silly little girl. And I betrayed my father.”

“You did what?” Alysane put down her wine. Lyra now leaned forward as well. I could have felt the room become tense without telepathy’s help.

“My father wanted to leave King’s Landing, and told Arya and I to prepare. We were in great danger, but I thought he was ruining my dream of marrying a prince. So I went running to Cersei and told her all about it. That started the whole chain of disasters that ended with Ilyn Payne cutting off my father’s head, my brother calling his banners for war, the Red Wedding. All of it.”

“That was Cersei’s doing,” Randa said. “Not yours.”

“She turned my treason into murder, that’s true enough. She didn’t make me tattle like a spoiled little child.”

“You were a spoiled child,” Randa said, earning a sharp look from Lady Stark. “And then you grew up.”

“I have to live with it,” Sansa said. “And I have to prove I deserve love and loyalty, when men – and women – lay down their lives in my name.”

“Cersei can burn in hell,” Randa said.

“Maybe she is,” Sansa answered. “We had a raven a day or two past that said a foreign whore had murdered Cersei.”

_Do not say a word_, my sister thought. I remained silent.

“To the nameless whore,” Randa said, lifting her goblet. We all joined in the toast.

“Will you marry again?” I asked Randa, eager to change the subject.

“Not if I can avoid it,” she said. “My father will doubtlessly try to arrange one as long as I stay young and possibly fertile. Until I run out of excuses, it looks like you’re the only wife here.”
“I am not sure,” I said. “I came to Westeros to find my husband, but I do not know if he wants to be found.”

“You’re still married even so.”

“Not under our law,” I said. “Either partner can end a marriage. The law requires that he do so in my presence, but our . . .” I struggled for the word, as they apparently did not have judges here, “keepers of the law have ruled that this is not necessary when it is not possible to confront the other party.”

“That’s so . . . civilized. Here it ends in death or,” Randa paused, pretending to think, “death.”

“There are still restrictions,” I explained. “If you kill someone’s wife or husband, or their betrothed, you cannot marry them in their place.”

“And you have this law because people often did so?”

“Very likely,” I said. “But there are ways around it. My friend Kantos Kan tried to kill my betrothed so that I could marry John Carter.”

“Tried? How did you marry John Carter anyway?”

“Kantos was not successful, but John Carter’s friend Tars Tarkas killed him instead.”

“So you were able to marry John Carter because his friend murdered your betrothed?”

“Yes. But we do not consider it murder if it occurred in fair combat.”

“I thought we lived in a violent land. No wonder you know how to fight.”

She paused.

“So why the killing part, if you can end a marriage without it?”

“You cannot end a marriage by divorce,” I used John Carter’s word, “and marry another with whom you have already fallen in love.”

“How would anyone know?”

They would know because we are telepathic. Since I did not wish to tell her that, I gave a weaker answer, though I still spoke the truth.

“We take honor very seriously. Or many of our people do. I have become less admiring of this concept.”

Randa reached over and poured more wine for me.

“That’s something else worth drinking to.”

It was very late when Sansa and Randa left us, followed by the Mormonts. Tansy and I undressed and settled into our sleeping furs soon after.

I awoke to find someone looming over us. Normally my telepathic senses would have alerted me well before anyone came that close, even while I slept. The figure reached across and placed its hand on Tansy’s forehead as she mumbled in her sleep, and my sister settled into a deeper slumber.
I seemed unable to react; my telepathic senses had become completely quiet. Somewhere in my mind I knew that I should never have let this person touch my sister.

When the figure turned in the dim light of the banked fire I saw that it was Melisandre, the Red Priestess. She wore a red skirt and a heavy necklace with a red jewel on a pendant, but nothing else. I felt a pang of disappointment that it was not Lyra Mormont, a feeling that surprised me, but only slightly. Desire quickly pushed those thoughts away.

I wanted to ask why she had come into my bedchamber, but found myself unable to speak. She leaned over me, her breasts right above mine, large and perfectly round. She was beautiful in the firelight; she had not seemed so lovely when I saw her with Stannis in the Great Hall. She kissed me. I kissed her back, opening my lips to admit her tongue.

She kissed my cheek, and then my throat. She ran her tongue down to my right breast, and took the nipple in her mouth. I felt it grow stiff. The sensation spread through my body, and my back arched involuntarily. I placed my hand on the back of her head and stroked her dark red hair. Someone had told me to keep away from Melisandre. Now I knew why. The pleasure of her kisses and her touch was almost more than I could bear. But neither could I bear for her to stop.

I wore nothing amid the sleeping furs other than a set of warm, loose-fitting leggings Sansa Stark had gifted me. Melisandre reached her hand between my legs, then withdrew it. We of Barsoom have an ovipositor there with which we lay eggs; touching its outer part gives us no sexual response. The sensitive areas lie well within, and require a tongue like ours to provide pleasure. John Carter certainly tried often enough to no avail.

She instead cupped my left breast and kissed it as well, taking the nipple gently between her teeth. I sighed; she had found a favorite place and I felt enormous pleasure. Somewhere deep in my mind I wondered what I was doing. I did not know or trust this woman. Melisandre rose to her feet, and extended her hand to me. I took it and stood. She put her arms around my neck and shoulders and kissed me again. I placed mine on her waist and kissed her back. She moved my hands to her breasts; they felt so warm and as soon as I felt the nipples rise into my palms I seemed to lose what remained of my will. I desired only to do whatever was necessary to please her. She took my hand and led me out the door of our bedchamber, stopping to kiss me in the doorway.

We proceeded down the hallway and out of the castle, stopping frequently to kiss again. Each time we kissed I felt my will slip slightly more out of my control, but I did not seem to care. I could only think of Melisandre placing her lips on mine, or on my breasts, again. I saw no one else. We walked out of the castle to the pile of wood and climbed up. At the top, Melisandre gently pressed my back against the wooden post rising out of the pile and kissed me. She took my hands and put them over my head, through a loop of rope affixed there, and tightened it. She kissed me again. I kissed her back, fully engaging my tongue.

All of my senses seemed to be operating fully. I knew exactly what was happening around me, and to me, yet I could do nothing to exert my own will. I only wished to be pleasured by Melisandre’s kisses. And they pleasured me greatly. I saw that someone had set the wood around me alight, and flames started to grow. Melisandre kissed me one more time.

“Your sacrifice shall save the world,” she whispered, the first words she had spoken. “Azor Ahai shall live.”

“Let go of my sister, bitch.”

I knew that voice. Suddenly Melisandre was yanked forcefully backwards by her hair.
“Dejah! Wake up! Dejah!”

Tansy slapped me across the face. Hard. And again. Why was my sister slapping me?

“Are you angry with me, Tansy? I did not mean to kiss her. But it felt so good.”

Melisandre tried to pull her away, but Tansy pushed her down. The Red Priestess wrapped her arms around Tansy’s legs, bringing her down on top of her. They wrestled atop the smoldering logs, but Tansy grabbed a piece of wood and hit Melisandre in the side of the head, stunning her. My sister scrambled to her feet and faced me again.

“Dejah! Pay attention to me. Look at me!”

She screamed those last words. I saw that she wore only leggings. She was very beautiful, half-naked in the firelight. Perhaps she wanted to kiss me too? I thought I might like that.

And then she did. Tansy took my face in both of her hands and kissed me, deeply, like she had in Cersei’s bedchamber. She forced my lips open with her tongue and I felt a warmth spread through me as her dark blue eyes bored into mine. I had not realized that I felt cold, even amid the slowly-catching fire. I did not need my telepathic senses to know how much she loved me.

I felt myself becoming even more aroused. My tongue wrapped around Tansy’s and I kissed her back just as intensely, fueled by the love I carried for her. I felt an awareness return that I had not noticed was missing; I had not noticed many things. Now suddenly I understood what Melisandre had done, what I had done, and that I and my sister were in great danger. My desire turned to anger.

Fully alert, I easily broke my hands free of the rope and pulled Tansy tightly to my side as Melisandre, once again on her feet, tried to stab her in the back with a strange, crooked dagger. I caught Melisandre’s wrist with my right hand, and took the dagger out of her hand with my left. I kept a firm grasp on her wrist, and pressed the dagger through it.

She gasped. Then I took hold of her other wrist and pressed it down over the tip of the dagger. She squirmed, but I maintained my hold and raised her crossed arms over her head. I placed my other hand on her chest and held her against the post where I had been standing, and pushed the dagger into the wood of the post as far as it would go.

Melisandre screamed and struggled, but the dagger held her firmly in place by her pierced wrists. The huge red jewel in the pendant at her bare throat seemed to shine with more than the reflected firelight. She had somehow changed and no longer looked as perfectly beautiful as she had moments before.

“No.” She began to sob. “You have to burn. You stole the power from the rightful Azor Ahai. It was never meant to be you; you don’t belong here. Let me go. It’s not my time to rejoin the Lord of Light.”

Apparently my enhanced abilities did not make me flame-proof; my feet began to feel the heat. Tansy’s leggings caught fire. I ripped them off of her and then lifted my sister in my arms.

“Oh, please,” Melisandre whimpered. “I don’t want to die. Please don’t leave me here.”

She had twisted my desires; I felt violated, as though she had committed some form of psychic rape. I knew how women were treated on this planet, yet I had thought myself immune to rape since their male sex organs would not physically fit inside me. And I thought I was simply too strong. I was wrong.
I have killed many people since my arrival, but almost always in the heat of the moment and rarely with any calculation. Without any doubt, I wished to kill Melisandre. I could have broken her neck or punched her over the heart, but I wanted her to suffer. I wanted her to feel the flames she had meant for me.

Tansy clasped her arms around my neck and I leapt free of the burning pyre. I landed on the cold gravel, bruising my feet but flexing my knees and keeping hold of my sister. I gently put her feet on the ground.

Many people from the castle and the camp outside had responded to the commotion, including Sansa Stark with Randa and Jeyne, her guards and those of our own group from Greywater Watch who had lodged within the castle. Lyra and Alysane had drawn their swords to confront Stannis, who stood by the pyre still holding a lighted torch as Melisandre writhed in the firelight. He apparently had set the wood alight but had otherwise done nothing to aid Melisandre in giving me to the flames or to help her when Tansy intervened. My sister wrapped her arms around me and held me close to her. Maege Mormont joined us, wrapping us both in her wide arms and kissing each of us softly on the head.

“Lord Stannis has guest right here,” Sansa said loudly. “I will not see him harmed, even outside the walls of Winterfell.”

“So did Dejah,” Maege shot back. “Put Stannis to the sword.”

“We’re not Freys here. Disarm him and put him in a cell.”

I noticed that Davos Seaworth remained silent. Stannis threw down the torch and drew his sword.

“That ends guest right,” Lyra said. “No one harms any of my sisters.”

She advanced cautiously; I knew my adoptive sister to be good with her sword but feared for her against an expert like Stannis Baratheon. But Stannis kept his sword lowered and held up one hand.

“None of you rabble are worthy to decide the fate of a king!”

Very quickly, he flipped the sword around to place its point over his own heart, raised himself on his toes, and pitched forward onto the hard, frozen ground. No one tried to stop him. The sword emerged from his back and he rolled onto his side. Melisandre’s screams became ever more high-pitched as her skirt burned away and the flames licked up her legs. The smoke did not seem to affect her. Finally the screaming subsided, and only the crackling of burning logs and the smell of burning meat remained. She slumped on the post, her arms still held aloft by the dagger through her wrists as her body blackened from the heat and flame.

Sansa ignored the screams and walked over to Tansy and I, touching us each gently on the shoulder.

“I’m very sorry,” she said. “I don’t know why my guards didn’t stop her. Are you alright?”

“It is not their fault,” I said. “She used . . . something . . . to confuse my senses and hide us from the guards or anyone else. If Tansy had not come, she would have succeeded.”

Davos Seaworth placed a cloak over my shoulders and another over Tansy’s, softly speaking his own apologies.

“I should have killed her myself,” he said. “After what she did to Princess Shireen. Had I known she would do it again, to another I love like a daughter . . . I’m sorry, Princess. I am so, so sorry.”
“It’s alright,” Tansy told him. “You warned us. What else were you to do? We’re safe. Dejah’s safe. The bitch is dead.”

He nodded, still deeply upset. He loved me, and my sister, as though we were his own daughters, as he had Stannis’ murdered daughter. Meanwhile, Mollen and another soldier took Stannis by the arms and legs and pitched him into the fire at Melisandre’s feet. I could receive thoughts again and knew that Stannis was not quite dead yet. I said nothing.

Lyra and Alysane walked back to our chambers with us, and stayed for what was left of the night. Alysane sat on the edge of our bed, stroking my hair and murmuring softly until I slept, as though I were one of her little children. Lyra summoned six Mormont soldiers but stalked the corridor outside our door, watching with her sword in her hand and nerves still on edge though our enemies were dead. I clung tightly to my sister and finally fell into a restless sleep.
Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Summary

In which Dejah Thoris ignites a blood feud and talks philosophy.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The sun rose not long afterwards with Melisandre’s pyre still burning, and with it came the appointed time for Petyr Baelish to die. The smell of scorched flesh hung heavy on the castle, but everyone pretended not to notice.

We all washed with cold water, and used the odd powder these people apply to their teeth to clean and freshen them. Tansy and I put on our Mormont leggings and tunics to match Lyra and Alysane, and after eating a few cold biscuits and drinking some wine the four of us went down to the courtyard together. This time I wore my sword, as did Lyra.

The Winterfell soldiers had placed a wooden block on the platform in the courtyard from which Sansa had watched the combat on the previous afternoon. Sansa Stark stood on the platform with Davos Seaworth, Howland Reed, Galbart Glover, Maege Mormont and the lord in the bronze armor who I had learned was named Yohn Royce. Two Winterfell soldiers held Petyr Baelish by his upper arms; he stared at the floor of the platform, his thoughts roiled with hatred of me, Sansa, Yohn Royce and the dead Lyn Corbray. I took a place at the side of the platform along with Tansy, Randa and all three of my Mormont sisters.

“We’re sisters now,” Jory whispered to me and took my hand. “I’m really happy.”

She tried to divert me from the night’s terrors, knowing that I could read her thoughts and would detect her effort, but determined to do so anyway. And yet, at least to a small extent, it worked. My little sister loved me, I loved her, and these were true emotions. I felt the layer of filth Melisandre had left behind start to wash away.

“It makes me happy as well,” I whispered back, as Lyra squeezed my other hand and took hold of Tansy’s. We could not say any more before Sansa took a step forward and began to speak.

“My father always said that the man who passes the sentence must also swing the sword. And so it must be for the woman who passes the sentence as well. Princess Dejah?”

I looked up at her; sensing her thoughts, I climbed onto the platform next to her.

“Might I borrow your sword for a moment? It was forged from the metal of my father’s great sword, named Ice. I think it fitting that it be the blade to carry out this sentence.”

“Of course.”

I had not known of my sword’s origins; apparently the Lannisters had taunted her with the destruction of her family’s sword when they held her prisoner. I drew the blade and laid it across my arm, the hilt pointing toward Sansa. She took it, expressing surprise at its light weight, and held it awkwardly in both hands. At Sansa’s signal, the two soldiers forced Baelish to his knees before her.
“Petyr Baelish, before the old gods and the new you have been found guilty of the murders of Robert and Lysa Arryn, and of conspiracy in the murders of Jon Arryn, Joffrey Waters and Ser Dontos Hollard. The sentence is death.”

“No, Sansa, please. You can’t do this. You need me. You love me, Alayne. I am your father.”

He urinated on himself. He attempted to rise and the soldiers took him again by the arms. He still twisted his head wildly and a third soldier climbed onto the platform to seize him by his hair and pin his head to the block with a thick leather strap I had not noticed before.

“Show some dignity, Petyr,” Sansa whispered.

She hacked wildly at his neck with the sword, sending blood and bits of flesh flying. Her face expressed calm, but her thoughts were filled with rage. Baelish screamed when the sword first bit into his neck, but then fell silent. The soldiers, now all standing, leaned back, with good reason frightened of the flailing blade. It took Sansa Stark at least six blows with the sword, but eventually Petyr Baelish’s head came free. She began to weep.

Mollen held the head aloft.

“The sentence is carried out,” he said. He looked at the Lady of Winterfell and she nodded, too overcome with emotion to speak. “We are finished here.”

She held the sword out to me with two fingers grasping its pommel as though it were some particularly noxious dead animal. I took it, and Myranda Royce led Sansa back toward her chambers. Tansy gave me a questioning look and I nodded; she followed Sansa along with Alysane and Jorelle.

Lyra handed me a cloth and I began to wipe down my sword.

“Are you alright?” she asked. “I saw that bitch staring at you. I wish I’d killed her when I first thought her a danger. We should have stayed the night with you.”

Two of the Vale knights approached us before I could answer; the younger wore the same symbol of a black bird and a red shape as Lyn Corbray, the other a yellow cross on a black background with nine black stars on the cross. They walked very stiffly, and I detected deep anger in both of them, directed at me.

