As High As Honor
by calistabista

Summary

Sansa burns Winterfell as the Night King approaches. Somehow, her story continues.
The End

She had died in fire. By her own hand, she had lit the candles. The flames were instantaneous. A sickly green that had blinded her for an instant before obliterating her eyes.

She had tried to stop Arya from leaving. Ordered her sister to stand at her side as the Others approached. Her sister had refused. Those eyes, grey Stark eyes, seemed fathomless in her solemn little face.

“Stay,” Sansa had demanded hotly, clutching Rickon’s unconscious form. The milk of the poppy had worked quickly. He would never feel a thing.

Arya didn’t respond. Her gaze was distant. The memory of their father bowing before his own blade struck Sansa with a dull thud.

“Arya,” Sansa said again. She swallowed hard when her sister did not respond. “We are wolves. When winter comes, the lone wolf dies. The pack survives.” But her words tasted bitter and burnt, like ash on her tongue.

Like Lady’s bones in the lichyard.

Like her father’s head on a spike.

Like her brother’s blood on his crown.

Like her mother’s body in the Trident.

Like Jon’s eyes, sharp and blue as death.

“Aye,” said Arya quietly. “But we won’t survive this, will we?”

A tendril of hair had escaped Sansa’s braid, and stuck to her damp cheek. Unbidden, Arya reached out and tucked it behind her ear.

“I’m not strong enough to stay,” murmured Arya. “I would die on the battlefield with a weapon in my hand.” She looked at Sansa fiercely.

Sansa regarded her sister. “You are the strongest person I know.” I love you.

Arya paused in the doorway, Needle half-drawn. She nodded, and disappeared.

Sansa sank to the ground, trembling. She shifted Rickon, his sweet face tucked into her shoulder. His steady breathing strengthened her resolve.

She had painted every inch of Winterfell with wildfyre. Every stone she had trod as a child. Every tapestry she had traced. Every inch of the seat of the North dripped with the ghastly green.

She would wait until the wights clawed at the gate. Until the roar of the ice dragon deafened the air. Until the Night King’s eyes pierced through the dark.

What would have happened if they had run? Her, Jon, Arya, Bran, and Rickon fleeing the long night. But her bones were built of duty, and they bore the weight of Winter’s crown.

And Jon had left. Bent the knee for naught. For the beautiful Dragon Queen, who had fallen with
her children somewhere beyond the Wall. Jon with them.

Already she could hear the screams from outside. The wailing of dying men butchered the silence, mixing with the inhuman screech of the dead as they tore them down.

*Can you still be brave if you are afraid?*

She lit a match.

*That is the only time you can be brave.*

And the world ended.
Sansa was floating.
Impossible softness and warmth surrounded her.
The air she breathed was cold and clear.
She opened her eyes.
The ceiling of her childhood room was above her. The familiar designs in the wooden beams had comforted her to sleep many a night. The whorl in the wood that had seemed to form the flourish of the Dragonknight's cloak. Six knots that she had once imagined to be Jonquil and her sisters.
Sansa pressed against the haze of memories, and struggled to sit up.
Arya.
She turned to her sister’s bed. It was empty, the furs thrown back in disarray. With difficulty, Sansa turned her head. She spotted Arya huddled in the corner, pressed up against the rough stones like she was trying to melt through them. Mumbling frantically to herself.
“Joffrey…”
Sansa tilted forward in her bed, her head spinning.
“…Cersei…”
She slid to the floor, her movements sluggish, like she was swimming through a fog.
“…Frey…”
“Arya,” Sansa croaked. She crawled across the floor, and stopped, keeping both hands flat on the smooth stones of the floor.
Distantly, Sansa recalled the rules. Don’t startle your sister. No sudden movements. Especially when her mind is elsewhere.
“Arya.”
“No one,” mumbled Arya. “A girl is no one.”
“A girl is Arya Stark,” Sansa reminded her, drawing the words out like a bucket from a deep well. “Arya Stark is my sister. You are my sister. You are Catelyn Stark’s daughter. Eddard Stark’s daughter. A child of Winterfell. Princess of the North. A wolf.”
Arya whimpered, and Sansa waited until she relaxed and sagged against the stone.
“Arya,” whispered Sansa. “Sister.”
“Sisters,” Sansa agreed. She offered her hand to Arya, who regarded it with sudden suspicion.
“You burned,” Arya told her, severely. “We all burned.”
“Yes,” said Sansa. Like recalling a dream, her memories drifted free of the haze. She looked closer
at her sister. Arya looked like a child, like she had before they had ever left Winterfell. It was only her eyes that gave it away.

“You look like a babe,” Arya told Sansa bluntly.

Sansa pressed her hands to her own soft, child-round cheeks. She gazed at her arms, pale and unscarred. She lightly ran her fingers over her smooth skin, places where chains and blades had once left their mark. There was nothing there.

Arya lifted her nightdress, and touched her stomach. Sansa knew the skin there to be jagged and puckered where a blade had pierced her sister. But that too was gone, only the memory of the hurt remaining.

Together, they helped each other their their feet. Sansa felt as if it had been a very long time since she stood on steady ground.

“It could be a trick,” said Arya. She rubbed her uncalloused hands together with a grimace. “A test for us to fail.”

“It’s a very beautiful trick.” Sansa fingered the edge of her wool nightdress.

Arya seized her hand, hard, and stared at her with wide, wild eyes.

“Don’t leave me,” she commanded of Sansa.

Sansa dropped her nightdress, and squeezed Arya’s hand in return.

“Never,” Sansa said. “I’m here.”

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The walked hand in hand to the hall. Sansa had rather unceremoniously won the effort to force Arya into one of the dresses residing in her closet. In response, Arya had snatched a letter opener, and tucked it comfortably into her pocket.

Arya stopped before entering.

“You wouldn’t hold my hand,” she told Sansa.

Guilt seeped into Sansa, and she reluctantly released Arya’s hand. It was true.

Haltingly, they stepped through the doorway.

Immediately, they were accosted by Septa Mordane. “Ladies don’t sleep this late,” she chastised them, although her eyes were on Arya.

“That’s your septa there.”

But Sansa could not even have told that it was a woman. The jaw had rotted off her face, and birds had eaten one ear and most of a cheek.”

Sansa’s eyes filled with tears when the Septa placed a gentle hand on her back, and Arya nearly came out of her skin.

They were too obvious, Sansa noted in a panic. But she could collect herself no more than she could explain what had happened to them. Hungriy, she took in the bustling scene in front of her.
There was Jeyne Poole laughing with Beth Cassel. The happiness of youth and innocence bloomed like roses in their cheeks.

Theon was lounging on a bench, wearing a smile Sansa hadn’t seen in years. His hair was thick and dark, his hands sure and steady where they were tucked behind his head.

Even old Maester Luwin was there. He drifted serenely past with his breakfast to sit beside Ser Rodrik and Jory.

But it was the high table that stole her breath away. Tears blurred her vision, but she kept looking. It was her lady mother, looking as beautiful as a dream. On her lap, she held a squirming boy. *Rickon*, Sansa thought in wonder. Next to her, was Bran, kicking his legs merrily.

“...may the Mother have mercy.” Septa Mordane’s voice cut through Sansa’s reverie. “What has gotten into both of you?”

Sansa realized that she and Arya had been standing, frozen, staring at their mother. Uncaring, she snatched Arya’s hand, and together they ran.

Catelyn looked up, and smiled at them when they appeared breathless before her. She looked surprised to see them together, even more so when they pressed close to her.

Kissing them tenderly, Catelyn urged them to sit. In a warm daze, Sansa began to eat.

“Mother,” said Arya. She formed the word softly, in wonder. “Where is Father?”

*Father*. The precarious delight that had been growing in Sansa’s chest all morning burst into yearning at Arya’s words. *Father was here.*

Catelyn’s mouth twisted slightly. “Your father is attending to a matter. Apparently Jon Snow took ill this morning.”

Sansa felt faint. Arya kicked her hard and indiscreetly under the table.

“Jon is...ill?” Sansa wondered aloud.

“It seems,” replied her mother, frowning at Sansa’s response. “Your father will see to him.”

Arya stood at once. “I would see to his as well,” she announced.

“We would,” murmured Sana, rising to her feet.

“Do not trouble yourselves,” ordered Catelyn. “Stay and break your fast with your brothers and I.”

Arya opened her mouth, but Sansa spoke first.

“No, Mother,” she said demurely. “It is no trouble. I - and Arya as well - we would like to greet Father this morning, anyway.”

She leaned over and kissed Catelyn’s cheek tenderly. Arya did the same, much to their mother’s surprise. Together, they slipped from the hall, hurrying towards Jon’s bedchamber.

“Yes he - ?” Arya began breathlessly.

“- I don’t know,” Sansa confessed. “But we must find out.”
They paused before the door to Jon’s bedchamber. Arya raised her hand to knock, but her fist hung there, trembling. She turned to Sansa, and Sansa nodded.