“I am Ser Lucas Corbray,” the younger said. “You killed my brother as he lay helpless and stole my family’s sword. I name you thief and murderer, and I demand satisfaction.”

He pulled off his glove and dropped it at my feet. I understood this to be a challenge.

“And you?” I asked his friend.

“Ser Symond Templeton, Knight of Ninestars.”

He pulled off his glove, and dropped it at Lyra’s feet.

“And what grievance do you have with me, ser?” Lyra asked.

“Do I need one? You named this whore your sister. You can die with her.”

“We have been challenged, and can name the terms,” I asked. “Is that not correct?”

“It is,” said Ser Symond.
“Two against two, simultaneous. No pairings. The weapons are swords, no armor, no shields. The fight continues until both of one pair are dead. That is the only conclusion; let it be clear this time that there is to be no yielding or ransom. Is this acceptable?”

I had named a typical duel alignment of Barsoom, the same I had chosen when facing the Ryswells. It allowed me to fight and kill both of them without putting Lyra’s life at needless risk. I also intended it to shock them. I succeeded, and both felt a frisson of fear though neither let it show. They hesitated.

“We do not play silly games in my land,” I continued. “Place your lives on the betting table or shut your mouths, walk away and do not trifle again with Mormont women.”

“Where and when?” Templeton asked, his voice pitched much higher than a moment earlier.

“Here and now.”

Lyra drew her sword and moved closer to me, thinking that she would cover my flank in the paired combat style. I nodded slightly, and read that she understood. I tossed the cleaning cloth behind me. The knights reacted slowly and I considered cutting them down on the spot, but decided that such a move might lead to further accusations.

The two of them finally pulled out their swords and assumed what I knew to be the standard opening posture in Westeros, swords in front of them and held low. They had already forgotten how that pose had doomed Lyn Corbray. I could see that they had never trained together, where Lyra and I had both trained and fought as a pair. The Knight of Ninestars moved forward first and Lyra knocked his sword aside, then I did the same to Lucas Corbray. Neither was very fast; from the haziness of their thoughts it appeared that both were drunk despite the early hour.

“Stop!” Hallis Mollen came running up to us. “Lady Stark has not authorized this. You are forbidden to draw weapons within Winterfell.”

“They challenged us,” Lyra said. “We wanted nothing to do with it.”

“The bitch murdered my brother,” Lucas Corbray answered. “We have the right of challenge.”

Symond Templeton attempted to attack Lyra while he thought her distracted by Mollen; I read his intent in his mind and blocked his strike. He stepped backward as Lyra countered, raising his left arm as though it held a shield – but his bare arm offered his chest no protection and Lyra ran him through with a two-handed thrust of her long sword. As he stared down at the blade sticking into his chest, she placed her foot on his abdomen and shoved him backwards to free her sword. He toppled onto his back, dead before his body came to rest.

I had already turned to face Lucas Corbray and parried his attack fairly easily; he thought to overwhelm me by brute force, believing a woman too weak to stand up to him. When he put all of his strength into an artless swing aimed at my head, I caught his blade on the flat of mine and shoved it back to my left. The force of my parry injured his shoulder and wrist, causing him to hesitate in bringing his blade back into guard position. In the space thus created, my own sword danced forward and carved out most of his throat.

The younger Corbray dropped his sword and collapsed to his knees with both hands fruitlessly trying to hold the massive wound closed. He pitched face-forward into the dust and horseshit of the castle courtyard. A wide pool of blood quickly formed around him.

“This is bad,” Mollen said. “This is very, very bad. These are significant lords. You can’t just kill
“They challenged us,” Lyra said. “You heard him.”

“They dropped their gloves at our feet,” I added. “You can see them right here.”

I picked up the cleaning cloth I had cast aside, intending to wipe down my sword. A small crowd had noticed the commotion and begun to gather. The bronze lord shoved his way to the front. I dropped the cloth.

“You’ve killed two more knights of the Vale,” he said. “And seemingly with no more honor than the first. You gave neither the chance to yield, any more than you did Lyn Corbray.”

“They challenged Mormont women,” I said. “They threw down their gauntlets” – I had pulled the proper phrase from his mind – “and died with swords in their hands, as you can see. The terms I named specified that no one would yield. Where is the offense against honor?”

“You two are a walking offense against honor. A woman’s battle is in the birthing bed, not a field of honor.”

“Would you care to try avenging them?”

My “blood was up,” as John Carter would have said. I suppressed an urge to snarl, as is common among fighting women of Barsoom, and slowly twirled my sword, letting the blood drip off the point. I was ready to fight Yohn Royce on the spot or any other of his Vale knights. His men now spread out to circle around us while Lyra moved to press her back against mine. She silently told me she was ready, even eager, to fight whenever and whoever I chose. I felt very confident fighting alongside my adoptive sister. Perhaps it was a reaction to what Melisandre had done to me, but I was ready to kill someone. If Bronze Yohn Royce wished to be that person, that was his misfortune.

“Make your decision,” I told Lord Royce. “If you wish a fight, I assure you that you will die.”

Winterfell, Glover and Mormont soldiers now moved to separate us from the Vale knights. A Winterfell guard arrived with Sansa, Maege, Tansy, Davos and Howland Reed following.

“This was murder,” the bronze lord angrily told Sansa. “These two wenches provoked a challenge and then this outlander used her witchcraft to murder two honorable Vale knights. I want both of them tried for murder and hanged as they deserve.”

“And do you plan to disarm them yourself?” Maege asked him. We had not moved from our back-to-back stance, our swords still raised in ready position with blood running down the fullers.

“This is your doing, She-Bear. You set this in motion when you named this, this hired killer a Mormont. Give her up and you can keep your own whelp.”

“They’re both my daughters, and you’ll have neither.”

“Lord Royce,” Sansa said in a firm, commanding voice. “Lady Mormont. Was a challenge made?”

“It was,” Lyra said. “Mollen heard them. Their gauntlets are still on the ground where they threw them.”

“Mollen?”

“It’s true, my lady. The younger knight said he had a right to challenge them. The older knight
attacked young Lady Mormont while she spoke to me and he thought her attention elsewhere."

“Lord Royce,” Sansa said. “I believe we have seen enough death for one day. Please remove all of
your Vale men to your camp. I think it best that they remain outside the walls. The Mormonts will
remain inside the walls until you depart. All of the Mormonts.”

“Go back to your rooms, now,” Maege said, indicating Tansy and I. “Lyra, go with them.”

We turned and entered the castle keep through the large doors to the Great Hall where Lyra and I
had made our entrance into the courtyard on the day before. The Winterfell soldiers kept the Vale
men back, but they were outnumbered very badly; Sansa believed a fight would be less likely were I
not present and I had to agree.

“What happened out there?” Tansy asked as soon as we entered the room, while Lyra barred the
heavy wooden door.

“What you heard,” I said. “They challenged us. They died.”

“You killed them?”

“Our sister killed one,” I said. “I killed the other. They were drunk and did not fight well. They
should have kept their gloves on.”

“You can’t just kill people in the castle courtyard. You’ve created a real problem for Sansa.”

“Tansy,” Lyra joined us, putting her arm partway around my shoulders, her hand splayed across the
middle of my back. I liked her touch. “It was just as Dejah said. They started it. We couldn’t just
stand there and let them cut us down. Templeton attacked without warning and would have killed me
if it weren’t for Dejah.”

“And I’m glad they didn’t,” Tansy said, taking us both into her arms. “I’m just all wrought up. It’s
been a hard two days rolled into one. I’m glad you were there to stand by my sister.”

“She’s my sister, too. And I’d do the same for you.”

Tansy nodded, then pulled Lyra into another hug.

“And I’m glad you’re safe.”

“I must have sleep,” I said, taking off my boots, pulling off my Mormont tunic and throwing myself
into the sleeping furs. Tansy and Lyra did the same, curling up on either side of me. I felt very safe
and comfortable between them.

I slept for a time, and then left my sleeping sisters to walk quietly around the walls of Winterfell. I
saw the small enclosed forest called a “godswood” and noted a large tree with red leaves. I walked
down to the courtyard, found the gate to the godswood and made my way to the tree.

Someone had carved a strange face into it, apparently long ago. Some well-worn stones had been
placed around it, where people apparently sat. But the tree curved to form a very comfortable-
looking spot, and I rested there with my back against it. Smooth places on the tree’s skin showed that
I was far from the first to nestle here. I could feel the tree’s very slow thoughts; it did not mind my
presence even though it seemed to know that I did not belong here.

I leaned back into the tree and looked up at its leaves. The white skin and red leaves reminded me of
home. Many differences remained if one cared to look, but I found comfort all the same.
After a time, I picked up the thoughts of Maege and Tansy as they sought to find me. They worried for my emotional state, and that I might have vented my rage on more of the Vale lords. I did not wish to avoid them, but neither did I alert them to my presence. Eventually a guard reported seeing me enter the godswood; they wandered about the small enclosed forest until they spotted me in my nook under the tree.

Walking up to me, they sat on the large above-ground roots, called “boles,” on either side of me. Tansy reached down for my hand. I put it in hers, silently. We all sat quietly for some time before Tansy spoke.

“I know how it feels,” she said as I continued to seek solace in the red leaves. “I know exactly how it feels. There’s nothing I can say to make it go away. Just know that you are my sister, and I love you.”

“You two are my daughters now,” Maege said. “And I love you both just like the daughters I bore. But it’s been that way for a while. Your new family is always here for you, Dejah.”

I took her hand and nodded, but still I stared at the leaves, and finally spoke without looking at either.

“I was not raped, the way women of your world suffer it,” I said. “But to have another take control of your will and force you to perform acts of love . . . this has happened to me before. It is not the same as rape, but it is degrading and humiliating all the same.”

“I don’t love you any less for it,” Maege said. “No one does.”

“Maege,” I said, trying hard to soften my words. “I know you love me like a daughter. And though I am older than you, I am coming to return those feelings. We form such bonds far more slowly than do your people. But you must understand. I am not Dacey. I can never replace her, nor can Tansy.”

“You don’t look older than me.”

“I eat well and exercise. And I love my new family. But it is a new family.”

“I understand. I miss her terribly and maybe I do sometimes see Dacey in you. Maybe more than sometimes. It’s not intentional.”

“She does get straight to the point, doesn’t she?” Tansy asked, smiling.

“As you know, my people read thoughts,” I said. “We communicate in a mixture of spoken and silent words, images and concepts. We have our own system of courtesies, but it does not involve polite lies to the same extent as yours. We can lie in conversation, but it takes skill and is rarely employed.”

“That must save a lot of time,” Maege mused.

“It does,” I said. “And it means that many times I do not know how to express myself in a lengthy, polite manner, by your standards. I do not wish to offend. I am very happy that you think of me as one of your daughters. But I do not wish to take the place of Dacey.”

“I’ll try to appreciate you for yourself. That shouldn’t be hard.”

“It’s not,” Tansy said.

I let go of their hands and pulled myself out of my nest.
“I think I feel better now,” I said. “Thank you.”

We started back to the castle; the godswood had its own wall but a separate gate leading into Winterfell. I held Tansy’s hand as we walked.

“How did you know that kissing me would break Melisandre’s spell?”

“I didn’t,” Tansy said. “It was the only idea I had left. True love’s kiss always works in the fairy tales. I wish a kiss could fix everything.”

“It is a good start.”

Sansa Stark invited me to First Meal the next morning. Tansy went to join our adoptive sisters in the castle’s main hall while I put on my Mormont green-and-black again and followed Jeyne Poole to the castle’s solar. I knew that I dressed provocatively given the previous day’s events, but I wished to show that I would not be intimidated. And despite the uncomfortable style, I was also inordinately proud to wear my new family’s colors.

As usual, Jeyne said nothing, but when she stopped to open the door she hesitated.

“I’m glad you killed him,” she said softly. “Petyr hurt me.”

She opened the door and stepped away before I could say anything in response. Maege, Randa, Davos and Howland Reed were already present within; Lord Glover evidently had arrived moments before. A large table had been spread with bacon, biscuits, and fruit, and there was coffee. I sat quietly and the Onion Knight explained some of the politics going on around me.

“Princess, you struck a serious blow for Lady Stark’s authority,” he said, echoing Randa’s assessment. “And finally getting rid of Petyr Baelish is good for all of the kingdoms.

“But killing Corbray’s brother and the Knight of Ninestars . . . this has put Lady Stark in a difficult position with her recent allies. There are just over a thousand men outside the walls owing allegiance to those two houses, one-tenth of the Vale’s strength.”

“If they did not wish to die, then they should not have challenged us. They went through all the proper forms, with a dropped glove and a spoken challenge. I named the terms as they agreed was my right. They agreed to a fight to the death in which no one would yield. And then they died. That is the usual result of a fight to the death, is it not?”

“Lord Royce withdrew his men from Winterfell,” Ser Davos went on. “But he continues to demand what he calls justice. He wants you, Lyra Mormont and Lady Forlorn handed over to him immediately.”

“He is welcome to try to take us. No one will lay a hand on me or on my adoptive sister and keep it. I took their sword as spoil of battle. They know how to get it back.”

“Princess,” Ser Davos tried again. “I’m not trying to anger you. I just want to be sure the Vale’s army leaves peacefully, and that means no more bloodshed.”

He also feared for my safety; my near-death at the hands of the red sorceress had shaken him.

“I only sought to help my friend,” I said. “I was asked to fight Lyn Corbray, to the death, and I did so. At the risk of my life. This was not my fight. I will not be scolded for killing someone in a fight to the death.”
“Princess, I’m deeply grateful for what you did,” Sansa took up her cause herself. “We only want to ask you and the Mormonts, the other Mormonts, to remain within Winterfell until the Vale knights have left and are well on their way home.”

“I will stand with my sisters. I wear these colors by choice. Here we stand.”

I clanked my coffee cup twice on the table and drained it. Maege Mormont broke into laughter, removing some – but not all – of the tension in the room.

“They taught you that, did they? Davos is advising caution regarding the Vale men, and I tend to agree. If you would consent to stay around until the Vale army is gone, it would simply be helpful. And I know your sisters would love more time with you and Tansy.”

“As would I,” Sansa added.

“I will not deny a favor to any of you,” I said. I realized that I had been somewhat petulant, but I had truly been offended by the notion that I had done something wrong by killing either Corbray when they had volunteered for their own deaths. “And I would enjoy the company as well.”

“Are you still willing to seek out the Night’s King?” Howland Reed asked.

“You believe him, or it, a danger to my sisters, do you not? I will kill any who would harm them. Any.”

I considered everyone in the room my friend, but I was no playing piece to be moved across the board of their equivalent of Jetan. My days of playing the helpless damsel had been left on Barsoom with, I assumed, my original body. I wished to be clear that while I would kill their enemies for them, I would do so for my own reasons. I was not a weapon to be wielded in their cause.

No guard stood outside our door, but it felt as though we had been placed under house arrest. Lyra moved her small bundle of belongings into our room and we remained there for most of each day. My sisters taught me the Westerosi version of Jetan, called Chevasse. We exercised in the courtyard, and I practiced at swords with Lyra.

Tansy and I also explored the castle, along with Lyra and Jory Mormont. Large parts of it had burned and many of the buildings remained unusable. The so-called “glass gardens,” where flowers and crops could be grown during winter, had been smashed. Broken glass littered their wreckage.

More interesting parts of the castle lay underground. Lyra had played here as a child and now led us into the many tunnels and caverns. I found this fascinating – the deeper one went into the tunnels, the warmer the rock became. I knew of this phenomenon – geothermal heating – from reading scientific studies of ancient Barsoom. Our planet had ceased to be geologically active eons ago, but the remains of volcanic activity were clear to see. This planet apparently still had active veins of hot, liquid rock running beneath its surface.

The caverns extended to multiple levels, and they appeared to be very old. They also were not natural: they had been well-made, so that no evidence of cutting or digging was easily apparent, but they were much too smooth and much too precise to be the random work of nature. Or of these people – we of Helium can cast molten rock, at a huge expense of energy. Few other nations even of Barsoom have the technology to create what I now saw.

“How old is Winterfell?” I asked Lyra as the four of us descended to yet another level. The walk was fairly easy, with carved stone steps and broad walkways. Their style did not match the walls of caverns themselves.
“Thousands of years, they say. Sansa might know more, but I think she paid as much attention to lessons as I did. The maester here was murdered during the sack and they don’t have a replacement. Even if they did I guess he wouldn’t know much about the castle’s history.”

Some of these caverns had been given over to the dead. Crypts made of stone held the remains of the Stark family going back for many generations. And here I saw something else unusual: the oldest crypts had been placed in the deepest caverns used for the dead. We have such places on Barsoom as well, but the oldest of the dead are closest to the entrance and the most recent burials are deeper in the rock. When someone dies and is added to the cavern, workers carve a new space out of the back wall and the cavern gets a little deeper.

The arrangement in Winterfell meant that the deepest parts of the tomb had been used first. Surely no one would wish to dig spaces that would not be used for centuries. And starting at the back would also mean that the dead would eventually reach the front of the cavern, and then someone would have to be placed in the deepest segment anyway. That day seemed to be no more than a generation or two away.

As I looked over the walls of the caverns by torchlight, it seemed that they were much larger than necessary. Many of the underground chambers were used to store food, firewood and other such consumable items, stockpiles for winter use or so Lyra informed me. Others simply stood empty.

So the cavern of the dead had not been constructed as an ossuary; someone had decided to use an already-existing, man-made cavern for this purpose. And I recognized the original purpose; similar caverns lie underneath Helium and other cities of Barsoom. Winterfell had been built to shelter people from attack by weapons far beyond the technology of Westeros: high-energy explosives delivered by cannon, airships or missiles or perhaps even fission warheads. If I could find some proof for this thesis, it would make for an outstanding paper, were I only able to deliver it to the Academy.

As I had mused upon coming to this planet, philosophers of our people had long stated that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. Perhaps I had been arrogant in my dismissal of the tales of ancient magic among these people. Rather than a stagnant civilization, as I assumed, perhaps they were the remnants of a much more advanced society.

And if indeed the remnants of advanced science still walked this planet, I needed to take the stories of walking dead, fire-breathing dragons and similar creatures far more seriously than I had to date. Magic might not exist, but biological weapons most certainly did. And some might survive in isolated regions – like the cold lands north of their Wall. Involuntarily, I shivered despite the warmth seeping out of the rock walls.

We ascended back towards the upper levels, counting the Stark rulers as we went. As we neared the most recent graves, I realized that some of the thought patterns I could detect were within the cavern. I quietly stopped my sisters in place as I read the minds of the six men inside the cave.

“They are followers of the Ninestar,” I said. “They hope to trap us here and kill us.”

I silently listened to their thoughts for a few more moments. They had doused their own torches and hoped to surprise us and then slay us by the light of those we carried. A very dim light came down the stairwell from above, not even enough to make out shadows except from a very close distance.

“Stay here with our sisters,” I told Lyra, reaching out to touch her face. “Behind one of these crypts. Do not come out until I call you. Kill anyone who is not me.”

“What are you going to do?” Jory whispered.
“She’s going to kill them,” Tansy answered.

I took the lit torches Jory and Tansy carried and ground them out in the dust of the cavern floor. Full darkness descended on us. I carefully slid to the stairwell and felt my way up to the next level. Perhaps I should have taken a torch with me, but it was too late for second thoughts.

Two men stood in the center of the cavern, with two on either side. All had drawn their swords, and all were very nervous. I crept quietly up the left side of the cavern, feeling my way from grave to grave. When one of the men thought he heard something, I stopped. Telepathic contact allowed me to locate the men, but did not give me enough information to pinpoint them.

Finally I approached the first man. I drew close enough to see his outline in the very dim light of the ascending stairwell. When he coughed, I quickly slipped behind him under cover of the noise, dagger in hand. Not wanting to collect his germs – a silly notion given that I was about to end his life in a spray of blood – I waited until he finished and relaxed before I clapped my hand over his mouth and slashed my dagger across his throat. I stopped him from crying out but could not prevent his sword from scraping on the floor as I eased his body down. I wiped my dagger on his clothing and put it away.

“What was that?” another man whispered.

“Quiet!” their leader also whispered, in a harsh tone. “They’ll be here soon enough.”

I moved forward slowly until I could see the next outline. This man was nervous, moving constantly, and I would not be able to approach him so easily. When I was sure of his position, I drew my sword and charged him, abandoning my silence with a crazed scream of battle. He froze and my sword took him neatly through the neck, removing his head in a lucky strike.

While my scream had yielded a great deal of primal satisfaction, I realized that it had probably been a mistake. The four remaining men now started wildly swinging their swords; I could not predict where they might cut now that their thoughts had turned to panic. My task became easier when one of the two men in the center slashed open the arm of the other, who turned out to be their leader. The leader retaliated by burying a large knife in his friend’s belly.

The pain of the wounded man, coupled with the leader’s anger and shame, made their thoughts by far the strongest in the chamber and I slowly approached them, careful to make no sound.

“Stop!” the leader yelled. “Everyone stop. The red-eyed bitch is in here somewhere. Be quiet and we’ll find . . .”

I had reached him and placed my sword over what I thought was the center of his chest. His thoughts confirmed the feel of the cold metal point on his skin as it cut through his thin leather armor. He had left his fighting knife in his friend but had not yet drawn his sword.

“Don’t,” he said softly.

I did.

The two men who had been on the right side of the cavern as I entered were now the only ones left standing. They broke for the stairwell and I chased them down, cutting one across the back with a powerful slash that opened him along his spine from the shoulder to the waist. His friend stumbled as he climbed the stairs and he struck the stone steps face-first. He was not dead so I took hold of his head and cracked it against the stone several times; his thoughts confirmed that he was now dying.

I carefully walked back across the cavern, following the wall along the side and trying not to trip on
any of the corpses. When my foot detected the first step I called down the stairwell to my sisters.

“It is over! Light a new torch!”

Jory’s thoughts confirmed that they had heard me, and she fumbled in the darkness with her flint and steel to strike a spark. Unwilling to trip down the stairs in the darkness – an ignominious end for Azor Ahai – I sat on the top step and waited. After numerous attempts and a great deal of cursing, I saw light flare below me.

Within a few moments they had climbed the steps and Jory handed me a torch of my own. I used the light first to check my weapons and make sure I had cleaned them sufficiently. Then we went to survey the carnage.

“They wanted to kill us?” Jory asked. “Rape us?”

“Yes,” I said. “They hoped to take us by surprise. The leader simply wanted all of us dead, but some of his men hoped to rape Tansy and Jory. Or at least they fantasized doing so. They feared me and also Lyra too much to entertain such desires.”

“They feared me?” Lyra asked.

“As they should,” I answered. “Templeton had a formidable reputation.”

I felt Lyra take my hand. I squeezed it.

“Did Bronze Yohn send these men?” Jory asked.

“Their thoughts said they operated on their own, and had violated Lord Royce’s orders to remain in their camp.”

The man stabbed in the belly remained alive. I squatted next to him.

“Is that correct?” I asked him.

“Royce hasn’t the balls for what needs doing,” he ground out through gritted teeth. “You bitches deserve to die for the way you humiliated our lord.”

Their leader’s knife remained in the wounded man’s abdomen, up to its hilt. I took it by its handle and shoved it upward to pierce the man’s heart.

“Perhaps. But not today.”

“What will we tell Lady Sansa?” Jory asked, like my other sisters otherwise unmoved by the carnage.

“Nothing,” Lyra answered her. “No one knew they were here. But we need to get rid of the bodies, or we’ll have created another problem.”

“In the crypts,” Tansy said. “Dejah can shift the lids, can’t you?”

“Put them in with the Stark lords?” Jory now asked.

“They’re already dead,” Lyra said. “They won’t mind.”

With my sisters holding the opposite edge to keep it from crashing to the floor and breaking, I shoved aside the lid of a crypt claiming to hold a Lord Rickard Stark. Inside were only a few bones and
some ashes.

“This was Sansa’s grandfather,” Lyra explained. “He was incinerated by the mad king. I doubt these are even his bones.”

“So it’s not like we’re desecrating his grave,” Tansy said. “How many can fit in there?”

“Several,” I said. “Can you hold the lid in place without me?”

They managed to balance the lid on the edge of the carved stone basin while I fetched the corpses. After checking the bodies for money or other unidentifiable valuables I jammed four of them into the space, including the head I had lopped off one man, but could not fit any more.

“What if they rise?” Tansy asked.

“Do you think they can lift the lid?” I wondered.

We decided it was best to be careful. I took out my dagger and sawed the heads off the corpses. We placed all six heads inside the crypt marked as belonging to Lady Mama Stark, and the other two headless corpses in that of Brandon Stark. We used a cloak taken from one corpse to wipe down the outside of the crypts and hide the blood but could do nothing to hide the stains on the floor; when next this cavern was fully lit to bury a dead Stark, they would be evident to anyone who cared to look. And that day would come very soon, with the bones of Arya and Eddard Stark awaiting interment. Hopefully when it did the inevitable smell would not cause someone to investigate the older crypts.

“This is really disturbing,” Jory said. “It just feels wrong.”

“We had to get rid of the bodies,” Lyra said. “If Dejah hadn’t been here, it would be us lying out there, probably raped, too.”

“If I had not been here,” I said, “they would have no quarrel with you.”

“Don’t say that,” she snapped, slightly annoyed. “We’re family now.”

“It just feels like we’ve violated some divine law,” Jory went on. “We just desecrated six corpses.”

“There are no gods,” I said. “And if there were, would you wish to follow gods who allowed the sort of evil that walks this world?”

We sat on the edge of the low stone platform underlying Brandon Stark’s crypt to share the last of our wine.

“Do people of your world follow gods?” Jory asked.

“Not as many as once did. I was imprisoned by our goddess. John Carter proved her to be mortal, and her followers ripped her apart. Far fewer follow her now.”

“You were in prison?”

“I learned how to fight as a girl, but only became this strong and fast when I came to your world. People seeking to harm my husband, family or city tried to do so through me. We are all beautiful women, yes?”

“Some more than others,” Lyra said.
“There is no need for false modesty, underground amid the dead. We all know, from experience, how men treat beautiful women. As objects. Prizes to be won. Women have far more opportunities, and far more power, on my world, yet this dynamic holds there as well as here. And so I was captured more than once.”

“Even by a goddess.”

“A false goddess, but yes. I am trained in the study of the natural world. And so I want to see evidence before I form a conclusion. I have seen no evidence of gods.”

“Do they go together?” Tansy leaned around Lyra to ask. “Does belief in the divine cancel out belief in science?”

“Science?” Jory asked.

“Study of the natural world,” I said. “A word from John Carter’s language; yours does not seem to have one. It is the idea that there are fundamental laws of the universe and we can learn what they are; we do not need divine beings to tell us. The principle of science is that one forms a proposition, tests it, and observes the results.”

“I would like to study this science,” Jory mused.

“As for Tansy’s question,” I continued, “I do not know. I do not see why they could not co-exist, but the believer would have to keep an open mind and not fall back on magic as an explanation.”

“That’s not exactly an open-minded opinion,” Lyra said with a smile. “You have a powerful dislike for religion.”

“You are right. I should try to keep a more open mind. Do you follow a religion? I should have asked before possibly offending you.”

“I’m not offended. If we’re going to be sisters, then we need to know what we really think and believe.”

“So do you?”

“Most of us Mormonts follow the old gods, more or less. We go to the godswood and pray to natural forces that don’t even have names. My cousin, yours too I suppose now, converted to the Faith of the Seven so he could become a knight, but I doubt it was heart-felt.”

“You pray to the trees?”

“I do. It’s not really to the trees. They serve as sort of a point to focus on. I don’t believe in some gigantic person living beyond the clouds playing chevasse with peoples’ lives, no. But there is something more to all of this than just us. I just feel it. I have no—science is it?—behind that feeling.”

“You have faith,” Tansy prompted.

“Yes, faith. Not in a named god. But that the world is more than just us, and we’re here for some reason.”

She paused.

“And you, Tansy?”
“I was raised in the Seven. The septons won’t minister to whores unless we repent our sins, so the
faith more or less left me. I didn’t see that I had anything to repent, not by their standards.”

Jory looked at her with raised eyebrows. She looked more shocked in the torchlight than her
thoughts showed was actually the case.

“Oh, it’s an evil business,” Tansy answered her unspoken question. “I’m the first to say so. It uses
women and it gives men yet another route to use women. No one ever wanted me to repent for
making money. They wanted me to repent for the part where I was on my back.”

I did not fully understand, but Jory believed that Tansy used a common metaphor for having a male
sex organ inserted into her. Jory had never experienced this act, though she had performed others
with young men and had received orgasm from them.

“Was it . . . bad?”

“Not always. It’s not like women are allowed to own and run other kinds of businesses. I made a
living, a good living. People counted on me. Now I’m sin-free and I live off Dejah’s charity.”

This part I did understand.

“That is not fair to say,” I said. “I also receive charity. I have paid for none of our meals or lodging at
Greywater Watch or Winterfell. Or I get money by killing people and looting their corpses, as I did
moments ago. You are my sister, Tansy. That means we share what we have. I would be lost without
you.”

“Yes, you would.”

Tansy leaned into Lyra’s side.

“Still happy your mother adopted me?”

“More than ever,” she answered, wrapping her arm over Tansy’s shoulders. “I knew what I was
doing when I gave you that tunic.”

She wrapped her other arm over my shoulders.

“And you have four more sisters now. You’ll never be lost again.”
Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Summary

In which Dejah Thoris meets the Mead-King.

Chapter Twenty-Three

As I had told Sansa and her advisors, I had only desired to help my friend when I fought Lyn Corbray. And I had followed the rules as they had been explained to me; if these knights wished to call their contests a “fight to the death” then they should be prepared to die. Otherwise they should call it a “fight until the more cowardly one surrenders.”

Through no fault of my own, I had become the center of a blood feud between my adoptive Mormont family on one hand and the Corbrays and Templetons on the other. We have these on Barsoom as well, and they are just as unproductive and just as impossible to end. Though it somehow felt unreasonably stubborn, I had become resolved not to back down for my part: I would not apologize for killing either Corbray, and I would not return their ancestral sword.

Myranda Royce came to join us for Mid-Day Meal on the day after our visit to the caverns of the dead. Despite the war-torn nature of Westeros the Winterfell kitchens supplied us every day with wonderful foods in copious quantities: as on Barsoom, during hard times the noble classes did not share the deprivations of the commoners. Today we had small birds called “Dornish hens” stuffed with some sort of spicy filling. I liked them very much, and Tansy had told me that these could be eaten with one’s fingers without violating etiquette.

Only Lyra and Tansy were with me for this encounter. Alysane was with Maege attending to the business of their island and Jory had gone to care for the horses, as always in these tense days shadowed by two Mormont soldiers and my telepathy. While I would kill anyone who harmed Tansy, Lyra or Alysane, I would tear anyone who threatened my little sister into very small pieces and all of their friends, family and house pets as well.

I liked Randa, but her primary loyalty lay with Sansa and her thoughts had quickly switched from the political advantage I had given Sansa when I killed Lyn Corbray to the political liability I had become with the death of Lucas Corbray. As I had come to understand, she covered her calculating mind with what she considered female prattle.

“It’s so intimidating to visit here,” she began, as the servants finished laying out the food. “I’m used to having the finest breasts in any room and with you three, well.”

Silence greeted her attempt at levity. The four of us sat around a round table, with Tansy to my left, Lyra to my right and Randa directly across from me.

“You did not come here to admire our breasts,” I said, as I speared a roasted hen with my fork and brought it to my small serving platter, known as a “plate.”

“No,” she sighed. “You read my thoughts on that one.”

I jumped slightly, but she did not seem to notice. Tansy and Lyra looked at one another but said
“Sansa will be installed as Lady of Winterfell in several days’ time. It’s important that Lord Royce and the other lords of the Vale attend. It would be a terrible insult for Sansa to exclude the men who defeated the Boltons in her name.”

“As it would be,” Tansy added, “to exclude the woman who defeated Lyn Corbray in her name.”

“Yes,” Randa agreed. “Do you see the problem Sansa faces?”

“Not really,” Tansy said. “Dejah freed the Vale from Baelish as much as she did Sansa. We should be buried in flowers and presents. Instead those ungrateful bastards want to see my sisters buried instead.”

“Did something else happen?” Randa asked, feigning ignorance.

“Nothing we couldn’t handle,” Tansy answered. “So what does my niece propose, and why is she not here proposing it herself? Dejah faced death, the least Sansa can do is face Dejah.”

“You know Sansa has to keep up the appearance of even-handedness.”

“Even-handedness?” Tansy asked, mocking Randa by feigning shock. “Corbray knew the rules. His brother and his starry friend knew the rules. Their minions got what they deserved.”

“So Dejah and Lyra did kill them.”

“They won’t be presenting any problems.”

“There were six of them!” Randa said, truly surprised. “Two anointed knights and four men-at-arms, all experienced fighters.”

Randa sighed, poured herself more wine, and drank deeply.

“Tansy. We’re friends. All of us. I didn’t come here to argue with you. I know it’s a terribly unfair situation. Yohn Royce is my father’s cousin, and I’ve known him all of my life. He’s a stubborn old coot tied to the laws of chivalry even though he hated the Corbrays and Littlefinger.”

I placed my hand atop Tansy’s; I could tell she grew upset on my behalf.

“Sister,” I said. “Randa is right. We should help Sansa if we can.”

I looked across at Randa.