“Enter.” Their father’s warm voice drifted through the heavy wood of the door.

Ned Stark smiled when he spotted them, and the sight of it stole Sansa’s breath from her lungs. The statue that had been placed in the crypt had held all of Lord Stark’s dignity, but none of her father’s tenderness. Even in her dreams, she saw his face in lines of grief, never in smiles.

Arya cried out rather alarmingly when she spotted him, and ran to him the moment they stepped into the room. Their father accepted her into his arms, in a bemused, but loving embrace.

Robb stood beside them, and the sight of them together caused an ache that swelled beneath Sansa’s ribs and fluttered in her chest.

But it was Jon Snow that made her heart stop.

His gaze burned when she met it. The same haunted, fragility that she and Arya had carried with them all morning clung to him as well. With one look, she knew he remembered as well.

He had left her a Northern King, and returned to her a Southern Prince.

Targaryen, The bannermen of the North had muttered. They shifted uneasily under the cold eyes of the Dragon Queen. Until she saw him, Sansa had not truly believed that he had bent the knee. Handed their hard-won kingdom off to the conquering Dragon Queen with no word to her or the council.

It was only by the thinnest of graces that they and their armies had been allowed entrance to Winterfell. In the memory of Ned Stark, one member of the council had advised. In memory of mad kings and dragonfire, Sansa had thought. With Daenerys, came her fearsome beasts. They circled Winterfell before settling behind their mother. The snow turned to puddles where they landed. It had been unbearable to look upon them. Her wild relief at his safe return drowned beneath her resentment and fury. Beside her, Arya swayed on unsteady legs, desperate to see her brother once more. She had broken the spell that had held them all stiff and still by running to Jon. He had swept her off her feet, and gathered her close. His relief at her welcome was palpable. Soon though, Arya stepped back, resuming her position beside Sansa. And Jon’s face had fallen the tiniest bit at this clear division.

He had reached for Sansa many times after that, always out of sight of the Queen, whispering apologies and excuses. His floundering manner was distressing.

“A man takes responsibility for what he has done,” she told him. “It is craven to act otherwise.”

He had sputtered, but offered nothing else. He was still honorable in some ways she supposed. Too honorable to lie, or perhaps he just knew that there was no mistaking the truth in his shame.

They had left on the last cold, clear day of Autumn with the bulk of the armies.

He had hugged and kissed Bran and Rickon. Rickon wailed as Jon tried to set him down, his face contorted in grief and disbelief. Sansa took pity on him, and moved to take Rickon in her arms. Arya came up next to them, her presence strong and reassuring. Jon drew her to his chest, and kissed her forehead. He smoothed her hair down, cupping the back of her head. She allowed it,
closing her eyes for a moment before they pulled apart.

Finally, he turned to Sansa. Even under Rickon’s struggles and tears, she stood tall and resolute. Her initial anger had thawed somewhat in the face of the looming threat of the Others. Carefully, he took her hand and kissed it gently.

“A favor,” she had said then, pulling him closer. In his hand, she placed a black handkerchief, embroidered with the Stark sigil.

“Sansa…” he had begun hoarsely. She waited, but he choked on his words.

“Take it and come home,” she told him quietly, so that only their family could hear.

He tucked the favor against his breast, and turned to join Daenerys who stood waiting by the dragons.

Sansa turned to her sister, who stared after the army with a glint in her eye.

“I would never ask you to stay,” she had whispered to Arya. “If you want to join them.”

Arya stared for a moment longer. “No,” she said. “I won’t march for the Dragon Queen. I’ll be with you when they come. Not them.”

It was the last they had seen of Jon. Two ravens had come back before they reached the Wall. Eight men had struggled back after the battle. But Jon had gone down riding a dragon. True to his name in the end.
Porcelain

Their first day back was the hardest that Sansa had ever endured, and she had suffered her fair share of them. Everything seemed too bright, too fake as she slogged her way through her childhood schedule. Her joy at seeing her family was cut by the inevitability of their deaths juxtaposed against their smiling faces.

Arya wanted to run to Jon at once, pin him down and demand answers. Sansa convinced her to wait. Before they left his bedside, when Robb and Father were turned away, Sansa had put her lips against his ear as she fussed with his blankets.

“Tonight in the godswood, Your Grace,” she had whispered, before turning on her heel and ushering Arya away.

At dusk, Sansa begged to be allowed to take Arya and retire to their room. Tense and irritable, Arya had begun twisting a knife from the dinner table expertly between her fingers. Sansa snatched the knife away as delicately as possible, and stilled her sister’s hands.

She sat Arya down on the bed in their room, and fetched a handful of letter openers and a stone.

“We must wait until dark,” Sansa said. Arya scowled and began sharpening the blades. Sansa lit a candle, and found a piece of embroidering that by her estimation she had begun nearly eight years before. It was a silly, fanciful little picture of dancing maidens. Even so, she picked up her needle and put shoes on the barefoot one, and flowers in the hair of another.

Only after the castle had been dark and quiet for some time, did the sisters slip their furs and make their way to the godswood.

Jon was waiting for them, looking small beneath the great heart tree.

Arya flew to him. She was small enough for him to lift and tuck into his chest. Their dark-haired, curly heads pressed tightly together. When he reached for her, Sansa took his outstretched hand and allowed his embrace.

After a moment, she separated them, drawing Arya and Jon to the roots of the heart tree so they could sit and talk.

“What happened?” Jon demanded, his eyes wild.

He looked only a boy, Sansa marveled. He had only the wisps of a beard on his chin.

“Robb told Father that I had taken ill this morning,” he continued. His gaze shifted between their faces rapidly. “When I woke, I went looking and found Robb. I cried like a babe. I thought it was a dream.”

“None of them remember,” Sansa confirmed, toying with the edge of her robe. “I thought Bran must,” she mused. “But he’s like he was - before.”

“I cornered Theon in the hall,” Arya said. Sansa turned to her in alarm. “He knew nothing.”

“It’s just us,” whispered Sansa.

Jon shook his head. “We can’t know that,” he said. “For all we know, Cersei Lannister woke up
unexpectedly this morning in Robert Baratheon’s bed.”

Sansa shuddered in horror. “Littlefinger - Ramsey - Joffrey,” she murmured, her eyes turning flat and glassy.

“We’ll kill them,” said Arya, pulling the letter opener from her pocket. “We’ll get them first this time.”

“We cannot be so rash,” Sansa warned her severely. The thought of Arya in the same room as Ramsey Bolton threatened to make her vomit in fear. “We are children again - we have no idea what has changed in this world.”

“This world is a gift!” Arya argued. “We can make it better than what it was! This time we’ll win! We can use what we know to crush our enemies, before they can ever touch us.”

“The long night is not some game to be won,” Jon interrupted. “The Night King cannot be dispatched as easily as Walder Frey.”

“We know that Jon, please,” said Sansa rubbing her forehead. “I’m not suggesting that we ignore our enemies, just that we take the opportunity to be thoughtful before moving forward.”

“We should tell Father,” said Jon. “Tell him to rally his bannermen. Half can ride to the Wall, the other half can ride South to demand more men.”

Sansa stared at him. “Tell him what, Jon?” she demanded. “What would you have him tell his bannermen? That monsters are building an army beyond the Wall?”

Jon faltered. “I will tell him… I will tell him I know the truth of my birth,” he said slowly. “And he will believe that we speak the truth.”

“It won’t be enough,” murmured Sansa. “I hardly believe it myself.”

“How will we fight the Others?” asked Arya. “With no armies, no dragons?”

“It will be long time before Daenerys’ children are grown,” said Jon.

Sans leaned back against the roots of the heart tree, exhausted, her heart in her throat. “Winter is coming,” she said carefully. “But the long summer is here yet. We have time.”

Jon and Arya shifted, Arya irritable, and Jon unconvinced.

“First,” Sansa continued. “We will write down everything we know.”

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Time passed slowly. Even as her fears circled, Sansa found herself luxuriating in every moment she encountered. Arya accused her of complacency, but Sansa found that immersing herself in Winterfell only spurred her convictions.

She rebuilt her strength on Robb’s belly laughs.

Rickon’s baby smiles.

Bran’s dancing feet.

The proud tilt of her mother’s chin.
On Ned Stark’s honorable brow.

And she wrote. She committed every detail she could remember to paper, from the moment that Robert Baratheon stepped foot through the gates of Winterfell. It was her own terrible song, the heart of it black and twisted. By the end of it, she had stained hands and a pile of shattered quills from pressing the nib so hard to the parchment.

Writing turned out to be even more arduous for Jon. His script was slow and laboured. Eventually Sansa took over for him, transcribing his words. He spoke for hours, the timbre of his voice monotonous and steady. She asked no questions, even as answers hung heavy on his tongue.

It was much harder to capture Arya’s story. Several times, Sansa found the burned remnants of her efforts in the ashes.

“It was the wrong story,” Arya told her, an eerie look in her eyes. “I wrote it with someone else’s face. No one doesn’t have a story.”