“Tansy should be with her niece for the ceremony. She should visit with her as well. I will wear my Mormont colors and stand with my adoptive sisters among the Mormont rank-and-file. Sansa need not be concerned about my interacting with the Vale people. But I will not apologize for anything I have done in Sansa’s name, nor will my sister Lyra.”

Lyra nodded, but said nothing.

“Dejah. Princess. That’s more than Sansa ever wanted. She really wants to be your friend. She just can’t have you two killing her allies.”

“Neither Lyra nor I will kill anyone who does not threaten us or those we love. Sister?”

“Of course not,” Lyra said. “Like you said, Randa, we’re all friends here. We don’t want to make
“Well that’s all settled!” Randa said. “I do so want to be friends, even with these perfect tits all around.”

“I thought only men obsessed over breasts,” I said.

Randa sighed again, an affectation she used to draw attention to her breasts. This time she filled my cup before pouring more wine for herself.

“You see right through me. Are you sure you can’t read thoughts?”

“Absolutely.”

“I’m insecure. Do you know how much I hated coming here to confront you three?”

“You love Sansa very much,” I said.

“I suppose I do. I’d never had a woman friend before Sansa. I always saw them as rivals. Her too, at first, even though I thought she was Littlefinger’s bastard. I wish I could be like one of you.”

“You can be,” Tansy said.

“I’m not jesting. That vile Symond Templeton grabbed my tits – three separate times – during the march from the Vale and all I could do about it was giggle. Lyra put a foot of steel through him. And she’s not even the dangerous one!”

“You don’t have to kill men to be your own woman,” Tansy said. “I’ve never killed anyone. I haven’t even been in a fight in . . . at least six months.”

“Except Melisandre,” Lyra noted.

Tansy shrugged.

“That’s easy for you to say, Tansy, when you have Dejah ready to kill anyone who’d harm you.”

“But Randa, you just handled complicated politics for Sansa. There’s a lot more to you than a great set of tits, and stop pretending you don’t know it.”

“Do you really think I have great tits?” Randa stared into Tansy’s eyes for several moments, watching the anger build in them, before she burst out laughing.

“I do know it,” she continued. “I’m not on Littlefinger’s level, but I understand many of the undercurrents that others seem to miss. Sometimes I just wish that I could be a Mormont, too. Your lives seem so free.”

“Sansa needs you,” Tansy pursued her point.

“She does. Ser Davos is a good man, but he’s not of the North and he has no feel for politics. Lords Reed, Glover and Mormont are very clear that they’re just visiting.”

“Stay with my niece, then. Advise her. I know nothing of politics and Dejah knows less. And Dejah’s solutions tend to be permanent.”

This was not exactly true; I knew much about the politics of Barsoom and Helium and had observed that many principles held true on both planets. I had even considered writing a paper about this
congruence. I simply did not care about the game of thrones: I had my own agenda.

“Will. I’m just allowed my fantasies of riding off after adventure.”

She laughed and drank some more.

“I grew up thinking that a woman could only follow very narrow path, and that path led through men. None of you follow it, each in a different way. I’m also pretty sure there’s a great deal more going on behind those lovely red eyes than our day-dreaming princess lets on.”

“There is,” I said. “I thought my existence here very simple. I would find my husband and find my way home. Things are now more complicated. I find that I belong to a new family.”

“Good,” Lyra said. “I like my new sisters.”

“So do I.”

We had finished our meal. We spent a good deal of the afternoon sitting on the stone balcony outside our rooms, overlooking the broken glass gardens, and drinking more wine with Randa. By the time she left, it seemed that we were all friends again. This eased my mind a great deal.

Tansy visited her niece at least twice a day, sometimes for extended periods. Westeros had little sophistication in matters of business and finance, except for its brothels. Once Sansa realized Tansy’s depth of knowledge in such matters, she sought her advice avidly on such topics as provisioning her castle against the coming winter and collection of taxes and fees. It pleased Tansy to be of use, and it pleased me to see her recognize her own worth.

Maege came to join us a few days after Myranda’s visit, while Lyra and I sat on our balcony trading our worlds’ myths and legends. She poured herself a goblet of wine and took a seat between us.

“I’m sorry to have stayed aloof,” she said. “Politics, you know. The Lady of Bear Island has to represent her house’s interests.”

“I was not offended,” I said. “I have enjoyed the time with my new sisters.”

“You know that I came here for a reason.”

“Our ability to read thoughts only reveals what someone is thinking at that very moment, and only if we seek that information.”

“There’s something I want to say to you, talk over with you, before you read it in my mind. I’m not proud of it. It’s family business. Let me finish asking you before you look at my thoughts.”

I nodded. Lyra leaned forward with interest.

“I am a Mormont now. You need not ask.”

“You haven’t heard the question. It’s matter of vengeance.”

“Who do you wish me to kill?”

“Walder Frey.”

“My sister Dacey was murdered on his order. I should consider her my sister?”
“It would please me if you did.”

“Then I will consider her so. But Tansy will not approve of such vengeance.”

“Do you?”

“You know I am no stranger to the blood feud. I do not feel the loss of Dacey, as I never knew her. But I feel your pain, and that of my sisters.”

“You don’t think less of me, for asking?”

“I do not. I know that you love me as your other daughters.”

“It’s not my intention to use you. But this burns to the very depths of me. They took my Dacey. I want them dead.”

“I understand. I only worry about my sister’s feelings. My sister Tansy.”

“She’s a Mormont as well,” Lyra said. “And she’s no wilting Southern flower, despite her name. She may have fewer objections than you believe.”

“Do you agree?” I asked Lyra. “Do you wish me to kill the Freys?”

“Yes,” she said, decisively. “But not alone. You and I, together.”

“Arya Stark wished me to help kill Walder Frey and his family,” I said. “I refused. I knew little of the Stark family, and what I did know, I did not like.”

I paused, wondering how best to tell them my feelings. I had no trouble expressing simple concepts with only spoken words, but more complex ideas posed more difficulties. When they involved emotion, I sorely felt my inability to open my thoughts to my sister and surrogate mother.

“You made me part of your family, and I have enjoyed that very much. The acceptance, the warmth, the love. I needed these things. I felt abandoned and alone. I had my sister, but when one person loves you, that may be a...” I wished to say, “anomaly,” but did not know their word, “a special, unique occurrence. When others do as well...”

“I know that I appear silly and foolish when I am not fighting, and sometimes, perhaps often, I am. But I have been a princess for a very long time. I knew there would be obligations to go with that love.

“The Frey family murdered the sister I never knew, they killed Tansy’s niece, and they stabbed me in the back. You wish vengeance. I do not know if this will ease your pain, but I will fulfill my obligations as a Mormont. I will help you kill the Frey family. All of them.”

They did not understand that I meant exactly what I had said. We sat for some time, looking past the shattered glass gardens to the snow-covered fields beyond Winterfell’s walls and drinking wine, but said no more.

The next morning brought a bright sun, and new arrivals: a troop of dirty men and women dressed in ragged skins and led by a massive white-haired man who bellowed loudly for “the Stark.” He could not be heard from where we practiced swords in the courtyard, but I had picked up the startled thoughts of the guards. I put away my practice sword, picked up my real blade and gestured for Lyra to join me.
Three nervous Winterfell soldiers stood across the open gateway, unsure whether they should attempt to shut the gates in the face of these visitors; apparently they had not spotted their approach until they were very close. A fourth soldier had rushed off in search of Sansa Stark.

The large man briefly fell silent when he spotted my adoptive sister and I, his eyes drawn to our Mormont tunics but, unusually, not to our breasts.

“She-Bears!” he shouted, shoving the soldiers aside and striding toward us. His thoughts indicated no wish to harm us so I did not draw my sword; I waved to Lyra to take her hand off hers. He enfolded me in a smothering embrace, then released me and did the same to Lyra. He was no taller than we, but of enormous girth.

“You don’t know me, do you? Has she said nothing of me?”

“He is not dangerous,” I said to Lyra, “but he is very strange.”

“Har! That’s true indeed! At least I’m no danger to my beloved She-Bears! Do you truly not know me?”

“Should we?” Lyra asked.

“Tormund Giantsbane, husband to bears?”

She shook her head. I did as well.

“Speaker to gods? Breaker of ice?”

We shook our heads again. Several more Winterfell soldiers came rushing forward; I waved them back with my hand.

“She said nothing of me,” he said, sadly. “She said she would say nothing, but I imagined she would anyway.”

He thought of a woman wearing Mormont colors much like ours, and then thought of her wearing nothing. He pictured a young Maege. That made me smile; she had been quite desirable in her youth. The present-day Maege arrived soon afterwards, along with Sansa Stark and the rest of her advisors. That brightened the face of Tormund Giantsbane.

“My She-Bear!” he roared when he saw Maege, then wrapped her in a crushing embrace as well.

“You never told our daughters?”

“No,” she said. “I told you it was but one chance meeting, never to be repeated or spoken of.”

“But we did repeat it!”

“Two chance meetings, then.”

“And these are my daughters?”

Maege stood between us, very proud of both of us. She had unsure thoughts regarding Tormund, who apparently had been highly skilled at giving her orgasm.

“This is my adopted daughter, Dejah,” she said, putting one hand on my back. “She is a princess born in a far land, but she is a Mormont now.”

Tormund actually bowed.
“And this beauty? I can see that she’s mine.”

“Oh gods no,” Lyra murmured.

“Yes, Tormund,” she said, placing her other hand on Lyra’s back. “Her name is Lyra. She is my third-born of five.”

“A spearwife among the kneelers!” he shouted. “I’d know you for my daughter, a woman bearing a sword among all these soft Southerners.”

He bowed again and turned back to Maege.

“We had but one, then? You believed yourself with child each time.”

“Two. My eldest was killed at what they call the Red Wedding.”

“Aye, where the Stark boy-king died as well. Jon Snow told of this. She was a spear-wife?”

“One of the king’s personal guard.”

“I’d expect no less. She died well?”

“No. Murdered by those she thought friends.”

Tormund muttered angrily, kicking at the snow in frustration. His thoughts showed that he grieved for Dacey’s death, and felt great sympathy for Maege’s loss.

“Five had I as well. Two sons died in the fighting at the Wall, and one after. I know the pain. But a son and a daughter are here.”

“I’ll look forward to greeting them,” Maege said.

Tormund spotted Sansa Stark.

“Touched by fire!” he bellowed. “You’d be Jon Snow’s sister, and rule here?”

“I am. I do.”

Tormund suddenly became much more sober.

“I have much to tell, that you need to hear. Can you let my people within your walls?”

“How many?”

“Perhaps three hundred. Tired and hungry they are.”

Maege thought a question at me. I nodded.

“I believe we can trust them,” she said to Sansa.

“Very well. Follow my guard Mollen, he will take you to warm and dry quarters and provide food and drink.”

Lyra and I followed at the rear of the procession heading to Sansa’s meeting room. Tansy joined us.

“You look like someone smashed your head with a rock,” she told Lyra.
“I wish they had,” she answered. “My father is a wildling. Insane even as wildlings go.”

“Mine was a whoremonger who sent me to a brothel,” Tansy said. “Wait, that man is your father?”

“Yes.”

My father was a prince, a scholar, a renowned legal authority and a successful fleet commander. I decided that this was not the time to share such.

“So when Maege talks about a bear . . .”

“Apparently that’s the bear.”

“What is so bad about wildlings?” I asked.

“They paddle across to Bear Island in small boats,” Lyra explained. “They rape, they rob, they murder. They’re the reason Mormont women fight.”

“You’ve fought them,” Tansy said, not really asking.

“Yes, and killed them. To have been fathered by one, apparently willingly . . .”

“He is not a bad man,” I said. “He is not couth, but he is very intelligent. And very worried about something.”

“You want me to feel better.”

“I am your sister,” I said. “Of course I want you to feel better. But I also tell you the truth. I have found no treacherous thoughts in Tormund Giantsbane. He is not pretending; he is very proud of you.”

Lyra’s unhappiness eased slightly. We had reached the conference room and took seats. Tormund insisted that Lyra and I sit on either side of him and, when he learned that Tansy was also a She-Bear despite the gown she wore, that our sister sit behind him in the one of the chairs lining the wall.

As soon as all were seated, Tormund looked about.

“The Onion Knight can vouch for me,” he said. Ser Davos nodded his head. “As can this She-Bear.” He slapped me, hard, on the back. I looked at him.

“You have the sight,” he said. “Don’t deny it.”

“It is true,” I said. “He is a strange man but I trust his good will.”

“Among our peoples,” Lord Glover said. “One does not normally pound a princess in that manner.”

I noted that his thoughts showed more concern that I might create a new diplomatic incident by disemboweling the wildling leader than for my fragile female person. Neither pleased me, but I supposed I would rather be seen as dangerous than as helpless.

“Aye,” said Tormund. “But this is a She-Bear. And you’ll note she did not flinch.”

“I take no offense,” I quickly added. “It is the wildling way.”

“We prefer ‘Free Folk’.”
“As you will,” said Sansa Stark, taking control of her meeting. “You said you had information of some urgency.”

“I do; ’twas important to mark my standing first. You need to heed my words.”

“As you say. What are those words?”

“I trusted Jon Snow. Fought alongside him. I loved that boy, I did. Crows murdered him.”

“The Night’s Watch killed their own Lord Commander?” Ser Davos asked, stunned. The others in the room murmured uneasily.

“Aye. He let the Free Folk through the Wall. Added us to his ranks, he did. Some hated him for it. And killed him for it. Stabbed by many knives, he was.”

“The Night’s Watch then sent you away?” Sansa asked.

“No. That is, aye. It is much worse than that, Red Wolf. Jon Snow, he rose. From the grave. He became one of them, the Others, but far worse.”

“The Night’s King,” Howland Reed said.

“Aye. The Night’s King. He slaughtered his brother Crows, those what killed him and those what didn’t, and they rose as well. They all rose to follow him. We fled. We lost most. But we made it here.

“They’re coming. A shambling lot of the dead, as far as you can see. They come with the cold.”

“Yours are the last wildlings?” Sansa asked.

“Free Folk. And aye, as far as I know. There could be more, but I don’t see how,”

“You wish to remain here?”

“Aye.”

“You will fight for me?”

“Aye.”

“You will obey me?”

“We’ll not bend the knee for no one. We will follow your rules as you set them forth, and your orders in battle.”

“I will consult my advisors and render a decision by day’s end. Until that time, you are our welcome guest, within our rules.”

We rose to leave, and I felt a gigantic arm clap down across my shoulders. Tormund had done the same to Lyra.

“Come, daughters!” Tormund bellowed. “Tell me of your lives.”

I slipped out from under the arm, and took my adoptive sister by the hand. We led Tormund to the Great Hall, where the servants brought us a great deal of grilled meat and several flagons of ale. The
three of us sat facing the massive Free Person, my sisters on either side of me.

“You are a fighter, yes?” he asked Lyra, gesturing with the roasted leg of a baby sheep.

“I fought in battles for King Robb, first as an archer, then a file-closer.”

“File closer?”

“You keep the soldiers in line during battle, so the enemy can’t break the shield-wall.”

“Aye, we do that as well. A deadly place if the enemy is wise.”

“It can be.”

“I love a woman who knows how to fight. Your mother raised you well, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Aye, she’s woman enough to be of the Free Folk, that She-Bear. You know she did not want me around?”

“I’d guessed as much.”

“Do not blame her. You’d not have wanted me as your father.”

“I don’t. I mean, I don’t blame her. Nor do I blame you.”

“Har. I’ve done nothing wrong. She’s done nothing wrong. No one has. I’ll not intrude on you. ’tis only curiosity.”

He turned to Tansy.

“You! You’re a woman!”

“So I’ve been told.”

“Sister to these two you say, but you have the look of the Red Wolf.”

“Aunt to Lady Sansa, on her mother’s side.”

“You’re a woman who’s seen life in the South.”

“You could say that.”

“Good. You keep watch on that niece of yours. Just a girl, she is. Fire inside, to be sure, just like you. And your other sister here.”

He looked closely at me.

“You’ve matched me, meat and ale.”

“I am still growing.”

“You’re a strange one. But I like you.”

“You liked Jon Snow as well.”
“That I did.”

“I am told that I must kill him.”

That shocked both of my sisters, but not Tormund.


He believed that title, out of some tale of his people, to be figurative.

“So you bear the red sword?”

I drew my sword and laid it on the table between us. He touched it gently, with just two fingers.

“Can feel the power in it.”

“Are you some sort of seer?” Tansy asked him.

“Har! No. I listen to the storytellers. Seen too much now to doubt them: the dead walking, giant ice spiders, the Others.”

“Tell me what you know of the Night’s King.”

“Seems there’s more than one such legend. In all I’ve heard tell, he leads the Others. Some say he’ll rise anew, some say he’s an ancient evil come again. My guess, he’s both, an ancient evil in a new body. Legends say he was made by a white woman, and so must be put to rest by a red woman. That’d be the Daughter of the Red Star.”

He drank down more ale.

“The original was a Lord Crow. Stands to reason the new one would be as well.”

“Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch?”

“Aye.”

“Jon Snow is the Night's King?”

“Aye. Saw it myself. Saw the Others follow his will.”

“These Others, they can be killed?”

“Aye. Dragonglass, a black glass like this,” he pulled out a long, primitive-looking dagger made of hand-chipped glass and placed it on the table next to my sword. It appeared to be the volcanic residue we call obsidian. I also noted that Sansa Stark needed more watchful guards. “And steel like yours; Jon Snow had such a sword as well.”

“Just a touch, or an actual wound?”

“Jon Snow fought an Other just like a normal man, killed it with a stroke to the body. It sort of melted. Was fighting myself, mind you, so wasn’t watching close, but didn’t seem like just a cut would do.”

“They are good fighters?”

“Strange, they are. Hard to follow as they move. But no better than a good man with a sword, no.
Not brave, not at all. They’d rather their wights did the fighting.”

“In the legends of the Free Folk, the Promised One is a woman?”

“Aye. Southrons, they think women soft. Free Folk know better. You got it in you to kill ’im?”

“I am very good at killing people.”

“Aye, it’s in your red eyes. But this isn’t the same, killing what’s already dead. Had to finish my own son when he rose . . .”

His voice trailed off, then he banged his empty flagon on the table.

“Enough! Let’s see if you can match the Mead-King drink for drink, She-Bears.”

We spent the rest of the day with Tormund; I became rather drunk well before he did and slowed my intake, as a princess is taught to do discreetly, but both of my sisters matched his drinking. Eventually his son Toregg, daughter Manda and her husband Ryk joined us. They were rough people; John Carter had gotten along well with rough people but as a princess I had been shielded from contact with those considered uncouth. Compared to the people of Helium, all the inhabitants of Westeros were barbarians, separated only by degree.

Even so, I liked them. The younger Free Folk feared the people of Winterfell, but Tormund convinced them that they were all related to the three of us in some fashion and therefore we could be trusted. A steady supply of ale helped put them at ease.

I learned a great deal about these Free Folk and their culture, which they now – probably rightly – assumed to be extinct. I also learned more about my adoptive family; after consuming enough ale Lyra proved more at ease with these guests than I had expected. It appeared that the Mormonts traded regularly with the Free Folk, exchanging finished items like alcohol and steel blades for products from the frozen lands like gold nuggets, animal tusks and furs, and a substance called “amber” that apparently was treasured as a jewel. This trade went on in secret – none of my drinking companions dared discuss it aloud, even when somewhat intoxicated – and I understood that it would bring my new family many problems with the other Northern houses were it known. And now I understood that Maege had encountered Tormund while carrying on this illicit trade.

Tormund claimed that 100,000 Free Folk had gathered to try to force their way past the Wall, and some 3,000 had actually passed through with Jon Snow’s approval. While they described the far North as utterly frozen, this apparently was not exactly true and some limited farming took place as well as livestock-raising. That obviously had to happen were such a number of people to be supported.

All four of them told us wild tales of bizarre creatures and people found in the far North, some of which they believed to be true. While women apparently had a great deal of freedom, going to war, leading clans and having equal voice in group decisions, men chose their wives by “stealing” them. The women could acquiesce or fight back as they chose, but if unable to defend themselves they apparently would be forced to serve the man.

“That does not seem very free,” I said. “Does a woman not have the chance to steal a man?”

“No,” Toregg answered. “Men steal women, but only when the red wanderer lies before the moon.”

“Red wanderer?” I asked, feeling my breath grow short.

“In the night sky,” he explained. “Seven wanderers roam the heavens.”
I looked at Tansy. “I thought there were but three.”

“Three that I thought we might spot on that night. That’s what I thought you were asking. The Faith does say there are seven wanderers in the sky. I didn’t know then about your, um, personal interest in the red one.”

“Thinking of home, Daughter of the Red Star?” Tormund asked, amused.

“Yes. I did not think I could go home.”

I had slipped, but he did not think I literally meant that this red wanderer was my home world, only that I would somehow use it in some magic ritual to return home.

“Could be you have to be in the North, the real North, to see your red wanderer.”

It could be. And if I held out my arms to this red star, would I return to Barsoom, to Helium? I felt the warmth of my sisters’ thighs and shoulders pressed against mine on either side. Would I wish to do so?

“Would you want a man you could easily defeat?” Manda asked me, breaking my reverie.

“No,” I said. “That sometimes is the way of our lands as well, though we do not take without permission. There is more to a woman than her ability to fight.”

“In these lands, that is true. Less so in ours.”

“Our no longer exist,” her husband said. “We will have to learn their ways.”

“Yes,” I said. “This ‘taking’ seems very close to rape. Rape merits the death penalty here. As it should.”

“Aye,” agreed Ryk. “A woman who cannot defend herself should not be taken.”

“The Free Folk rape when they raid, do they not?”

“It’s happened, aye,” Tormund said. “Crows rape women and children north of the Wall as well.”

“It will not happen now that you are south of the Wall.”

“You’re threatening?”

“I am promising.”

Tormund and I locked eyes for what seemed a very long while, then he laughed.

“As you will,” he said.

“What makes a woman strong, then, if she does not fight?” Manda diverted the discussion. “You fight, as does the other She-Bear. Your sister does not.”

“And she is the strongest of us three,” Lyra said. “A strong woman, a real woman, decides her own path. She may do so with a man, or without, but she does it by her own choice.”

“Southron women have such choice?”

“Not often,” Tansy said. “I’m not sure I agree with Lyra. Trying to be a strong woman like as not
will get you killed. Or worse.”

“These She-Bears respect you,” Toregg said. “You can see it.”

“I don’t know why,” Tansy said. “I feel weak, like Dejah has to keep saving me.”

Sansa Stark quietly took the seat next to her.

“The lone wolf dies,” she said, “but the pack survives.”

The four Free People nodded their heads.

“I seem to recall you saving Dejah’s life not long ago,” she said to Tansy. “At the risk of your own. And not for the first time, according to Ser Davos. You’re part of their pack. And mine as well. As will be the Free Folk, if it’s their will. I would like you all to stay with us at Winterfell.”

“Har,” Tormund said, seemingly his favorite comment. “That would be a fine thing. Drink with us.”

He slid a large cup made of horn to Lady Stark, and filled it with ale. She looked at it a moment, then took it up, drank it down, slammed the cup on the table and wiped the back of her hand across her mouth. All four Free People burst into loud laughter.

“You’ll do,” Toregg said, raising his cup to Sansa Stark. “Takes all types to make a pack, it does.”

“What would you have us do?” Tormund asked.

“Your fighters will help man the walls. Ser Davos will arm them as needed, and assign them watches. We’ll find work for the others.”

“We’ll not be servants,” Tormund said. “Outside work, aye, is no problem. But all the grown men and women are fighters, naught else survived. We have a few children but that’s all.”

Sansa nodded.

“I am sorry for your loss, but glad to add your strength to ours.”

She stood.

“I have other business that needs attending. Please try not to get our princess too drunk. Could you come with me, Tansy?”

I did not think I looked very drunk, at least not yet. Sansa and Tansy left us; I rose as well and sheathed my sword. Lyra joined me.

“I am glad to know you all,” I told the Free Folk. “I hope to speak with you again.”

“And you, She-Bear?” Tormund asked Lyra.

“I’m still surprised,” she said. “But not sad at all. I’m happy to know you as well.”

I took her hand as we left the Great Hall. I had come to love my adoptive sister and knew her thoughts to be confused.

“Are you well?” I asked her.

“Like I told them,” she said. “It’s a shock, but I knew Mother sought fathers for her children outside
of Bear Island. I just never thought to meet mine.”

I nodded. A narrow genetic pool needed outside input. I approved of Maege’s decision.

“They’re not bad people,” she continued. “Strange, as all wildlings. Do you see me any differently?”

We were now alone in one of the castle’s long corridors. I stopped her and put my hands on the sides of her shoulders, imitating her treatment of me several days before.

“You would be strange to me regardless, do you not remember my origin? You are my sister. There are no exceptions to that. You have accepted Tansy’s profession and the awful things I have done, without question. Do you imagine that we would do less?”

“What did you read in his mind?”

“He is what he seems. Concerned for his people, afraid of the advancing army of the dead, trying to hide his worries with a bluff persona. You did not need to read thoughts to know that.”

“No, but I worried all the same.”

I pulled her close.

“Do not worry so. You already know who you are. And I need to lie down now.”

“So the red princess does get drunk?”

“Terribly. I was taught to sip carefully while appearing to drink deeply, and to hide the effects. That does not stop the effects.”

“Aye, I’m pretty drunk, too.”

I awoke in a tangle of sisters; Tansy had joined us at some point and darkness had fallen. Someone, probably not one of us, had kindled a fire and lit a pair of thick candles. I extracted myself as gently as I could, and drank a great deal of water from the pitcher in our chambers. These people had no drug treatments for what John Carter had called a “hangover,” and I doubted they would work on my brain if they did.

A wide and comfortable chair stood next to our bed, and I sat with my feet propped on the sideboard while I drank water and watched my sisters sleep. I might be able to take Tansy and run from this place, fast and far, and elude this Night’s King. But Lyra would never abandon her family.

I watched Tansy stir in her sleep and fling an arm and a leg across Lyra, as she often did to me, and I knew that I could not leave my new adoptive sister; like Tansy, I had come to love her as well.

Nor could I leave the rest of my new family. I felt far more protective of Jory than I ever had of my own daughters, including Tara. Had I fallen into the same trap as Tansy had with Arya Stark? I did not think so; I was well aware that Jory was not my daughter. Yet I did look on her now as a younger sister I loved very much, and would fight to protect. Once again, I had changed.

I would speak with Tormund again, and learn whatever else he knew about these not-dead beings and their Night’s King. And when the time came, I would kill this Jon Snow for good.
Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Summary

In which Dejah Thoris has tea with Lady Stark, and battles the Others.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Several days later, the time came for Sansa Stark’s investiture ceremony, in which she would formally claim the title of Lady of Winterfell. I knew that she and her advisors – Ser Davos, Howland Reed, Maege Mormont, Galbart Glover and Myranda Royce – had been locked in an intense debate over whether she should not also claim the title of Queen in the North. I had not been invited to these deliberations, which I appreciated since I lacked the background knowledge to offer an informed opinion and did not care enough to obtain it.

Tansy at times attended these meetings with her niece, as did Alysane. The lords of the North had apparently classified me as simply another younger Mormont daughter and I preferred this status. Were my opinion asked, I would give it, but I had no desire to force it on anyone. Many times I had been deep in the counsels of my father and grandfather, as some issue of the day seemed more important than anything else in the known universe. It had been very exciting at the time. I found that I could no longer name many of these all-consuming affairs of state.

Instead I spent my time on what I now found to be actually important: walking the walls or tending the horses with Jory, practicing at swords or learning dance steps with Lyra, drinking ale with my new Free Folk friends or studying archery with the Mormont soldiers. I even knelt with my sister Lyra before the odd white tree while she prayed, feeling the tree welcome her presence and detest mine. I could not recall a time when I had ever felt this free of care, all the while knowing that I would soon have to wager my life to defend all of these people. I would leave the tree to its own devices.

We all bathed before Sansa’s investiture ceremony, and I sat on the bed with Jory in our Mormont black-and-green to watch Lyra help Tansy into her gown.

“I did not know that you owned a sword,” I told Jory. She handed it to me and I drew it a short distance out of its scabbard; at least it had been well-oiled.

“Me either,” she said with a shy smile. “Don’t hate me.”

“You are my little sister. I could never do that.”

“It’s an expression. It means, don’t judge me too harshly.”

“I would prefer that you never draw this. But that is not the way of this world. Would you like me to teach you to use it?”

“I had lessons with our master-at-arms, but it couldn’t hurt.”
“It is more dangerous to be unskilled with a blade, than to be without one.”

“I’d rather be without one, but Mother thinks otherwise.”

“That is her decision. In these things, I am merely your sister.”

“You didn’t mind borrowing my ring mail to keep me out of the fight with the Boltons.”

“I did not say that I agreed with her.”

In truth, I would not have minded having another sister-in-arms. While the paired fighting style is effective, three are far stronger than two as it is much easier to protect against flanking moves and more difficult for an enemy to predict the axis of attack. But I did not wish to see my little sister take up the sword when it went against her nature.

Lyra had pulled the gown over Tansy’s head and adjusted it. My sister looked quite beautiful.

“I had thought this clothing odd,” I told Jory, “but I am starting to see the beauty in it.”

“That’s because you’ve never had to wear one.”

“I did once,” I said. “I think I might like to again. You do not?”

“It’s . . .” somehow, I had embarrassed Jory. I became distressed.

“I am sorry. Did I say something wrong?”

Lyra had overheard.

“You can tell her,” she said to Jory. “She needs to know.”

“I don’t own one,” Jory said quietly. “Neither does Lyra.”

I understood.

“There is little money on Bear Island,” I said. “And fine gowns are costly.”

“That’s right,” Jory said. “We grew up with weapons and armor, but not gowns.”

Tansy came over to us, her gown making a rustling sound as she moved.

“And all of these gowns,” she said, “these dozens of gowns, made by King’s Landing’s finest seamstresses or imported from Essos. These are where Bear Island’s taxes went.”

Our sisters fell silent.

“Yes,” Jory finally said. “I don’t blame Sansa, truly I don’t. But we are a poor house. Bear Island is beautiful, but not rich.”

“And we don’t tax our people into starvation,” Lyra added. “We share the burden.”

“The Mormont Way,” I said, now understanding still more.

“Yes. It’s more than just cleaning a few dishes.”

“I am even more proud to be a Mormont,” I told them. “I will work with you to restore our house’s fortunes.”
“And that of all our people,” Lyra added

Tansy gathered her skirts and sat on the other side of Jory.

“I’ve had lovely gowns before,” she said, taking Jory’s hand. “I’d rather be a Mormont.”

“Me, too.”

Tansy lightened the mood by making the three of us stand at attention in a row while she checked our hair and our Mormont uniforms. We each wore our sword across our back, all in the same fashion. Then Tansy led the way to the castle’s Great Hall, the rest of us following in single file.

Not all of the people could fit inside, so each house or group had its representatives within the Great Hall while the rest waited in the castle courtyard. Maege and Alysane had taken places with the high lords near the chair in which Sansa would sit. Tansy stood with Myranda Royce and Ser Davos directly behind it. The other lords, including the Vale lords and Tormund Giantsbane, made an arc around the chair. Tormund appeared to have bathed and found clean clothing.

The three of us stood with seven other Mormont soldiers, two women and five men. All of us dressed alike, though the men wore their swords at their belts. We had been placed as far from the Vale troops as possible, with Glovers and Reeds and Winterfell men and women between us.

The ceremony consisted of Howland Reed and Yohn Royce droning on about a lord’s responsibilities, and Sansa repeating their words. Each of the Northern lords, including Ser Davos, laid their sword before Sansa who formally handed it back to them. I let my mind wander through the thoughts of those assembled, making sure everyone was as bored as I and that no one plotted mischief. In a true adventure story I suppose someone would have tried to knife Sansa during the ceremony, but no such excitement took place. I monitored the Vale men as best I could, but while many looked for me at the front of the assembly none thought to seek me among the Mormont soldiery.

Afterwards, we all exited into the courtyard, where wooden tables had been set up and filled with food and drink. Fires had been built in metal fixtures called “braziers” between each row of tables, and straw had been spread over the ground to make the mud-and-horseshit mix somewhat less disgusting to step upon. We joined the rest of the Mormont troops at a set of tables as far from the Vale people as could be arranged. I had met most of our companions during the march northward, but had not spoken with them at any length.

It turned out that I was very popular with them; they appreciated my defeat of Lyn Corbray, from which many had profited by placing wagers on the outcome. Many also guessed that I had protected Jory in the fight underground. They admired the Mormont sisters, and greatly approved my adoption. They now wondered whether Sansa would be acclaimed Queen in the North. Mostly, though, they hoped that this ceremony marked the end of their service and thus meant that they could return to their island.

I had not shared such a meal in hundreds of years, since my days as a lowly subaltern in Helium’s navy. A princess could not mix with commoners on such a level. I found that I had missed out on a great deal thanks to my privilege, as I thoroughly enjoyed our fellowship. They respected me as a fellow fighter, not because of my royal status, and had a great deal of pride in me. Only a few imagined me naked. I could feel my self-esteem rising.

Tansy came and joined us as the meal’s end neared and musicians began to play. She cautioned us to remain with all of the Mormont soldiers until the Vale men had returned to their camps. Ser Davos appeared soon afterwards, and thanked the soldiers for helping make the day possible.
I headed back to the large round tower with Ser Davos and my sisters, filled with warm feelings of sisterhood, appreciation and wine. And then these quickly evaporated as I detected thoughts ahead. Lord Glover awaited us at the huge doors leading into the Great Keep, accompanied by six of his Glover soldiers. I would have known him to be extremely angry without the aid of telepathy.