“Arya does,” Sansa told her sister. “I won’t read it if you don’t want me to, but it needs to be written.”

Finally Arya came to her, clutching pages and pages of worn parchment in her hands. Sansa took them from her gratefully, and tucked them in her keepsake chest, nestled unassumingly beneath her old dresses.

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Jon wanted to tell Father. Arya itched to hold Needle.

Wait. Wait. Sansa thought desperately as she watched them chafe beneath their secrets. Possibility was so quickly snuffed out by a wrong step. They knew better than any how quickly the future could succumb to mistakes.

Arya came to her, silently slipping into her bed, seeking to end her indecision. They lay quietly side by side.

“We cannot stay here.”

Sansa closed her eyes at Arya’s words, but her sister continued to speak.

“We’re not them,” Arya said softly. “Not really. And it will do us no good to pretend we are.”

“We’re going to fix it,” Sansa said, opening her eyes. “This is what we are meant to do, but it will take time.”

“You can’t fix everything, Sansa,” said Arya, her tone tinged with weary annoyance. “It can’t all be fixed. The best we’ll do is try to stay alive for a bit longer this time.”

“I want to live, Arya,” said Sansa. “Not just stay alive.”

Arya was quiet, her frustration tightening the corners of her mouth.

“I couldn’t bear it,” whispered Sansa, her voice cracking. “To cost us everything. Again.”

“We will live,” Arya reassured her. “But Sansa to live, we must act. It’s different this time, but that’s good. We’re better - stronger - smarter. We were divided, and we fell. It won’t be like that again.”
Arya took her hand and held it tightly.

“We have another chance,” urged Arya. “And it will be worth nothing if we do not seize it.”

“You’re right,” said Sansa softly. “Jon is right. I know that we cannot walk the same path again, I do not intend to, but I am frozen by the possibilities that lie ahead. The mistakes that are to be made.”

“My lady,” Arya said quietly. “You must steel your resolve. Together, we will succeed. I trust you. You are the strongest person I know.”

Sansa’s mouth twisted into a smile. “Aye.”

That night, Sansa didn’t dream of Winterfell burning.
Ned Stark looked up as his eldest daughter entered his solar.

“Father,” she began. “Can I speak to you about something?”

“Of course, darling,” Ned said expectantly. He looked upon her sweet, upturned face. A face that was too often marred by frowns these last few weeks.

His pretty, frivolous daughter had all at once become a stranger to him. She was sharp to those around her, hardly smiled or laughed, and had developed a surprising closeness with Arya.

Catelyn was beside herself.

“It’s not like her, Ned,” Catelyn had snapped at him. “Sansa has always been such a good-natured girl, something must have happened to her.”

Catelyn had paused then, weighing her words.

“It’s Jon Snow,” she had whispered, causing Ned to clutch tighter at the arms of his chair. “Ned, I’ve seen her with him, walking through the halls. She has never taken an interest in the boy before now, never.”

“Jon is close with Arya as well,” Ned had pointed out. “He has never given you cause to worry before.”

Her eyes shuttered at his dismissal, and she said no more, but her words had taken root. He found himself watching his children closer than he had before. What he found was unusual, but scarcely worrying. He did find Sansa with Jon more often, but their interactions seemed innocent.

Jon and Arya had always been thick as thieves, but Sansa had always maintained a distance. She was her mother’s daughter, and Cat’s hurt over Jon colored Sansa’s treatment of him.

Now though, he saw Sansa make small motions of recognition towards Jon. Passing plates at dinner, a compliment in the courtyard, her hand on his arm as they walked.

Ned doubted the nefarious undertones that Catelyn saw in these developments, but something had changed in Sansa. He was loath to look at Jon, but he lacked any other explanation.

“It’s about the glass gardens.”

Ned was taken aback. “The gardens? What about them?”

“How many houses in the North have them?” Sansa’s tone was brisk and businesslike.

Ned considered her question. “To the best of my knowledge, Winterfell has the only ones,” he said slowly. “They were built generations ago, after a particularly long and difficult winter.”

Sansa nodded, contemplating this. “So there is no one alive who has built gardens like ours.”

“Yes,” said Ned. “It is a difficult process to craft glass is such a way. Other houses have made attempts in the past, but none have been very successful.”

“Would the architects have saved their designs?” asked Sansa. “Or recorded their efforts?”
“It’s possible,” said Ned. “We can inquire it of Maester Luwin in the morning. If they exist, he will be able to find them. Why do you ask?”

Sansa considered the question for a moment. “Our gardens,” she said thoughtfully, “can produce enough food the feed the castle comfortably in Summer.”

“In Winter they are even more of a necessity,” Ned pointed out. He smiled at her. “In Winter there are not so many lemons for cakes.”

“I shall have to eat my fill then,” said his daughter with a wane smile. She paused again before speaking. “Father I ask this of you because I think it is a worthy cause to have more gardens built around the North in preparation for the coming Winter. It would not be well to wait until our people find themselves hungry and their fields blanketed in snow.”

Ned was baffled. “It is a good idea,” he said. “But the other houses may not see it as such. It is an expensive and lengthy endeavour, one that will take time before it shows its reward.”

“It is a worthy one,” Sansa argued. “And I speak specifically of Castle Black.”

“You wish us to build a glass garden at Castle Black?” Ned was taken aback. Not just by her sudden interest in the Night’s Watch, but by the fervent conviction in her voice.

“If glass garden are built at Castle Black, then the men will have more food, more strength. More men will want to join the Watch. They would even be able to offer food to Moletown, and to the surrounding villages.”

Ned leaned back in his chair, and studied his daughter. Everyday she looked more Catelyn. Now with her head held high and her gaze steely, she resembled her all the more.

“Castle Black has no gold with which to finance this project,” said Ned. “No glassblowers, no materials.”

“Yes,” Sansa admitted. “But we have gold. So does the Crown. King Robert should be just as invested in maintaining the Wall as we are. Sand can be brought in from Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, there is plenty of wood to feed the fires, glassblowers can be sent for from Myr…”

Ned was struck suddenly. “Has Jon been speaking to you of the Wall?”

“Jon does mention the Wall, yes,” Sansa said. “But that is not the only reason I am interested in the Watch.”

“What are your reasons then?” Ned asked softly.

“It is an investment,” said Sansa. “An investment that will benefit not only the men that man the Wall, but the entire North. So will building gardens for other houses. It will generate support for us, and for the Crown, while providing food security to lords and smallfolk alike.

Sansa fixed him with a penetrating stare that he found unnerving. “Our words are true, they have always been true. Winter is coming. And we will be as fortified as possible when it arrives.”

Her cheeks were flushed with the intensity of her words, her eyes like two bright stars.

“What has you scared, child?” Ned whispered.

His daughter shivered, but when he reached to comfort her, she rose to leave. “Please consider it,
Father,” she said. “I will do my part in searching for those designs with Maester Luwin come morning.”

She left before Ned could protest. Sinking back into his chair, he felt his stomach twist. The fear that Catelyn had sparked, crept back up his throat.

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“I spoke to Father about the glass gardens.”

Jon nodded, deep in contemplation. “It would be a great boon to the men if we were to have another source of food. The meager rations we receive from the farmers make us unpopular enough, and we still go hungry. To ask a man to freeze is one thing, but to starve in that cold is nearly unbearable. Not to mention the mouths that Mance Rayder will bring.”

“Father wasn’t convinced that it was necessary,” said Sansa. “He shall have to be persuaded otherwise. The… the last time. There was hardly any food in the North or the South. The Boltons had done such irrevocable damage, the gardens hadn’t been used in years. I wasn’t able to repair them in time to make any use of them, there was simply no food anywhere.”

“You did what you could,” Jon reassured her.

“Yes,” Sansa murmured.

“How was he?” asked Jon. “When you spoke to him.”

“Confused,” said Sansa. “He knows something is wrong, and yet he has no idea of any of it.”

“Mother’s been watching you too,” said Arya, prying dirt out from underneath her fingernails with a dagger that Jon had gifted her.

Sansa had seen the concern in her mother’s eyes as she pulled away from her. Catelyn didn’t understand where her little girl who loved pretty things and sweet songs had gone. Sansa couldn’t tell her that she had been lost.

“You are the easiest to notice a change in,” explained Arya.

“You mean I was the most foolish,” Sansa said bitterly.

“Yes,” said Arya rolling her eyes. “But you have also always been the most noticeable.” She grinned. “We are a bastard, a wretch, and a lady. You do tend to draw the eye.”

“Arya,” Sansa scolded. “Don’t say such things.”

Arya shrugged. “It is only the truth. You shall be beautiful, and I shall be terrifying, and together we will take down our enemies.”

Sansa smiled somberly. “I cannot say that I relish it. I’d rather never see them again. I thought I wouldn’t.”

“You won’t if you wish it,” said Jon, speaking suddenly.

“It is inevitably, Jon,” said Sansa with a touch of weariness. “I won’t pretend as if it isn’t. And I cannot say that I’m not scared, that the thought of what is to come doesn’t sicken me. Father knows it too. He saw I was scared.”
“Then you think that we should tell him,” pressed Jon. “We should.”

“He won’t like it,” muttered Arya, twirling her dagger. “He might refuse us.”

“He might,” said Sansa. “But I’m willing now, to try. The three of us must be enough to convince him. Father is a smart man, he will know when he is out of options. There is simply no other explanation that will suffice.”

“What about Robb?” asked Jon. “And your lady mother?”

Sansa bit her lip. “No, not yet. It would be better to have Father behind us first. Mother is much more likely to listen to him. Mother and Robb… are impulsive. If we are to succeed, we must play the long game.”

“And we will,” said Jon, touching her hand briefly. “All of us, all of us will be here at the end of this.”

He was so sure of himself, so convinced of the words that he spoke. Sansa loved and pitied him for it.

“We will take it one step at a time,” said Sansa in a measured tone. “But we will go to Father soon. Now, we must rest.”

Her and Arya rose to their feet. Jon shook his head.

“I’ll stay for a bit, in the godswood,” he said gruffly. “I’ll see you both in the morning.”

What did Jon pray for, Sansa wondered as they left him kneeling before the heart tree. What lay at the end of his long game? Could he see past the Night King? It was what had blinded him last time.

And the North couldn’t afford a king like that again.
Steel

“I’ve told Father I wished to speak with him about joining the Night’s Watch,” said Jon.

He had caught her on the way to finish her stitching, drawing her aside so that they were hidden behind one of Winterfell’s tapestries.

Jon’s hand was warm in hers, sure and steady. Absentmindedly, she ran her thumb over his knuckles. She did not miss the scars from the old burns that had covered his hand and run up his arm. Surely, the terrible marks left by the brothers’ daggers were gone as well. She thought to slip her hands under his shirt, to see for herself. But she was suddenly uneasy in the silence that had fallen, and in the closeness that had felt comfortable only a moment ago.

“He’ll be alone then,” said Sansa, pulling her hand away. “He won’t want Mother to hear that conversation.”

“No,” agreed Jon. His eyes were very soft in the low light, and she shivered. Before she could protest, he slid his own fur around her shoulders. “I’ll come to your room before I go. We’ll walk together.”

She hadn’t thought she was cold, but she supposed she was. Sansa nodded, dipping her chin against the fur that was still warm from the heat of his chest. She left first, ducking out from behind the tapestry quickly and walking away as if she had never even paused.

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Sansa hadn’t intended to finish her projects so quickly, but she suddenly felt as though it was necessary. They were walking into battle after all. It made sense to have armor.

She stitched furiously, her fingers turning raw and red as the sun dipped low in the sky, and purple twilight drenched the world. Arya burst in, covered in sweat and dirt, startling Sansa into stabbing herself with the needle.

“It’s happening tonight,” Arya said breathlessly. “Jon’s just told me.”

“Aye,” said Sansa. She scowled at her sister, and sucked on her bleeding thumb.

Arya’s gaze fell to the piece she had just finished embroidering. “What’s that you’re making?” She reached out to touch it, and Sansa pulled it away.

“You’ll find out as soon as you have bathed and combed your hair,” said Sansa. “And not a moment sooner.”

Arya glowered at her, and stalked off to wash, leaving her dirty clothes strewn across the room.

Sansa smoothed the three bundles in her lap, and placed two to the side. She picked up her own and unfurled it revealing a heavy wool dress dyed a deep blue, almost black. It was trimmed with grey fur that encircled her neck and wrists, and lined the hem of the gown. A grey direwolf was embroidered on her breast, the only embellishment.

It was very simple and very northern. Slipping into it made her stand a bit taller.

Moving to the mirror, she braided her hair in one long braid, tying it off with a strip of fabric that
matched the dress. Finally, she pulled on the long, thick cloak she had made herself. It settled onto her shoulders with a reassuring weight. She still looked so very young, so very childish. But in the clothes she had made, she could see a flicker of the lady she would become, the Queen she had once been.

Her childhood gowns were ill-fitting, and made her feel out of sorts. Dresses in the southern style that she had begged and begged for. Lace and silks that were so easily ripped and sullied and bloodied. Dresses that were not suited to a life north of the Neck. They reminded her too much of pain. Of what dreadful things always befell a foolish little girl in pretty dresses.

“You look lovely.”

Sansa turned to see her sister looking at her approvingly.

“You’re outside matches your inside now,” said Arya, studying her. “Father will notice that.”

“It makes me feel braver,” admitted Sansa.

She fetched the second bundle for Arya, and pressed it into her sister’s curious hands.

“For you,” said Sansa. “So your outside matches too.”

Arya was silent as she unfolded the clothes. A gorgeous brown leather jerkin with a matching pair of breeches. A soft wool undershirt that Sansa had embroidered with running direwolves. Gloves, boots, a belt with a scabbard for a dagger. A heavy cloak trimmed with fur that matched her own.

“Don’t worry it’s only the first,” Sansa assured her sister. “I’m making you some everyday clothes as well that can stand all the messes you get into. But I wanted to give you this set first.”

“How…” whispered Arya, running her hands reverently across the jerkin.

“I am rather clever and talented, I’ll have you know,” said Sansa raising an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t have you wear dresses ever again, not if you don’t wish it. But you are a daughter of Winterfell, you must take some pride in your appearance.”

Arya vanished from view, and reappeared several minutes later, running her hands over her new clothing. Sansa moved forward, helping her adjust the cloak so it laid perfectly over her small shoulder.

“Do my hair,” commanded Arya. “Like Father’s. Like I wore it before.”

Sansa complied. She could not recall the last time she had brushed Arya’s hair. Before, but long, long, in the past of before.

When she was finished, they both regarded themselves in the mirror. They were startled by Jon’s soft knock on the door. He waited a moment before stepping in. When he saw them, his lips parted in shock.

“Sansa’s made armor for us,” Arya informed him, grinning.


Sansa ducked her head, her mouth twitching to hold in a laugh. “I have yours too,” she said, offering him his bundle.
His whole face softened as he took it from her. His clothing resembled Arya’s, but she had made his in a deep black. She had pressed the Stark sigil into the inside of the leather, unnoticeable to anyone but him.

“Thank you, Sansa,” he told her.

“One more thing,” she said, pulling a handkerchief from the folds of her dress. It resembled the one she had given him before, but this time she had chosen white thread on a grey background. The direwolf embroidered on it resembled Ghost as best she could manage.

“Thank you.” He took the handkerchief and tucked it safely away. His hand rested on the spot where it lay hidden.

“To make us strong,” affirmed Sansa. She retrieved the sheath of their stories and stood to face them. “Shall we?”

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They walked silently through the halls of Winterfell. Despite the dark of the night, the walls seemed to hum with life and warmth. Behind every door, Sansa knew there to be light and love, untouched by pain or sorrow.

Her dress whispered across the stone, and Sansa knew she looked as regal as a queen. Beside her, ensconced in their beautiful clothes, marched the other pieces of their heart.

As they approached Father’s solar, Sansa caught Arya’s arm and drew her back. She nodded at Jon, who after a moment’s hesitation, knocked on Ned Stark’s door.

“Come in,” called Ned.

Jon met Sansa’s eyes. She nodded.

“Ah, come in Jon,” said Ned, looking up as Jon entered. His voice trailed off as Sansa and Arya followed behind them. Arya closed the door, and locked it tightly.

“Girls,” said Ned, frowning and rising to his feet. “What are you doing here?” He absorbed the resolute expressions on their faces, their strange clothing.

“We needed to speak with you privately, Father,” said Sansa. “Please do not be alarmed.”

“I am not alarmed by my children,” said Ned, looking discomforted. “But I am now very concerned. What is troubling you all so?”

Sansa sat and beckoned Jon and Arya to do the same. Arya immediately began bouncing her knee, and Sansa laid a firm hand on it to stop her.

Sansa opened her mouth to speak, and every possible sentence she had planned to begin with died on her tongue. Under Ned’s piercing and increasingly frantic gaze, she was speechless. She looked to Jon.

Jon reached out at once to take her hand in his. “Father,” Jon began carefully. His words sounded pained. “You have noticed that we have been acting strangely recently. Differently.”

“I have, yes,” said Ned. He was staring at the place where their hands were joined. “I hope you are here to tell me why.”
“We are,” said Sansa softly. “You must forgive us for waiting, we were so terribly unsure. But Father, when we speak to you of this, you must promise to listen. In return, we will promise to tell you nothing but the truth. No matter how strange and terrible and unlikely it may seem.”

“Are you unhurt?” asked Ned, getting anxiously to his feet again. “Sansa, I must know if someone has done harm to you and your siblings.”

“Father,” interrupted Arya, drawing his eyes. “Sansa asked you to promise. And you must.”