“Yes, milord?”

“Where did you come by it?”

Lord Glover’s hand slowly began to draw his own sword. I decided to end this quickly and stepped close to him. I took his wrist in my hand and pushed his blade back into its scabbard, letting him feel my greater strength. I pressed against him and spoke in a harsh whisper.

“Davos Seaworth is my friend. If you wish trouble with him, you will have it with me as well. And you do not wish that.”

Lyra joined me, steadily meeting the eyes of the Glover soldiers one by one. “My sister does not stand alone.” Attracted by the disruption, several Mormont soldiers lined up at our backs. Jory slowly pulled Tansy behind them.

Lord Glover considered taunting Ser Davos for hiding behind women, realized that this would likely cost him his life and those of his men, and explained instead.

“He carries my brother’s sword.”

“Which I purchased for him in Duskendale,” I said, still whispering. “From a shopkeeper who found it in a stream. If your brother valued his sword, perhaps he should not have cast it aside so casually.”

Galbart Glover feared me, but also realized himself in the wrong. Most other lords of this land would have insisted on their position even more strongly, even knowing themselves likely to die. Lord Glover raised both of his hands and stepped back.

“My apologies to you, Ser Davos, and to you, Princess. I was out of line. I have had no word of my brother for a very long time and leapt to unwarranted conclusions.”

He turned to leave, his soldiers greatly relieved. They had seen my adoptive sister and I fight, and they not only feared us but admired us greatly. They did not wish to oppose any Mormont. This relieved me as well; I had already started one blood feud within the walls of Winterfell. I had not done such things on Barsoom, but here I seemed eager for confrontation.

“That would be Robett Glover, milord?” Ser Davos asked.

“Aye,” said Galbart Glover, turning back towards us.

“You do not know?”

“Know what?”

“He’s with Lord Manderly in White Harbor, in hiding from the Freys and Boltons. He aided me on my return from the South.”

“My brother lives?”

“He did six weeks ago.”
“Ah, that is wondrous news indeed. He never asked for his sword back?”

“I never draw it if it can’t be helped. It was packed away for my entire time there.”

I had not purchased a fine sword for Ser Davos just for him to leave it packed away, but this did not seem the proper time to scold him in front of others.

On the next morning the Vale men broke their camp and began their march to the southeast toward White Harbor, where Robett Glover had been hidden. There they would board ships for their homeland. Sansa held a luncheon for their leading lords to thank them for their support; Lyra and I remained in our chambers with Tansy and Jory. Jory and I made playing cards from small pieces of thin flat wood, and once the paint on them had dried I taught my sisters John Carter’s favorite game, called “poker.” It took several days before the last of the Vale army departed, and then our exile ended.

Sansa held a luncheon for all of the Mormonts, myself and Tansy included, the day after the last Vale soldier marched out of sight. I wondered if allowing them to leave had been a mistake, with the army of the dead on the march. Despite the blood feud, we would probably have a need for 12,000 armed, experienced and most importantly living men soon.

With Sansa officially installed as Lady of Winterfell and the Vale troops departed, she directed her servants to prepare the underground crypts to receive her father’s and her sister’s bones. She asked Tansy to accompany her, along with a priest of her faith, known as a “septon,” Jeyne Poole and Howland Reed.

I waited in the castle’s solar along with Randa and Lyra.

“It is always a private ritual?” I asked.

“I truly don’t know,” Randa answered. “In the Vale, and I had always supposed everywhere in Westeros, a funeral draws a large crowd. Prayers are said, and any friends or family wishing to speak say a few words about the departed. Then they lower them into the ground. But the North is different in many ways.”

“We burn our dead on Bear Island,” Lyra said. “And then place the ashes in small containers, and put those in a crypt under Mormont Keep.”

After a short while our friends returned. Sansa silently hugged each of us, and then we made to leave.

“Could you stay, Princess?” she asked me.

“I am Dejah to my friends.”

“Please stay, Dejah.”

She led me to a comfortable chair near the fire, and took another next to it, with a small table between us. A servant soon brought us tea and small cakes flavored with a tart yellow fruit.

“I’m so sorry to have spent so little time with you,” she began. “You did so much for me, and I ignored you in return.”

“I am glad to have helped you,” I said. “I did not intend to start a blood feud, but I could not back away from it once it began.”
“I think I understand,” she said. “A woman can’t back down without appearing helpless.”

I liked Sansa, and so I decided to tell her the truth.

“Lord Reed believes that I have some destiny in the North, to do battle with the Night’s King. I do not know that I believe him, but I feel far more aggressive than is usually true. I am actually a gentle person when I am at home.”

“I’m glad you were here, and aggressive, when Littlefinger appeared.”

“I was pleased to help.”

“Thank you. And the fresh bloodstains in the crypts?”

“Six Ninestar warriors wished to kill me and rape my little sister. So I killed them.”

She shook her head, and smiled at me.

“When I left Winterfell that would have horrified me. Now I’m only relieved that you hid the remains from Lord Royce. And I don’t want to know where.”

“It is not easy to rule. And very lonely.”

“Everyone wishes to give me advice,” Sansa said, stirring her tea. “Usually the advice results in some favor for their family or some favorite project. But you have not done so.”

“It is not my place,” I said. “And these are not my lands.”

She smiled again.

“You deflected that well, Princess. Randa thinks you’re much more perceptive than you wish for others to believe. You appear of an age with us, with somewhat more years than I but no older than Tansy. But you are, aren’t you?”

“Considerably.”

“You’re my aunt’s sister. I trust you. What would you have me do?”

“Regarding what?”

“Whatever you consider important.”

I pondered this; her thoughts said she sought political guidance.

“You are my sister’s niece,” I said. “Which makes you mine as well, under your laws?”

“I think so. I hope so.”

“I am actually a princess. I know many doubt this, but it is true. My husband, however, is not a prince. He will never rule my city; I shall do so in my own right. His title is and will remain ‘consort’ even when I am Queen.”

“We don’t have anything like that in our laws.”

“When you are Queen, you will make the laws, will you not?”

“It’s one thing to make them. Another to expect men to follow them. Or women, for that matter.”
“Declare yourself Queen. Marry as you will. Make your husband your own consort. Do not allow him the title of king, and have him swear oaths setting aside any right to rule before your Northern lords and your tree-god.”

“I keep the Seven.”

“He can swear to them as well.”

She nodded, liking the idea.

“You have someone in mind?” I asked.

“No. And perhaps I never will. But I would like to be able to fall in love, or marry, if the opportunity arose without worrying that he only wanted a crown.”

She paused, pouring us each more tea and pushing the little pot of insect vomit known as “honey” toward me.

“What else would you suggest that I do?”

“You obviously wish to be Queen. Once crowned, do not forget that you are the Queen. Continue to surround yourself with good people, and listen to them, but remember that you are the one who must decide, and bear responsibility for that decision. Always remember that what is done in your name, is done by you.”

“You were taught to fill this role.”

“I was.”

“You could take my place, my throne, if you wished it.”

“Possibly. But I do not wish it.”

She nodded, mostly but not completely believing me.

“What is your wish?”

“I no longer know. I do not think John Carter is here, in Westeros, but I would very much like to remain a Mormont sister. I miss my home, but I will not leave Tansy, or Lyra and Jory.”

“I’m not used to meeting princesses who don’t care about power.”

“My city wields vast power; our fleets and armies would overrun all of Westeros very easily. Over 100,000 full-time soldiers, and many times that number who could be called to our banners for war. All of them better fighters than I, armed with terrible weapons unknown in these lands. Once I cared about that power very much. Now I find myself changing.”

“You never were a girl, were you?”

“My parents tried to shield me from the demands of my position, but they could only do so for a brief while. I would not say ‘never,’ but I would have liked more time with friends, with other young women.”

“With sisters.”

“Yes. I seem to be experiencing a phase of life I never had.”
She nodded, imagining I had missed much of my childhood due to the demands of a royal upbringing, not knowing that we of Barsoom are children for a much shorter time than her own branch of humanity.

“It seems we trade places.”

I sipped my tea, imitating Sansa. She still had not gotten to her point, which I could not discern in her thoughts.

“You wish something of me.”

She started, unused to direct speech.

“Randa said you were blunt,” she said, then caught herself. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to offend.”

“I am not offended, nor do I wish to give offense. It is the way of my lands.”

“Then I will try to do so as well. Tansy is all the family I have left. She’ll follow wherever you choose to go. I would ask that you remain here, at least as long as you can.”

“Does she know that you ask this?”

“No. Will you tell her?”

“She is my sister. I will not lie to her. But she is very fond of you, and I do not believe she wishes to leave.”

“I know she became attached to Arya. I don’t wish to cause her fresh distress. I only ask that you two remain for a short while.”

“I suspect that that is her wish, but we have not discussed it.”

We exchanged pleasantries for some time after, but the core of our discussion had finished. Sansa had tried to manipulate me and failed, but I had gained in her esteem: presented with an opportunity to gain favor, I had deflected it. She told herself that I could be trusted, which relieved her greatly. She trusted few people.

I wished that I could share with her the knowledge I had gained through telepathy: she had already surrounded herself with very good people. Randa, Ser Davos and the Lords Reed, Glover and Mormont all wished her well and could be thoroughly trusted. Yet I also saw that I had been wise to keep my abilities secret; in a land without telepathy, I could give whatever faction I chose to support a decisive political edge, thereby becoming part of their game.

I had no wish to play their game of thrones. I would defend my sisters, and others of House Mormont. And I would help avenge the sister I had never met. But beyond protecting those I loved, I would not use my fighting skills or telepathy for something as fleeting and meaningless as political advantage.

With the Vale army gone, my sisters and I had freer rein to wander, yet I took seriously Tormund Giantsbane’s warning of the approach of the not-dead army. I awaited their arrival, and that of this Night’s King, with something like anticipation. I feared this monster, but I feared even more deeply for my new family. Jory desperately wanted to ride outside the walls of Winterfell, but I told her she must not. She argued, I became upset, and soon she was re-assuring me that she would not leave the castle if it distanced me so.
Near Winterfell lay a town called, in keeping with the creativity shown throughout this land, Winter Town. Some of Howland Reed’s men had been quartered there, and in the early evening hours one of his warriors rode up to the gates of Winterfell to report that strange not-dead creatures had attacked a number of people there.

The short swamp warrior entered the castle solar where I had been sharing some wine with Sansa Stark, Howland Reed and Maege Mormont – true to her word, Sansa had begun to consult me more often for advice on princess behavior. I remembered the man from our ride north; he had escorted Lyra and I to the hilltop overlooking Ramsay Snow’s army. He had struck me then as sober and reliable, but his thoughts now displayed a deep terror of what he’d seen.

“They were dead, milord,” he told Howland Reed. “Flesh falling off their bones, skulls showing through strips of waving skin. Horrible creatures. Blows from swords and other weapons could break them up, but not stop them. They burn easily. Touch them with fire and they light up like lamp oil.”

“It is as Tormund said,” I offered. Lord Reed nodded his head.

“I had hoped we might have more warning.”

“What does this mean for Winterfell?” Sansa asked.

“Grave danger,” he answered. “I do not believe that the White Walkers can raise the dead, or control them, all the way from the Wall. If the dead are out there, so are the Others, and possibly the Night’s King as well.

“But everything I have just said is supposition. We know next to nothing about them.”

“Tormund said that dragon glass and Valyrian steel can kill them, either the Walkers or the dead,” Sansa said. “We have daggers and arrow points of dragonglass, as the Night’s Watch asked us to prepare before we ceased to receive word from the Wall.”

“That is good,” Lord Reed said.

“What do you suggest?” Sansa asked, as Davos entered the room and sat next to me. I handed him a metal goblet and he poured himself wine. Sansa had learned a principle long followed in Helium: when matters of state are discussed, no servants are present.

“Protecting Winterfell is paramount,” said the Onion Knight. “And your person as well, milady. We can’t risk the garrison.”

Howland Reed nodded.

“Knights and soldiers are of no use, my lady,” the swamp lord told Sansa. “Anyone not armed with a Valyrian steel blade or dragonglass will simply add their own corpse to the army of the dead.”

“And what about Winter Town? I have a responsibility to protect my people.”

“This could easily be a diversion, my lady. Keep the troops here to defend Winterfell. Alert your guard and issue the dragonglass weapons. Prepare torches in case the dead attack here as well.”

“I will not leave my people to the Others,” Sansa said. “And certainly not have them join the army of the dead.”

“The princess wields a Valyrian steel blade.” Howland Reed looked at me, and prompted me in his
thoughts.

“I will protect the people of Winter Town,” I said. And I repaid his favor. “Howland Reed will accompany me.”

“Thank you. Please make it so.”

The two of us left the solar along with Maege, and headed back to my quarters.

“I would have come with you anyway. You know that.”

“Yes. But you surprised me. I thought I was supposed to fight the Night’s King.”

“I have seen you fighting the Others, also. The Others would slaughter the Winterfell guards out in the open. Even behind the walls here Sansa’s people are none too secure.”

“We have four more daggers of this special steel in our saddlebags. We took them from Queen Cersei. And I have the sword I took from the vile Corbray. I will give a blade to you.”

“And to me as well,” said Maege. “I’m coming with you.”

“I would like that.”

As we turned a corner, we saw Lyra and Alysane headed toward us.

“Where are you rushing off to?” Alysane asked.

“We’re going to kill the Others,” Maege answered. “Join us.”

We reached our quarters, where Tansy was reading a book, one of the few that had survived the burning of Winterfell. I had never seen this side of my sister. As I rummaged through our belongings looking for our daggers, I told her of Sansa Stark’s appeal.

“I’m coming with you.”

“Of course you are. I will not leave you here alone.”

I gave the sword to Howland Reed; he held it appreciatively before checking its balance. He was obviously an experienced swordsman and recalled a bitter fight against a group of knights in white. I handed a dagger to each of the Mormont women and another to Tansy.

“Do you have a plan?”

From my talks with Tormund Giantsbane I knew that the Others usually appeared in very small groups, and I thought we could overwhelm them.

“Yes. These blades are of a special steel that will kill the Others. We five will remain together in a group to concentrate our force. We will locate and destroy any Others that are spotted. Together. Do not split up to fight alone. We do not wish to fend them off. We are going to the Winter Town to kill them.”

I looked at the Mormont sisters.

“Tansy has no instinct for battle. Do not lose track of her.”

They nodded. I continued.
“Do not become drawn into a lengthy fight, any of you. If you have any trouble, call me and let me kill the Others. This is about survival, not honor.”

“You make us sound like men,” Lyra said. “No offense meant, Lord Reed.”

He had heard her, but pretended to be absorbed in examining his new sword.

“If we’re ready,” he said. “We should ride.”

We quickly headed to the courtyard, where our horses had been saddled, and mounted up to ride to the Winter Town. Jory Mormont held the reins of my mare and her own mount. She looked at me, eager to join us; I nodded to her and she swung easily into her saddle.

“Stay by Tansy’s side,” I told her. “No bravery allowed.”

“No problem. I have none.”

The swamp warrior who had raised the alarm led us to where the Others had been seen. The ride took only a few minutes. We pulled up where the swamp warrior indicated; a cluster of warriors stood waiting and Howland Reed called out six men by name who took up torches. I told Tansy and Jory to stay very close.

Chaos ruled the small wooden town. I scanned for enemy thoughts and found something unusual. It had a mental taste I had encountered before on Barsoom, in the horrific synthetic hormads created by Ras Thavas: like an intelligent being, but not quite the same. These were likewise artificial creatures. I led our battle group toward their thoughts, such as they were. I could not read them clearly, only their broad intentions. They had directed a number of their enslaved dead people to attack and kill townspeople, but they themselves remained at the edge of the forest. Tormund had been correct; they were not a valiant people, these Others.

When they remained still they were almost invisible to one’s eyes. They were the color of ice, and while I had heard them described as white this was only sometimes true—they could alter their appearance to allow light to pass through them. But they could not hide their thoughts, nor could they sense our approach until we were very close. When I was very sure that these two were alone, Howland Reed and I attacked while the others watched for their dead servants.

The Other I faced carried a long, narrow blade that looked to be made of ice. He, for it appeared to be male, wore what seemed to be close-fitting leather armor, also shimmering like ice. His fluid movements were difficult to track, and I could sense no usable thoughts to give a hint as to his intentions. He only broadcast a desire to kill me. I knew that this could be a very dangerous opponent.

I saw his right hand with blade extended move toward my breast, and blocked it with a strong upward cut. My sword struck his blade and made a sharp keening sound. I sensed fear; he now knew that I had a weapon that could kill him. He hesitated, and I struck at his wrist, forcing him to drop the icy blade. It began to bubble and turn into heavy mist when it hit the ground. He turned to flee in his odd gliding motion, and I slashed him across his back. He fell to his knees, let out a piercing shriek, and dissolved into a bluish liquid that quickly bubbled away into steam. I leapt backward to avoid breathing it in.