“This is foolish,” said Ned, his frustration evident. “Stop this nonsense and tell me what is the matter at once.”

“Promise us,” said Jon.

Ned sat back down, and stared at them. “Yes,” he said finally. “I promise.”

“On your honor as a Stark,” said Arya.

Ned nodded slowly. “On my honor… as a Stark.”

“We are unhurt,” Sansa began. “As of now, no one has done us harm. Do you remember the day when Jon took ill?”

“Aye,” confirmed her Father. “Robb said that Jon came to him in tears.”

“I did,” said Jon gruffly. “Seeing Robb brought me to tears. I had not seen him in so many years. I thought I never would again.”

“We are not the children you once knew,” said Sansa, continuing before Ned could respond. “We are still your children, of course. I am still Sansa, your Sansa, but I have lived another lifetime. I had lived to the age of nine and ten. Horrors… horrors were coming for us. I was the lady of Winterfell, the Queen in the North. Only Arya, Rickon, Bran, and I remained. When the Others came for us, I burned Winterfell to end them, to save the rest of Westeros. And then… then I woke up in my bed. A child again. And here we all were. Children again, but children who know exactly what their future holds.”

They sat in silence, a silence that seemed to choke the air and steal their breath. It stretched until Ned leaned forward, his hands clasped tightly together.

“What… what are you saying, child? I do not understand what you mean to say.”

“Sansa speaks the truth,” said Arya looking up fiercely. “I died at seven and ten. Cut down by the dead in the courtyard of Winterfell, defending the castle. And yet I awoke to find myself as it all was so many years ago. To see your face, to see mother’s. I thought I never would again. I can hardly believe it, but it is true. Every word of it.”

“You know we speak the truth, Father,” whispered Sansa. “You look upon us and you see that we are different. We are not the children we used to be, and you know it. It is the truth.”

“Dreams,” murmured Ned. “You dreamed this. It is nothing but fantasy.”

“No,” said Jon firmly. “You must believe us. Every word of it is true.”

“Did you die at Winterfell too?” demanded Ned. His face was pale as milk.

“No,” said Jon. “I died beyond the Wall at one and twenty. The Others had brought down the Wall
and marched South. I went to defeat them. I did not succeed. And then I woke, here. To Robb’s face, to yours. I could not believe it.”

“You expect me to believe this,” said Ned hoarsely. He looked unnerved by the look of utter truth on their faces.

“We know things,” said Sansa. “Things that we never would have known before. It is the only proof we can offer.” Gently, she placed the sheaf of papers on his desk. “These are our stories,” she told him. “Everything that has happened to us.”

Her father made no move to touch the papers that she lay in front of him. He simply stared at her.

“I know the truth about my mother.”

Ned took a shuddering breath, and turned to look at Jon. Sansa was proud of him. Here, he did not falter. He looked Ned calmly in the eye, and waited for acknowledgement.

But Ned said nothing. Just shook his head.

“Lyanna Stark was my mother,” Jon said. Ned stopped breathing. “Lyanna Stark was my mother. Rhaegar Targaryen snatched her and carried her off to the Tower of Joy where I was born. The day it happened, Rhaegar was gone, ridden off to be slain by Robert Baratheon, fighting a war for the Mad King. He had left his Kingsguard behind - Lord Commander Gerold Hightower and Ser Arthur Dayne. You fought them, Howland Reed by your side. And you rushed to Lyanna’s side, but it was too late. She was dying, from me, from bringing me into this world - ” He broke off, unable to continue.

“She begged you to protect him,” Sansa continued. “Robert would have killed him on the spot. Would kill him now if he knew who Jon was. So you took Jon with you to protect him. Swore Howland Reed to secrecy. Named Jon your bastard, and brought him back to Winterfell to be raised beside your trueborn children. Far from those who would name him the blood of the dragon - ”

“- and the wolf,” Arya finished.

“Told no one,” said Sansa. “Not your wife, not your children. Spoke naught of it until this moment.”

“How.” croaked Ned. Sansa looked up and saw great tears filling his grey eyes, and sliding down his cheeks. “How could you know…”

“We lived terrible, brutal, short lives,” said Sansa. “Lives filled with secrets, betrayals, and horror. But we have been given a second chance. Father, we mean to take what we know, and shape a different future. One in which we do not suffer like we did. We can do it, but we need her help. We cannot do it without you.”

“Do you believe us now?” asked Arya. Her mouth was grim. “Can you believe us?”

“I…” Ned had no words.

“We do not tell you these things to hurt you,” Sansa told him. She offered him a handkerchief that Ned took from her with trembling fingers.

They averted their eyes as Ned wiped away his tears. He seemed to steel himself as he did.
From porcelain, to ivory, to steel, thought Sansa in wonder. How we all do turn.

Ned stood, and came around the desk to them. With much care, he reached for them and they came willingly. Kissed Sansa’s forehead, cupped Arya’s chin, gripped Jon’s shoulder. Without the desk between them, Sansa became overwhelmed, tears springing to her eyes. Her father dried them, and rubbed her cheek with his thumb.

“You will speak,” Ned said. “You will speak, and I will listen. I give you all my word.”

It was a long, dark night.
“Good morning, my love,” Sansa sang, gazing down tenderly. “Did you sleep well last night, darling?”

Rickon cooed back at her, and grabbed a handful of her long, red hair. “Sansa!”

Sansa swept him up in her arms, and covered his face in kisses, much to Rickon’s delight. He shrieked and giggled in her grasp.

“Lift me high!” he demanded, and she obliged. Sansa lifted him above her head, and then caught him, and fell back on the bed.

She repeated this several times, until she was breathless from laughing.

Rickon reached up and patted her cheeks. “Your face is red like your hair,” he informed her.

“Is it?” Sansa gasped in mock indignation. “You do know we have the same hair, don’t you?” She flipped her head over so that her loose hair tickled his cheeks.

She stood upright quickly when Septa Mordane entered the room, trying fruitlessly to straighten her wrinkled dress.

“Lady Sansa,” Septa Mordane greeted her, with only the hint of a reprimand in her voice. “I was meaning to take the little lord to to Lady Stark, but perhaps you’d like to take him for a bit.”

“I want to stay with Sansa!” Rickon announced.

Sansa scooped him up under his arms and set him on the floor in front of her. “I think that’s a lovely idea. Fresh air might do us both some good, don’t you think so Rickon?”

“Yes!’ he shouted, seizing her hand and pulling her towards the door.

Sansa picked up her skirts in the other hand and ran beside him, weaving through the bustling halls. They stopped by the window, and peered out.

“Let us walk the grounds of our castle, my lord,” She told Rickon. “It such a lovely summer day.”

“Aye, my lady,” he said in what she hoped was a rather pompous impersonation of Robb. He tripped over his feet trying to bow, but she graciously pretended not to notice and offered him a stately curtsy.

This Rickon greeted everyone they passed with shouts and smiles. This Rickon longed climb, to run, to explore. This Rickon had never known loss or pain. Sansa treasured the bold, fearless look in his bright blue eyes.

So many times she had thought him to be lost. When she found out he was being held by Ramsey, her heart had shattered from the terror. *It would be better if he had died,* she had thought. She had been sickened by her own thoughts, and the truth in them.

But he had been saved. A beautiful gift that outshone anything that terrible battle had accomplished. Nothing was more important than having Rickon back. Not Ramsey’s death, not their victory, not Winterfell.
He had changed. He had cried and cried for the wildling named Osha. He cried for Shaggydog who had been taken from him and killed. He cried for all the things that had happened that Sansa didn’t know of and that he couldn’t tell her.

He did not recognize Jon or Sansa at first. He feared them.

Slowly, slowly he had come back to them. He was content to sit for hours running his hands through Ghost’s thick fur, while Sansa worked at the desk. Jon’s great wolf had demonstrated remarkable patience with him. Ghost was impossibly gentle with the smallest Stark.

When Bran returned, Rickon had been the only one to bring a smile to his face.

When Arya returned, she had sighed and kissed him.

It had been Rickon that she thought of most on that last day. She had only lit the match when she was sure that he slept too deeply to feel a thing. She did not regret it, but the memory pained her nonetheless.

But she pushed those thoughts from her mind, and focused on the blue sky, the soft breeze. She took Rickon walking out by the godswood. She swung him up onto the roots of the tree, and he scampered around, rolling around in the grass.

She had thought to bring Bran as well, but he had informed her that he much preferred to watch the men practicing in the yard, rather than pluck flowers with his brother and sister.

Sansa sighed, and tucked another daisy behind Rickon’s ear. He held very still as she twisted the stems of the flowers together so they would sit properly in his red curls. When she was done, he flew off to investigate a squirrel that had leapt through the grove.

She felt peaceful for the first time in days.

Retelling her story for Father that night had drained her. The next day she had begged Septa Mordane and her mother to be allowed to stay abed. Her bones felt like lead, and she feared that if she lifted her head, it might fall off. Arya had stayed with her for a while, but soon she ran, too restless to stay still.