I turned to check on the swamp lord in time to see him bury the point of his new sword in the chest of his opponent. The creature gave a similar shriek and likewise turned into blue goo, followed by foul steam. I found the method of their demise deeply disappointing; I very much wanted to dissect
one of these strange creatures.

With the death of their masters, the dead seemed to lose direction and began to stagger about in seemingly random patterns. The torch-wielding swamp warriors rushed to set them alight. Most of these walking dead seemed to wear the livery of Stannis’ slaughtered army.

We returned to our friends. Lyra and Alysane flanked Tansy and Jory, while Maege stood in front of them with her mace in one hand and dagger in the other. She had had no cause to use either.

“That was much too easy,” she said.

We all said it together.

“Winterfell.”

Chapter End Notes

This is our penultimate chapter! In the Martin tradition, the fiery climax will be followed by a preview chapter from a sequel that may or may not ever be completed.
Chapter Twenty-Five

When we rode through Winterfell’s gates again, the castle had fallen into panicked disorder. Men and women ran about shouting, but I could gather little from their thoughts. Tormund Giantsbane stood in the middle of the castle courtyard, rallying his own fighters and the Winterfell guard with his mighty voice, sending them to cover both the gates and walls against immediate attack.

“What happened here?” Lord Reed asked him.

“I don’t know,” he said, his exaggerated accent and gestures gone. “Something has happened to the Red Wolf. I thought it best to see to the walls.”

“You had the right of it,” Howland Reed told him. “Carry on.” Tormund nodded and we plunged through the milling crowd while Jory and Alysane gathered up our horses.

I entered the Great Hall with Howland Reed, Maege, Lyra and Tansy. Confusion reigned here as well. Myranda Royce sat on the edge of the high table with a vacant expression. Her thoughts exuded only shock.

“Randa, where is Sansa?” Tansy asked. The girl stared at her and said nothing.

“Randa. We need to know. Where is Sansa?”

“Snow. He took her.”

“Ramsay Snow? I killed him and punted his head. Did he rise without it?”

“No. I mean, I don’t know. It wasn’t Ramsay Snow. It was Jon Snow. The Night’s King.”

Tansy sat beside her and put her arm around her shoulders.

“Randa. Tell us everything that happened, from when we left Winterfell.”

“Sansa came here to the Great Hall to hear reports from her guard commander and make sure everyone had the dragonglass weapons.

“Tormund, Davos and Mollen walked the walls. The soldiers doubled up on the gates. Nothing happened. Every now and then a soldier would come in and report that nothing had been seen. We began to relax a little.

“Then the big heavy doors blew inward,” she gestured toward their thick gray wood. “And in came Jon Snow. I recognized him from Sansa’s description. But he wasn’t Jon Snow any more. His skin was gray and he wore white armor. His eyes were bright blue like they say the dead have when they rise.”
“The Night’s King,” Howland Reed said.

“I believe it,” Randa said. “He had power. You could feel his power.”

“What happened to Sansa?”

“She stood from her chair like she had no will of her own. I ran to her but the Night’s King reached out his hand and I fell. Jeyne put herself between them and he simply stared at her. She fell to the floor as though she were dead.

“Jon Snow placed one hand on Sansa’s shoulder and the other on the side of her face, and he kissed her. Very gently, like a lover. Then he placed a hand right over her heart. She began to shudder and a gray color spread over her skin starting from there.

“She didn’t say a word. She took his arm and they walked right back out the doors. I tried to run after her, to stop her, but it was as if I couldn’t move. No one else could move either. We were frozen in place.”

Howland Reed sighed heavily. Behind the table, I saw Lyra pull Jeyne to her feet; she still lived but her thoughts revealed only confusion.

“She’s gone. He’s taken her as his Night’s Queen.”

“She is dead?”

“Worse, probably.”

I turned back to Myranda Royce.

“Did you see where they went?”

“Ser Davos said the guards at the gates had been frozen just as we were. The guards believed they went north, up the Kingsroad, on foot.”

“He did not kill the guards?”

“No. Nor anyone else.”

“He wants us to pursue him,” the swamp lord mused. He looked at me.

“We pursue,” I said.

“Agreed.”

We walked back out into the courtyard, where Howland Reed began to issue orders to collect fresh horses and load food, furs and dry firewood into a sledge. We would take a very small group: myself, Howland Reed, Maege Mormont and Tansy. Tormund slammed a giant hand onto my shoulder without a word before he stalked off to patrol the walls. Ryk, his son by law, hesitated before following.

“Give me your knife,” he said. I pulled Brienne’s working knife from the sheath strapped to my thigh and handed it over. He gave me an obsidian dagger, which I slid into its place.

“In case the steel doesn’t work.”

“You have another?”
He opened his cloak, revealing a row of at least eight such daggers strapped to his abdomen, nodded to me and loped off after Tormund.

Davos and Mollen had their garrison ready to meet the Others, but I would not leave my sister in Winterfell; I trusted my adoptive sisters but Tansy would stay where I could protect her myself. I had felt very comfortable fighting alongside Lyra, but Maege insisted that she would come herself on this dangerous journey.

“I can’t risk all of my daughters,” she said. “You know what you have to do to protect them.”

I did. My three new sisters formed a line as Jory took my hands in hers.

“I’m glad I have two more sisters,” she said. “Take care of yourselves.”

I pulled her close and kissed the top of her head. Alysane firmly placed one hand in the middle of my back, pulled my head down with the other and touched her forehead to mine. She said nothing, but I understood her thoughts: I now carried the responsibility to defend all of the North’s people implicit in the Mormont family’s oaths. She trusted me to fulfill them, a duty she placed above her own life. I nodded my understanding; she returned the gesture and smiled.

Lyra embraced me tightly as I climbed into the sledge.

“Fight like a Mormont,” she said softly into my ear. “And come back.”

“I will,” I whispered into hers. “I will do both. Keep our little sister safe.”

“I love you,” she murmured, and kissed the sensitive spot under my earlobe. As nervous as I was to set out after this strange Night’s King, it thrilled me to hear those words and feel her lips on my flesh.

“And I you.”

The Mormonts watched us climb into the sledge, a sturdy vehicle mounted on rails rather than wheels so that it could glide over the top of the ice and snow, and they waved until the castle’s open gate fell out of sight. Two strong and agreeable Winterfell horses pulled the sledge, with two more trailing behind for when they tired. As much as I wished to have my own horses along, I knew they were not used to the snow and might tire too quickly.

“You’ll see her again,” Tansy said quietly. I nodded, and smiled at my sister. She gave me her hand and I held it.

I rode silently in the sledge, playing with Tansy’s hand and absorbed in my own thoughts. I seemed more troubled that I would now never get to wear my pretty new purple gown and participate in the dining and dancing rituals than I was upset by the living death of Sansa Stark, who had been so kind and so welcoming, or concerned for my sister, who had once again met and lost a loving niece. I had started to feel comfortable with these women; they had become my friends and I wanted to experience with them the things they enjoyed. Part of me knew that those feelings were just the mind’s way of avoiding a harsher reality, by substituting something smaller and easier to grasp. I felt ashamed and very small all the same.

Jon Snow and his captive had headed to the Kingsroad and then turned north. The horses knew the way and pushed ahead enthusiastically; they could not sense the not-dead creatures, though I could. The Others remained well away from the road, but seemed to be watching us. Jon Snow remained a constant distance ahead of us. How he kept pace with the horses and sledge, I could not explain. When I faced him later his feet sank into the snow like a living person’s.
We spoke little as the trees glided past, endlessly the same: long green needles frosted by snow. I thought about Alysane’s charge, to defend not only Tansy, not only my adoptive family, but all those in the North as the Mormonts had sworn. I lay on my back amid the furs, looking upward at the night sky with Tansy’s head on my shoulder as she slept.

I had come to love Maege, Jory and especially Lyra, but had spent much less time with Alysane. Yet now she dominated my thoughts. She took up her responsibilities with the utmost seriousness, and expected the same of me. I had been trained as a princess of Helium, and implicitly understood her meaning. While I would die to defend Tansy, or Lyra, or Jory, she had asked me to do the same for all of the people of the North.

In the sky above, I finally saw it: the red planet. What would happen if I held my sister tightly, raised my hands to the shining red jewel and wished to be there?

I snuggled more closely alongside Tansy, and went to sleep.

For days we tracked Jon Snow and his captive along the Kingsroad. The sun did not show itself; the skies remained overcast and very gray. The Others stayed within sight but did not approach; whether they feared our blades or wished us to continue, I do not know. We drove as fast as the horses would allow, but even with a spare team we had to stop and let them rest. We would build a fire with some of our dry wood and warm ourselves beside it, yet the Others kept away, watching but not attacking or even approaching.

No matter how quickly we pursued, Jon Stark and his Night’s Queen remained a short distance ahead. We spotted them on occasion, gliding eerily over the snow, but could pull no closer. Our enemies sought to draw us forward; Howland Reed believed they wanted us to reach the Wall. He offered a few possible reasons, none of which made a great deal of sense to me. I had come here to kill Jon Snow, and if that meant doing so on ground of his choosing, I did not see the difference.

Howland Reed also confirmed many of the tales passed to me by Tormund Giantsbane. The Night’s King was an ancient evil being, now somehow restored to this world in the person of Jon Snow. Whether Jon Snow served the Others, or the Others served Jon Snow, was also unclear. All the swamp lord could tell me for sure was that it had become my destiny to kill the Night’s King. He had killed my friend Sansa and somehow enslaved her spirit. That was enough to set me to kill him, yet even worse was the horrifying image of his hand on the breast of Lyra or Tansy, their skin turning gray and eyes bright blue. I would not allow such a thing to happen.

In my mind, I replayed my discussions with Tormund. Jon Snow had been a highly-trained swordsman in life, but Tormund believed him prey to his own emotions in battle. Would that still hold true now that he had died and risen? Tormund insisted that he had been a gentle person prior to his death, obsessed with notions of honor. All of that had disappeared when he became the Night’s King, yet apparently he had retained the memories of Jon Snow, calling out his victims by name.

On Barsoom I had suffered possession of my body by ancient evil beings; I shuddered at the recollection. Perhaps Jon Snow could be freed from the spirit of the Night’s King, but that was not my intention. I was not travelling rapidly northward to rescue Jon Snow. I had come to kill him.

I was sleeping in the bottom of the sledge under a thick pile of furs when my friends spotted the Wall. By the time they woke me it was fully visible; a majestic sight, stretching all across the horizon well over the tops of the trees. The Others had formed a cordon across the road and we had stopped to confront them. Behind them I could see the countless armies of the dead, rank upon rank, shuffling slightly but not moving forward.
I climbed out of the sledge and stretched my arms and legs; the Others and their not-dead minions made no move to advance. The snow came up to about halfway between my ankles and my knees. My friends suffered in the cold, but it bothered me very little – Barsoom experiences great extremes of both heat and cold, and we native peoples are adapted to them. I wore my fighting harness and soft leather leggings, with high hob-nailed boots pulled over them. I had a cloak lined with the fur of a bear, but shrugged it off and handed it to Tansy, who gave me my armored gauntlets in exchange. I pulled them on over Brienne’s armored gloves; the cloth portion of the gloves came nearly to my elbows and kept the cold metal of the gauntlets from touching my skin.

The ranks of the not-dead parted to allow two figures to pass through them, and when Jon Snow and Sansa Stark emerged from the line of Others, the odd creatures fell back. The Night’s King looked more like a man than he resembled one of the Others. He had dark hair and a long face, which did look dead to me. He wore close-fitting white armor very much like that of the Others, but seemed to move easily in it. He appeared solid, without the translucent quality of his minions. Or maybe they were his masters; I was not sure. He carried a normal sword – not one of the icy blades wielded by the Others – already drawn in his right hand but he had no shield.

Next to him stood Sansa Stark, now the Night’s Queen. She also wore the odd white armor; she still looked a great deal like Tansy. She was also obviously dead, with pale gray skin and those bright blue eyes of the Others and their servants. She retained her red hair. Unlike her mate, she carried one of the tapered icy blades of the not-dead.

They approached us side-by-side, no longer gliding atop the snow but sinking into it as we did. Hundreds of Others accompanied them, but held their positions far back of their leader. There were easily enough Others to overwhelm us by sheer numbers, even with our Valyrian steel blades and fighting skills. Yet it appeared that they would watch while their champion fought. Perhaps they had prophecies of their own to fulfill.

I watched the pair of them carefully, but saw none of the lurching movements of the not-dead creatures we had encountered in the Winter Town, nor did they now glide like the Others. They both moved like the living. Except that they were dead. Unlike the thoughts of the Others, I could read those of Jon Snow and Sansa Stark as those of the living. They seemed very angry.

Tansy held one of the special steel daggers we had taken from Cersei; I told her to stay close behind me and watch my back. I would fight both of these creatures at once but did not trust them not to send Others to flank me. Howland Reed and Maege Mormont remained farther back. Somehow I knew that I could bring no other companions. The fate of this world would be decided in single combat, or something close to it.

The Night’s King stopped a short distance from us. I drew my sword.

“You are far from home, Dejah Thoris,” he said in a low voice; I noted that he only breathed in order to speak. “This is not your fight, Daughter of the Red Star. Leave and take your sister and I will not harm you. I know you have no wish to be here.”

I pulled a thought from his mind.

“You know nothing, Jon Snow.”

He started, then resumed.

“I know you only want to find John Carter. I can reunite you with him. Let my love slide her blade through your heart. It will only hurt a moment, and then you will be one of us. And you will be with John Carter.”
“John Carter is not dead.”

“And you know nothing, Dejah Thoris.”

He moved forward quickly, now using a gliding step that hid his speed. I met his strike and we traded blows before backing up. He was enormously strong, maybe even stronger than I, and very fast. And I realized that he wielded a Valyrian steel blade, just as I did.

When he attacked again, the Night’s Queen moved forward at his side. She was not nearly as fast, and I parried her attack easily. But she needed no skill to skewer me with that icy blade if her mate kept me occupied too long. She seemed to realize this as well and hung back, watching for her opening. We separated again.

“You swore an oath, Jon Snow. You swore to protect these lands and people.”

I twirled my sword and snarled, the way of our women in battle. I should have feared him, yet I found myself almost eager to cross blades with this strange creature. For some weeks I had felt myself growing ever more aggressive, and now it seemed to have found its ultimate outlet.

“That oath ended when I died. The Night’s Watch murdered me. I repaid them in kind and they serve me once again. As you shall when Sansa kills you.”

“Arya died because of you two,” Sansa said, her voice likewise pitched low. She had been very nice to me while she lived. That seemed to have changed with her death. “I’ll kill your whore, my so-called aunt, and make you watch, Dejah Thoris. You killed my mother and never told me, you lying bitch. I’ll kill my mother’s bastard sister as slowly and painfully as I can. And then you will both serve me and my king.”

“So he is your king now?”

“Death brought us together. But it will separate you from your lover. Both of your lovers. You will suffer as you made me suffer.”

Somehow death had given them information they had not had in life. I briefly wondered how this could be, but shrugged instead. This was not the time to consider such. Had they been this melodramatic in life? I no longer blamed the Night’s Watch for killing Jon Snow.

It seemed important to the Night’s King that Sansa be the one to stab us with the ice-blade; it must carry some important power to transform its victims that his sword of steel, even Valyrian steel, did not. I concentrated on their thoughts, and was ready when they both sprang at me together. I fended them off but the power behind Jon Snow’s blade sent vibrations all the way up to my shoulders. I decided to taunt them.

“Your mother was already dead when I killed her,” I told Sansa. “She had become a monster, much like you.”

I paused, as though the next thought had suddenly come upon me.

“No, that is not correct. You are far worse than she. Your stupidity killed your father when he only tried to protect you. Arya, your younger brothers, your friend Beth – they all died because of you.”

Even dead, Sansa reacted with shock. In life, only Cersei had ever spoken to her in such a manner. I next turned to her King.

“I thought the Night’s Watch took no wives. Can the dead still fuck?”
He did not expect me to say “fuck.” I pressed an attack while his Queen remained confused. I normally do not taunt my opponents; one should fight when it is time to fight and speak when it is time to speak. But the Night’s King was so powerful, and yet seemed so vulnerable to distraction, that I used the thoughts I gleaned from him to voice his own doubts.

“All this time you wanted her for your own. Your own sister! But you were never good enough for her. Not until you were dead. And now you cannot make your tiny, dead organ harden for her. You were not a man while you lived and you are less of one now.”

He screamed in frustration and struck harder but without discipline. I forced him back and kept after him, but Tansy had not kept pace. The Night’s Queen darted into the opening that had appeared between us.