She and Arya had left first. Ned had requested that Jon stay with him awhile longer. It was good, she supposed, that they spoke at length. So many secrets had hung between the words they spoke in a previous life.

She had feared seeing her father at dinner the next night. F feared her mother would notice something was amiss between them. But Father had been as he always was. Very good at keeping secrets.

“We cannot tell your mother,” Ned had told them as they gathered once more in his solar. “She cannot know of this. It will break her heart.”

Arya had protested. “She needs to know just as Robb does! We cannot do this without them.”

“Do you plan on telling Bran?” Father asked. “Rickon?” He shook his head. “You know as well as I do that they need protecting from these horrors.”

“Mother is not a child, Father,” Sansa told him with a frown. “I would be shocked if she is not already suspicious. She will demand the truth soon enough. Will you lie to her?”
Ned rubbed his chin. “I fear what she would do with this information,” he said finally. “I fear what this knowledge would do to her.”

“At least tell her about Jon,” insisted Arya. “Then she can stop being so horrible to him.”

“Arya,” Ned reprimanded her sharply. “You will not speak of your mother like that.”

Arya leaned back, glowering.

“Do not tell Lady Catelyn for my sake alone,” Jon insisted. “But I do believe that we need her. Lady Stark is smart and passionate, and she loves her children. If anything, she must know enough to be able to protect herself and her family.”

“I never told her,” said Ned softly. “After all these years, I have never breathed a word of you to her. At first I didn’t trust her. We had been married for so little time before I rode off the war. I swore to Lyanna that I would tell no one, no one of your true parentage. And then, as all the years went by, I realized she was cloaking you, playing her part so well. The way she looked at you, treated you, no one could ever doubt that you were a bastard boy in your Lord Father’s house.”

“Perhaps I owe her my thanks,” said Jon with a bitter smile.

“And now?” asked Sansa. “What would Mother say now if we told her? Surely she would see her actions as a mistake. She was hurt, yes, but Jon was only a boy.”

“Your mother is a proud woman,” said Ned. “I do not think she would consider her actions a mistake, and even if she did she would not admit it. I trust your mother, I love her. She has been my partner for these many, many years. Birthed my children, run my household. Yet, I cannot say for certain that this secret would be safe with her.”

“If it were one of us, or Jon,” Arya said. “She would never choose Jon.”

“Yes,” said Ned. “I believe that to be true.”

“So we do not tell her about Jon,” said Sansa firmly. “If you believe that it cannot be risked then we will not risk it. There are other things that we can tell Mother to convince her. If you stand with us, Father, she will believe it.”

“We should tell her and Robb together,” offered Jon. “They both need to know, and I cannot keep this from Robb any longer.”

Ned agreed, reluctantly. Had he ever been free of troubles, Sansa wondered. Had his brow been this furrowed as a boy? Had her Father ever been unencumbered by the weight of the world?

She was startled out of her thoughts by Rickon’s cry. He had fallen into the mud at the edge of the black pool, and it was smeared all over his clean tunic. His knee was bleeding from a sharp rock.

“Rickon!” At her reprimand, he began to cry. He made a pitiful sight, standing ankle deep in the muck, tears dripping down his dirty cheeks.

“Oh, love,” she sighed tying her skirts up at her knees, and crouching beside him. “There, there, it’s all right.” He sniffled, wiping his nose on the back of his hand. “Let me see.”

He stuck out his knee, and she examined the wound. She took her handkerchief and dipped it in the pool before wiping the blood away. “See?” she said. “It always looks worse than it is.” Sansa took a clean scrap of cloth from her pocket, and wrapped it around his knee.
Rickon looked at it suspiciously. “You have to give it a kiss,” he reminded her.

“I have been remiss in my duties, my good lord,” Sansa agreed. She bent over and kissed his knee.

Rickon looked satisfied. Sansa opened her arms, and he nestled his face into her shoulder.

“It won’t bleed anymore?” he asked her, his voice muffled.

“It shouldn’t,” said Sansa. “You might have a scar though.”

“I don’t want a scar,” he complained.

“No?” Sansa straightened one of the daisies in his hair. “All brave heroes have scars. You must think of it as a battle won, not a battle lost.”

Rickon looked intrigued, but they were startled by the arrival of Arya crashing through the trees.

“What is it?” gasped Sansa, taking in the wild look on Arya’s face. “What’s happened?”

Arya took a deep breath, and placed a hand over her heart.

“Brienne of Tarth,” said Arya. “She’s at the gate.”
Sansa did not speak, even to ask questions. She scooped Rickon into her arms despite his protests, and ran after Arya.

There, in Winterfell’s courtyard, stood the Maid of Tarth. She looked younger than Sansa had ever known her to be. Her big blue eyes darted nervously about.

Jory and Alyn looked unimpressed, yet wary of Brienne. Their eyes roved curiously over her ill-fitting armor, and the sword that dangled at her side.

If we could only get to her, thought Sansa wildly. But it was too late. Her father was striding into the courtyard to deal with the commotion, followed by her mother who looked nonplussed.

Brienne dropped hard on one knee as Ned and Catelyn approached her. Sansa wracked her thoughts frantically, trying to remember how much she had told her father of Brienne. Had it been enough that he might recognize who she was?

Arya was fairly vibrating with anxiety beside her. “She remembers!” hissed Arya. “Why else would she be here, there is no other explanation!”


“Who is that?” asked Rickon loudly.

“We must wait and see,” Sansa told him.


“Aye,” agreed Ned cautiously, eyeing Brienne in bewilderment.

“My name is Brienne of Tarth.” Brienne unhooked her sheathed sword from her belt and placed it on the ground. “I am the only daughter of Lord Selwyn Tarth. I have traveled here from the Stormlands to Winterfell to offer you my services. To serve you and your family.”


“Yes,” said Brienne. “I have come to be the sworn shield of your family. To serve you and to protect you from all that would seek to do you harm.”

“But you’re a woman,” said Catelyn in fascination, stepping forward. “What use would we have for a woman knight? Surely your father needs you home.”

“My lady,” said Brienne, turning to Catelyn and bowing her head respectfully. “I may be a woman, but I am equally a true knight, ready to serve you and your family. My father has no use of a daughter like me, even if I were to stay on Tarth.”

Robb appeared in the courtyard, trailed by Jon and Theon. Theon’s mouth dropped open when he spotted Brienne, and he whispered something to Robb who batted him away. Jon looked shocked by Brienne’s presence, though he made no motion towards her.

“But why have you come here?” asked Catelyn. “Your house is not our vassal, and there are few true knights in the North. Northmen do not follow the teachings of the Seven.”
Brienne nodded. “Yes, my lady, I know this. I do not mean to impose upon you. I have heard many wonderful things about the North. About the honor, dignity, and loyalty of House Stark. Of the unforgiving Northern landscape which shapes men into immovable pillars of strength. I heard these things, and resolved that I should come here. To better myself, and to serve people who greatly deserve my loyalty and protection.”

“Ser Brienne.”

All eyes were on Sansa as she stepped towards Brienne. She was terribly aware of her frumpled, wet dress and the mud stains that Rickon had left smeared across her bodice. But Brienne’s eyes lit up when she spoke, and it didn’t seem to matter so much then.

“I think it is a noble quest that you have come on,” Sansa continued. “To have journeyed so far with honorable intentions.”

“Yes, my lady,” said Brienne, ducking her head. “I wish to serve and protect.”

“Then you shall stay,” said Sansa. “As our honored guest. The North repays duty and loyalty in kind.”

She looked up at her parents. Her mother looked too shocked to be angry. Her father looked calmer, his eyes searching her face. When he found nothing but pride and delight. The tension slipped his shoulders.

“Very well,” said Ned. “Ser… Ser Brienne. Quarters shall be readied for you. There you can rest from your journey, and later you may join us for dinner. We can discuss your place at Winterfell in further detail then.”

“Thank you, my lord,” said Brienne. She stood. “I am overwhelmed by you and your family’s generosity. I pray that I will be able to repay it in kind.”

Ned called for a steward to escort Brienne to rooms. Sansa watched the Maid of Tarth stride away, her blond hair glinting in the sunlight.

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“She is the sworn shield of myself and Arya,” said Sansa fiercely. “Before that she was sworn to mother. Brienne of Tarth is the finest knight I have ever known, and she protected us to the last.”

Her father looked weary.

“What am I to tell your mother?” Ned asked. “That this woman has come here to fulfill an oath that has not yet been made? It sounds like madness.”

“You resolved to tell Mother anyway,” Arya pointed out. “This is the perfect opportunity.”

“Where has Jon gone?” asked Sansa anxiously. “We need to speak with Brienne as soon as possible.”

“And you’re sure,” said Ned. “Absolutely sure that this woman remembers. There is no other explanation?”

“She would not be here if she did not remember,” insisted Sansa. “She would be a thousand miles away on Tarth if she did not. She would join Renly Baratheon’s service. After the Lannisters killed Robert Baratheon, she aided Renly in his bid for the crown. But Renly was killed by a shadow
monster that was conjured by a binder from Asshai in the service of Stannis Baratheon and Brienne was blamed for his death - ”

Her father groaned and waved her away. “It is too much at the moment, Sansa, please.”

“We must see Brienne now,” said Arya. “She must have been alone with nothing but her thoughts ever since she woke up. I cannot imagine what it must have been to wake up alone like that.”

Jon appeared suddenly, barreling through the door. “Brienne - ”

“ - we are going to see her right now,” said Sansa.

“I will occupy your mother while you do this,” said Ned grimly. “But afterwards, I expect that we shall have more words.”

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Sansa cleared the maids from Brienne’s room briskly, asking that she be allowed to speak with the woman privately. After they all scurried away. Brienne rose to speak.

“My lady - ” Brienne began.

“A moment, Brienne,” Sansa instructed. She darted to the door, and ushered Arya and Jon in.

“Brienne!” Arya cried out, enthusiastic and grinning.

“Brienne, thank you for coming,” said Jon.

Brienne looked desperately hopeful as she looked between them. “Do you - I did not think that - ”

“We three remember,” Sansa assured her, coming forward and laying a hand on Brienne’s arm.

Brienne exhaled, and placed her own hand atop Sansa’s. “I had not dared to hope. I intended only to come and plead my case. So that I might be able to protect you from some of what is to come.”

“Lady Sansa, I offer you my services once again.”

*And Sansa is drenched in blood and fear, soaked from the freezing water of the river. Ramsay’s men are strewn like lifeless dolls in the snow. Theon is trembling beside her, and Sansa is filled with such relief, and such grief that she almost cannot bear it.*

“It was wonderfully noble and brave of you to do so,” said Sansa. “And I thank you. We all do.”

“What was it like for you?” demanded Arya. “When you died, when you woke?”

“Arya,” scolded Sansa.

“No, my lady, I do not mind,” said Brienne. She turned to Jon. “We had ridden out to find the Wall in pieces.” Jon lowered his head at her words. “The Night King rode Daenerys’ dragon, that he had risen from the dead.”

Sansa sucked in a terrified breath.

“We fought as well and valiantly as we could,” Brienne said in a faltering voice. “I beside Ser Jaime. He fell under the sheer weight of the monsters. It was nothing that any man could handle. I do not remember exactly what it was that killed me, just the coldness and pain of death. And then
it was gone. And I woke on Tarth.”

“I am sorry,” said Jon. His eyes were glassy with tears. “I am sorry that it ended that way for you.”

“I never expected to be a great warrior,” said Brienne. “But I died like one. Protecting those who needed me. And that is all I will ever ask of this world.”

“We have need of you now,” said Sansa. “We have told our Father, and he believes us. It is our intention to change the future, and we will need him to do it. His belief is even more solidified in the wake of your arrival.”

“That is good,” said Brienne. “It is an impossible story to tell, and even more impossible to believe.”

“Are there any others that you know of?” pressed Arya. “Any others who remember?”

“Not that I know of,” said Brienne, with a wary look. “I did not know that I was not the only one until arriving here. Do you suspect that there are others?”

“We cannot know,” muttered Jon. “It could be any one.”

“We must be watchful,” declared Sansa. “But still we must carry on. Brienne, my mother knows nothing of this. My father has been reluctant to tell her. He does not know what she will do or say with this information. I hope that with you here, you will be able to help us tell her our story.”

“I will,” said Brienne. “I will gladly tell my story if it will be of some help to you. And I will do my best to protect your mother. I was once sworn to her as well, and I do not intend to break that oath. I will do in this life what I could not in another.”

“Do not blame yourself,” Sansa urged her. “We must look to the future, not dwell on the past. After dinner, we will discuss further with Father. Until then, rest and regain your strength. Your presence here is valued more than I can express.”

“Thank you, my lady,” said Brienne. “Until my end, I am yours.”
Thank you so much to everyone who read and/or commented! I’m so glad y’all like this story, I love writing it. I know everyone is excited to see who comes back! Hint: Seven people are scheduled to come back, and each person is associated with one face of the Seven. Guess away!!

“You’ve never married then?”

“No, my lady,” said Brienne, looking up at Catelyn. “I thought I might, when I was younger. My father was quite convinced of it. But I did not find it to be in my future.”

“And you see future in being a knight?” asked Robb curiously.

“I do, my lord,” Brienne said with a smile. “As long as I am able to fight, I will. It brings me purpose and joy.”

“Brienne is a great warrior,” agreed Arya. “Perhaps she would be willing to spar with us, so that we may see her skills.”

Catelyn frowned at her youngest daughter. “With your brother perhaps.”

Ned leaned in to ask Brienne how the Stormlands were faring, and Sansa took the opportunity to scan the hall for Jon.

As was usual, he was sitting at the back of the hall - too far to hear what Brienne was saying though he must be curious. He looked up and caught her watching him, giving her a soft smile.

He didn’t look like a bastard anymore, she realized. Perhaps it was the cant of his head that was making her Lady Mother so suspicious. He didn’t slouch his shoulders, or hunch his back. He didn’t look as though he was lost. The small, sullen motherless boy who Sansa had given little thought to was gone. He sat like a man grown, a king, a commander. A man who had an army at his back, and a plan to save them all.

_Arya was wrong_, Sansa thought absently. _He’s noticeable too._

She wished he was seated up here, beside her, beside Robb. It was what he deserved, and they needed him.

He was still watching her, although she supposed it could be that she was still watching him. Sansa wondered what he was thinking, if he too, was imagining himself taking the seat beside her at the high table.

But would that say?

_Who should the North rally around? The trueborn daughter of Ned and Catelyn Stark? Or a motherless bastard born in the south?_
Sansa flinched as the memory of Littlefinger’s silky voice poured into her ear.

“Jon is my family,” she had told him. “We have taken the North, and rallied the people together.”

“And you think you shall rule together?”

“I trust Jon.”

“Trust, my dear, is only an illusion, the perception of security. Those who are foolish enough to fall prey to it, will always lose.”

This is no longer a game, she had wanted to tell him. But it wasn’t true, it would never be true. It was all a game, every bit of it. She was so tired of playing games.

“Perhaps I shall lose then,” Sansa told him. The sly smile that slid across his face at her words made her cold as ice. “But I would not hold your breath, Lord Baelish.”

Bran dropped his knife with a clatter beside her, and she was startled enough to look away from Jon. She refocused on Brienne, and pretended not to notice the empty space at the table.

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“You are going to let her stay?” asked Catelyn regarding her stoic husband. He had offered no true explanation of his decision, simply pointed out how set Sansa and Arya were on the Maid of Tarth staying.

“She is a noble, honorable woman, who has asked to serve us,” said Ned. “She has journeyed far, I see no reason to send her away.”

“But what are her reasons for coming?” pressed Catelyn. She shook her head in disbelief. “Women do not suddenly spring from their beds in Tarth and travel such a distance to serve a noble family they know nothing of! It doesn’t make sense, Ned. You truly believe what she says? That she came all this way for honor?”

Ned hesitated, and Catelyn snapped under the weight of her discretion.

“I will not just stand here, as our family suffocates under its secrets,” Catelyn said harshly. Seventeen years she had been a woman of the North, and she felt it now, the bite of ice in her words. “Do you think I have not noticed the changes in you, in the children? Our children? I notice, Ned. I love you. I love our children, and it terrifies me to think that there is some unknown that has cast such a dark shadow over you all.”

Ned was quiet, his hands clasped tightly in his lap.

His silence cut deep. She could not help but be thrust back to those first few weeks at Winterfell. Robb at her breast, whispering maids, and a husband, silent as the grave, his bastard held up for all the North to see.

“You have never trusted me with your secrets,” continued Catelyn. Never ask me about Jon. He is my blood, and that is all you need to know. “And I have had to live with that. But I will not stand aside, not now. You will tell me the truth, Lord Stark.”

“You have not called me that since the day you put Robb in my arms,” murmured Ned.

“Your son, Lord Stark.”
And she had offered her precious babe to the husband she scarcely knew. Catelyn hated how her eyes darted from Robb’s red curls and blue eyes to see his reaction. It wounded her that Robb had come looking nothing like a Stark, when the bastard boy looked every bit Ned’s son.

But Ned had smiled so tenderly down at their babe, and kissed his tufted auburn head with an air of awe.

“Thank you,” he had told her. “Thank you, my lady.” He was as solemn and serious as she remembered, but there was softness in him now as he held their son.

“You might call me Catelyn, my lord,” she said. “Or Cat, if you wish.”

“Cat,” he repeated. He nodded. “And you may call me Ned.” He smiled then. “If you wish.”

“I call you this to remind you of your duty to me,” said Catelyn. “To me and to your family.”

He looked up at her, looking so terribly shamed. She blinked, trying to rid the tears that had welled up in her eyes.