I probably should have overruled Maege and brought Lyra Mormont with me on this deadly errand, for Tansy had no skill or experience with a blade while my adoptive sister had both and more importantly a killer’s attitude in battle. But the Night’s Queen was no better. She and Tansy struggled to avoid one another’s weapon while I increased the speed of my attack on the Night’s King. The two women did look a great deal alike, except for one of them already being dead.

Fear that my sister could join her niece in death gave me added impetus, and when I knocked Jon Snow’s blade aside I spun forward inside his guard, drew Ryk Longspear’s obsidian dagger from its sheath on my thigh and rammed it into Jon Snow’s side. His flesh seemed extremely dense, but I pushed the dagger into him until the blade snapped. He fell to the ground, cursing me and roaring in pain.

That wound should have crippled or even killed a living man, but he slowly staggered to his feet. His thoughts showed immense, burning pain radiating from the piece of obsidian lodged in his flesh. He plunged his fingers into the wound and dug out the fragment of the dagger, then cast it to the ground. No blue goo oozed out of the wound; it did not appear to bleed at all. Yet he moved much more slowly than he had before, clearly injured. I could have finished him but had already turned back to Tansy; I knew she still lived but her thoughts broadcast that she was in grave danger. My sister came first, before every other being on this planet.

She had lost her dagger and the Night’s Queen now taunted her in turn, grasping a handful of her heavy cloak and tracing the ice-sword back and forth over Tansy’s heart. I gathered myself and leapt toward them, but hit a patch of ice and slipped on landing. I slid feet-first between them, slashing at the Night’s Queen’s right leg as I passed.

She dropped the ice-blade and fell to her knees; I had severed the leg just above the ankle and she could not stand. The amputated foot began to smolder while the blade bubbled into blue-gray fumes. I raced over to Sansa, and she looked up.

“I can’t go on like this. End me, before he takes control again.”

She placed her hands behind her neck and bent her shoulders back to expose her chest. She looked so much like Tansy had in my nightmare in Duskendale, just before the pirates came. I stabbed my sword downward between her willing breasts and pierced her heart. A terrible, inhuman scream erupted from her as the point entered her flesh, and the Night’s King joined in as he raced towards us.

“Nooooo! Sansa!”

I pulled my sword free. She also did not bleed. First smoke and then flames licked out of the hole the blade left between the Night’s Queen’s breasts, though I suppose it is possible that she was now
Sansa Stark again. And then she caught fire. Flames spread all along my sword’s blade, even brighter than they had when I killed her mother.

I faced the Night’s King as he charged, assuming a slight crouch and dragging my right hand across the top of the snow while I once again snarled. Jon Snow knew nothing of Barsoom and its ways, but recognized the challenge implicit in the gesture. Either his rage caused him to ignore his pain or he had remarkable healing powers; whatever the reason he threw himself at me with even greater strength than before, fueled by anger and despair over losing his love.

Apparently Jon Snow had wanted Sansa throughout his years living in the same home, but she had followed her mother’s lead and scorned him as a bastard. Once his father sent him to the Wall he continued to pine for her, stroking his undersized sex organ while imagining her naked and seeking sexual relief with a red-haired wildling woman who reminded him of Sansa. Even the dead on this planet suffer from unrequited love. Small wonder he was now so angry.

“You killed her, you foreign bitch. I’ll make you suffer as she did. I’ll make the other bitch suffer as she did.”

He balanced his lack of discipline with unnatural strength and speed, which now seemed much greater than mine. Only my extensive experience, and the aid of telepathy, had kept me untouched this long. He might not be able to make me into a not-dead creature with his steel blade, but he could most certainly make me – and my sister – into a dead one. Even seeing his moves ahead of time would not keep me alive forever. I had to distract him further.

“You killed her. I freed her. You saw how she wanted my sword, how she begged for it. She hated you for killing her and longed to escape. She hated you so deeply that she bared her heart to me, but never to you.”

That was entirely a guess built only on his vague feelings of guilt but the shot struck home; he grew even more enraged and redoubled his attack. He fought with powerful emotion, while I fought with none at all. My mind became totally clear, and I thought only of my own moves, of his moves, those he planned in his mind and those I would deploy to counter them.

John Carter speaks of the “song of battle,” and I finally understood. My flaming sword and I formed a single instrument, and I felt great power surge through me while my sword seemed to burn with even greater intensity. Jon Snow poured all of the rage of the Night’s King into his strikes, but I met them and forced him back. It was the finest sword-work I have ever known. I, modestly, do not think that John Carter would have exceeded me on that frozen day.

The dead do not tire, but neither did I. I do not know how long we continued until he gave me a brief opening. Whether it was a mistake or by design, I still am not sure. But his chest was exposed for a fraction of a second, and I rammed my flaming sword’s point into his heart with both hands and a fierce cry.

He dropped his sword. I shoved my blade through his body, and then pulled it free. It continued to flame, as Jon Snow stood and stared at the hole in his chest. He looked up at me.

“Thank you,” he whispered. And then he caught fire.

He burned to nothing almost immediately, and I raced back to where Tansy lay in a heap next to a similar pile of ashes. Her cloak and tunic had been shredded and she had a cut across her chest from her left shoulder to her right breast. It was not deep but it showed frost-bite all along its length. I fell to my knees and pulled her into my lap. She looked up and smiled at me. Her eyes were still the right kind of deep blue.
“I knew my sister would protect me.”

“You will live?”

“Don’t be so dramatic. Of course I’ll live, unless my tits freeze off. I just need a new cloak. They’re not so lucky.”

She nodded in the other direction and I looked behind me. The Others had begun to flee, and those closest to us appeared to explode into shards of blue ice. The demise of the Night’s King had somehow doomed them, yet they had done nothing to assist him and preserve themselves. It struck me as very odd, as did all things regarding the Others, but I did not object. As the Others exploded their not-dead minions simply collapsed to the snow, like puppets whose strings had been cut.

Howland Reed and Maege Mormont joined us while I watched.

“My sister says she will live. Is this true?”

I was desperate with worry. The swamp lord knelt by Tansy and peeled back her shredded cloak.

“A wound inflicted by the Others usually needs to actually kill you to, well, kill you. This is a bad cut and she will lose some flesh from the frostbite. She’ll have a scar to remember this day but she will live.”

“I won’t need a scar to remember this.”

They had brought our sledge, and Maege easily lifted Tansy to place her on it. She began to arrange furs around her, and I saw that Maege truly loved Tansy as a daughter.

“She will be fine. You have another task to fulfill.”

“I know,” I said, and somehow, I did.

The Wall looked so close, but it was a long walk for Howland Reed and I. I could see nearby Others still exploding, but those who put a little less than half of the measure known as a “mile” between us appeared to be safe. I wondered if I should chase them, but they were faster than I in the snow and the Wall called. I could not explain how, but I knew with certainty that I needed to reach the Wall. I collected Jon Snow’s sword as we passed the blackened ring of snow that was all that now remained of the Night’s King.

My own sword continued to burn brightly. I saw that I could melt a path for us through the snow by holding the flaming sword in front of me and fanning it slightly back and forth. Yet it did not seem to give off an uncomfortable level of heat. At least not to me.

“Does the sword’s heat disturb you?”

“No, I am fine, princess. Don’t worry.”

“Tell me of Jon Snow. Who was this man I just killed?”

“You only put him to rest. His sworn brothers killed him.”

“And he was . . .” I prompted. Howland Reed was a master of avoidance.

“A bastard, just as his father always claimed. His mother was a lady named Ashara, aunt to your friend Ned Dayne.”
“The Lord of the Fallen Star.”

“Yes.”

“Why all the talk of prophecy? Of the prince fathering him and his destiny to wield this sword or one like it,” I waved my flaming blade, “and save the world?”

“Jon’s father wanted more for his first-born son than a bastard’s life. He and I thought we might need to proclaim him king someday, if King Robert proved to be a drunken fool on the throne. So we left his parentage mysterious.”

“With no regard for the boy’s happiness,” I said.

“With no regard for the boy’s happiness,” Howland Reed repeated.

My dislike for the long-dead Eddard Stark grew yet again.

“You live in a cruel world, Howland Reed. Beautiful, but cruel.”

_Much like me_, I added silently.

“The world isn’t cruel. Only its people are.”

“As I understand, King Robert _was_ a drunken fool. Why did you not proclaim your candidate?”

“We should have. Have you never failed to do that which you knew was right?”

I remained silent. We had reached the Wall.

It loomed over us; I craned my neck back but could not see the top. Perhaps I have underestimated these people. We have nothing on Barsoom to compare with this.

I felt no foreign thoughts intruding on my mind, but the next step seemed obvious. I thrust my burning sword into the side of the Wall, as deep as I could, up to its hilt.

The Wall began to pulse in a regular rhythm, showing a reddish-orange light from somewhere deep within. With each pulse the light spread along its length in either direction. As the light spread, so did more Others begin to explode once again.

I withdrew my sword. It no longer burned. The pulses continued.

“Are you sure you should do that?”

“It is my sword.”

_Fin_
Clegane and I sat on a bench in front of Tobho Mott’s shop while the armorer and his assistants worked on our weapons, warning off the handful of would-be customers who tried to enter. Though Gendry fully trusted Mott, I did not; three Valyrian swords made a very tempting treasure, and so I kept close watch on the armorer’s thoughts. I detected no deception, only a deeply-felt awe for the sword he named Dark Sister. But I monitored him just the same.

After a time the Hound walked down the street and came back with some fresh brown bread, cheese and two large pitchers of a bright golden alcoholic drink he called “hard cider.” I liked the drink very much.

“You remember your first?” Clegane blurted out suddenly.

“First sex partner?”

“First you killed.”

He had been replaying yesterday’s fight in his mind; both my adoptive sister and I had gained enormous status with him. I understood this question to be a bonding ritual. He respected me on his terms - as a killer of men. I was not sure that I liked that, but I went along with his conversation.

“I was very young, serving in our city’s fleet. All members of the royal family, even princesses, must serve as common soldiers. You cannot lead until you know how to follow.”

He nodded, approving.

“We fought pirates, a black-skinned people who call themselves the First Born. Not a very dark brown like the Summer Islanders, but a truly black color.”

A well-dressed and fat man, likely a rich merchant, tried to enter Tobho Mott’s shop with his pimply-faced son in tow. Clegane glared at them; they turned and melted into the crowd. I saw them enter an armorer’s shop on the other side of the street.

“Their ship was smaller than ours, but faster, and made to escape. A lucky cannon shot – a powerful, long-range weapon your people do not know – damaged the ship and slowed it. Our captain brought us alongside and ordered a boarding party to take the pirate ship. Despite the tradition of exposing the royal family to combat, no officer wants to be responsible for losing a princess in her first battle,
so I was told to board last, and I did.”

Clegane imagined that I spoke of sailing ships as he created a picture of my story in his mind. I did not correct him.

“The First Born had warriors hidden below their deck, to try to board our ship once we had come aboard theirs. A female officer led them. She was a royal, like me: tall and beautiful and very deadly.”

“You knew her for a royal?”

“Not all women of my land are as tall or as beautiful as I. We are bred for it. Much like your people breed horses. There are no weak or ugly princesses.”

He nodded, silently appreciating my lack of the false modesty shown by beautiful women in these lands. Most would have scorned me for it. In his imagination, the First Born princess looked just like me, except for her jet-black skin. I started slightly; he was not far wrong except for her hair, which had been golden rather than black like mine. Her eyes had likewise been golden rather than my own dark red color. I resumed the tale.

“She challenged me – it is a ritual among our peoples. She raised her sword and pointed at me, to signify a desire for single combat. It is usually honored, but if you decide to break the tradition and just shoot them, in the heat of battle no one will know. So I drew my pistol to shoot her, but was so nervous that I dropped it overboard.”

“What’s a pistol?”

As with “cannon,” I had used John Carter’s word for the weapon, as these people had no knowledge of firearms.

“A hand weapon that sends out small metal projectiles at a very high speed, so fast they will puncture armor easily. Very deadly if they hit a human body.”

He nodded, impressed and wishing that he had a pistol of his own with which to shoot his monstrous brother. I shared his wish, gently rubbing my nose where the not-dead Gregor Clegane’s armored fist had broken it.

“If your enemy draws a sword, you fight her only with a sword. If she draws a pistol, you can fight her with a pistol. The one issuing the challenge decides.

“I had broken the code of honor and she was enraged, and determined to kill me. We fought with swords but she was so much better than I, that I soon had been bent back over some piece of equipment as her blade pressed toward my throat. I tried to force it back with my own sword but she was the stronger and I would soon die. I saw that she had a pistol holstered along her thigh, and I drew it with my left hand, pressed it against her side and fired it. She dropped her sword and fell to the deck, and I kicked her over the side before she could get up again. And before my shipmates could see that I had shot her.”

“So you fought dirty.”

“Yes, and I lived.”

“I never said it was a bad thing.”

“You have also killed many.”
“I enjoy it. Just like you do.”

I thought to contradict him, but I was still caught up in old memories. Ancient memories, by the lifespans of these people.

“I have never told anyone about that day. It has been a shameful memory.”

“So why now?”

I thought about his question; Clegane saw that I considered it seriously and held his tongue. For all of his crudity, he understood other people better than most. I watched a wagon trundle up the street’s slight slope, its driver madly cursing his horses, the crowd and the street itself.

“Perhaps divorcing John Carter changed me. He thought me perfect. Perhaps now I can admit that I am not.”

He snorted.

“Perfect? I guarded Cersei Lannister. I know what sort of rot and filth hides under beauty. You got her beat on the beauty part but you’ve a lot more rotting to do before you catch her. You just realized you’re not special, princess, and you don’t like being the same as everyone else.”

I sat quietly with my legs crossed beneath me and sipped my cider. The street remained crowded. I was not mollified to learn that Clegane thought me only somewhat rotten. Were my soul not diseased, perhaps then John Carter would have remembered me, remembered our love, and not transferred his love so easily to another.

“Have you ever loved anyone, Clegane?”

I do not know what made me suddenly ask the question. I regretted it immediately, but once spoken it could not be taken back.

“Aiming straight for the darkest secrets today, are we?”

He snorted again, his favorite sound it seemed, and looked down into the mixture of dirt and shit underneath our bench.

“You showed me yours. I’ll show you mine.

“I was five-and-ten, back from Robert’s Rebellion. Gregor had inherited our father’s keep and I knew better than to go back there. But I did. I had fought in the rebellion from the age of twelve. Big for my age I was, and good with a sword. I had quite the opinion of myself, and feared nothing.

“She was daughter to the castellan, an old man who ran the place while Gregor was off killing folk. She wasn’t beautiful, but she had all the right parts and she didn’t puke at the sight of this,” he ran a hand over the burned half of his face. “And I believed that I loved her. Maybe I did. I loved fucking her, and I loved being with her even when we wasn’t fucking. I decided that I should marry her. Her father agreed, seeing’s how I’d ruined her and said I’d kill him if he didn’t. Meant it, too.

“Then Gregor came back from whatever hell he’d been visiting, just before the wedding. He declared that he would take his lord’s right.”

Clegane stopped talking, and took a long pull of his cider to cover his difficulty speaking. I was surprised to see him become emotional. I had not thought him to have feelings about anything except killing and his horse.
“Lord’s right?”

“An old tradition, abolished by some king hundreds of years ago but a few lords still take it anyway. After a marriage, the lord of whatever place it is takes the woman first, before her new husband. Gregor raped her until she died. Right proud of it, he was. We fought, I lost, and he had his men bind me and dump me at Casterly Rock. So I served Tywin Lannister, killed who he told me to kill, and hoped for a chance to kill Gregor. I came to love killing and lost interest in fucking.”

“You no longer have sex?”

“I get drunk and forget why I don’t. Then I fuck some whore and I remember. So I get drunk enough to forget everything.”

He drank more cider. I did as well.

“Not sure that’s really true. Even then, fucking just wasn’t all that important. Telling myself it’s just because of what happened years ago means I’m not different from everyone else. You know all about that last part, princess.

“A girl was willing to fuck me, without getting paid for it. I wasn’t a monster. I wasn’t like Gregor.”

I drained the last of my cider. I had been selfish again, pitying myself for losing John Carter’s love when I had the love of my sisters, while Sandor Clegane remained trapped in his pain and confusion.

“I did not wish to kill Sansa Stark. She was kind to me.”

Once again, I seemed to have lost control of my speech.

“To me, too.”

“You loved her.”

“No. I don’t know. Maybe. She was nearly the perfect woman, kind and gentle and all the good things.”

“Unlike me.”

“Unlike you.”

“I regret that she died. I do not regret what I did.”

“Killers like us, we always have reasons.”
Sequel Notice

Chapter Summary

In which Dejah Thoris embarks on a new adventure. And meets a raven.

Just a note that the sequel has now begun. You can click on the "Next Work" link right down below to find the next installment. It involves dragons.

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