“Yes,” Ned said finally. “I have kept secrets from you. I did what I thought was best, and I will stand by that. But you are also right. Keeping this from you has not spared you in the least, only frustrated and worried you, my love. Fetch Robb. Leave Bran and Rickon in their beds. I will collect the other children and the Maid of Tarth. We will speak at length then, about what has been troubling us so.”

His admittance did not bring the relief she had expected. Instead, she was fearful. But she conquered it, nodding at her husband, and stepping out to find Robb.

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Jon trailed behind the rest of them, as they walked quickly towards Ned’s solar.

“It might be best if I was not there for this conversation,” Jon murmured.


Jon looked unconvinced.

“Jon,” said Sansa turning to him. “Robb will be there. Robb trusts you more than anyone. He will want to hear this from you.”

“Your mother - ” Jon began.

“Sansa and Arya are right,” said Ned. “I do not doubt that this will be an upsetting night for Catelyn. Your presence will not affect that. And Robb will need you.”

With that, Ned pushed open the door and stepped through. Sansa followed him, Brienne, Jon, and Arya behind her.

Robert was slumped in a chair, rubbing his eyes in annoyance. Sansa could not imagine what their mother had said to pull him from bed at such an hour. Catelyn stood behind him, her fingers digging into Robb’s shoulder.

“Father,” complained Robb. “What is the meaning of this? Mother will tell me nothing. What is going on?”
“What is he doing here?” Catelyn’s eyes had snapped to Jon, and Sansa thought she could feel Jon flinch back.

“Jon needs to be here,” said Ned. “He plays a part in this as well.”

It was the wrong thing for her father to say. Her mother’s eyes widened. “What has the boy done?” Catelyn whispered, low and furious. “I told you the girls shouldn’t be around him, and you wouldn’t listen.”

“Jon wouldn’t hurt us!” Arya said hotly.

“Hush, Arya,” said Catelyn. “You’re not to be alone with him anymore.”

“Stop,” Sansa commanded, holding up hand to her mother and Arya. Both quieted at the intensity in her voice. “Jon hasn’t hurt us, this isn’t anything like that. We’ve called you here to listen, and that is what we need you to do. You too, Robb.”

The room was quiet, the fire crackling in the corner.

Her mother looked as though she might argue, but after glancing at Ned, she settled back, her mouth in a tight, worried line.

Robb was staring at her, his brow puckered in confusion. He’s only still a child. The thought made Sansa terribly sad.

“We have a story to tell you,” said Sansa, her words slow and deliberate. “Not a very kind story. But you must listen, even if you do not wish to hear it.”

Her mother had gone quite still. Robb’s hands had scrunched up into fists on his knees.

“And it’s true,” said Sansa. “Every word of it.”

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They spoke for hours.

Robb laughed at them at first. Shook his head, waved his arms, shouted, paced a hole in the floor, and stared angrily into the fire.

“What is this?” he demanded, over and over. “How can you say these things?”

Catelyn said nothing, but she had been betrayed by her tears that began to fall when Sansa spoke of Ned’s death.

“I begged,” said Sansa, each word coming in a ragged, little gasps. “I begged Joffrey to spare him… but he… he… “ She broke off. “… I was so stupid.”

Arya took her hand, and stared at their joined hands while she spoke. “They killed him, they killed Father.” Her tone was blank. “I tried to run, I tried to save him, but I was too small. Yoren dragged me away, cut my hair. He smuggled me from the city as a boy set to join the Night’s Watch, but Sansa… Sansa stayed. Alone.”

“I was a prisoner of the Lannisters,” said Sansa dully. “The Key to the North they called me. Joffrey still intended to marry me then. Cersei knew that Robb would call our banners when he heard of Father’s death. And you did. You led an army South, won battle after battle. But it wasn’t enough.”
“The Riverlands were torn to pieces,” said Arya. “A waking nightmare, the rivers ran black with death.”

“They named you King in the North,” Sansa said to Robb. “Five kings fought for the realm. When Renly rose, Stannis killed him. Stannis sailed on King’s Landing, but Cersei had been stocking wildfire beneath the city, and Tyrion poured it into the Blackwater Bay and lit it alight. The Lannisters, the Tyrells by their side, emerged triumphant.”

Robb’s head was in his hands.

Sansa faltered.

“You married a healer that you met in the Westerlands,” said Arya. “Breaking the promise you had made to wed Walder Frey’s daughter when you brought your armies across the Trident. Instead you offered Edmure Tully. He married Roslin Frey, but the Frey’s broke guest rights. Roose Bolton stabbed you in the heart. Murdered your wife. Slit Mother’s throat. Killed your unborn babe. All at the behest of the Lannisters.”

“The Karstarks betrayed us,” said Sansa. “The Boltons betrayed us. Roose Bolton was given Winterfell, and he installed his… his son.” She choked on the last, and Jon made a terrible noise behind her.

“I thought there was nothing left for me here,” said Arya. “I left for Braavos. I wanted to become more than I was. To get revenge on those who had wronged us…”

Sansa doubt they would have been able to convince them without Father there. She could see that Robb was desperate to run, to cover his ears and hide. She knew that Catelyn longed to dismiss what they said, perhaps to scold them for worrying her so and send them off to bed. But they were held there by Ned’s solid, unwavering presence. Her father didn’t speech much, but his silent support anchored them.

Finally, when it was all done, her mother turned to Brienne. “You remember too, I suppose.”

“Yes, my lady, I do,” affirmed Brienne. “When I awoke on Tarth, I did not believe it either. But it is the truth. I came to Winterfell because I was and am sworn to your family. I swore an oath to you, I swore an oath to both your daughters. And I intend to uphold it to the end of my days, however many times I stand on this earth.”

Catelyn watched her, looking so very, very tired. Sansa stared at the spots that her mother’s tears had made on her silk collar.

“The day I swore myself to you,” continued Brienne. “You were weary, just as you are now. Weary from pain, from suffering, from loss. Yet you continued on, and I wondered at the courage you had. Anyone would have said the gods had forsaken you, but you did not falter. A woman’s kind of courage I called it, such strength. Have courage now, my lady, as I know you do. We speak the truth.”

The room fell oppressively silent. Robb looked stricken. His hands were shaking.

“I must go.” Her mother’s words were choked with grief.

“Cat,” said Ned, reaching for his wife. She shook her head and stepped away from him.

“I will consider what you have told me here tonight,” said Catelyn in a hollow voice. “But it is late, and I must go. I must pray.”
“Mother…” Sansa whispered.

Catelyn stepped to her, Kissed her hair, and did the same for Arya. And then she was gone.

“I will pray as well,” said Ned, stiffly, getting to his feet. “My soul is weary.”

Robb had not moved. His face was a mixture of grief and fear.

Sansa moved to go to him, but Jon caught her and held her back.

“Let me,” he said gently. “Let me speak to my brother.”

Sansa nodded, releasing his arm with reluctance. She followed Arya and Brienne down the hall, but her thoughts turned back to her mother, to Robb. Telling them the truth, seeing their pain, it broke her heart.

But in doing so, she had promised herself that these things would never again come to pass.

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They walked in silence. Robb had muttered something about fresh air, so they had gone up on the ramparts. The night was calm and still. Jon tilted his head back. The stars twinkled, almost mockingly so. What a beautiful night to be filled with such pain.

“It’s true, isn’t it.”

Jon turned to Robb. The look in his brother’s eyes was brutal.

“You wouldn’t lie to me,” Robb said. “Father wouldn’t lie. The girls wouldn’t lie. Not about something like this.”

“Aye it’s true,” said Jon, his words escaping in a puff of white. “I’m sorry, brother.”

“The girls have been strange,” said Robb, with a distant look in his eye. “I didn’t notice, not really, until I thought about. How could I not have noticed?” He turned sharply to Jon. “And you. Keeping this from me, how could you?”

Robb was hovering on the edge of anger, but Jon felt nothing but sadness in return.

“How could I share something like this?” asked Jon. “How could I burden you with this, with all this? If it were possible, I would have never told you. Never hurt you like this. But I believe you need this information to make different choices. You need to be able to protect yourself, to help me protect our home, our family. I cannot do this without you. I didn’t do it without you, I failed.”

Jon ducked his head to catch his breath.

“Sansa didn’t tell you?”

“No. Nothing.”

Arya was wary. She swallowed before speaking.

“We burned.”

“You lasted longer than me,” said Robb. His words seemed to make the air colder. “You stayed with them. With Arya, Sansa, Bran, and Rickon. You were there for them when I… I wasn’t.”
The pound of Jon’s heart made him dizzy.

*She gave Rickon milk of the poppy. He never felt a thing.*

“I wasn’t,” Jon said, his voice cracking. “Not really. I couldn’t protect them in the end. I couldn’t even protect myself. I was long dead when the Night King came for them.”

“You’re here now,” Robb said. A sudden fierceness buoyed him. “As am I. And I intend to stay. We’re going to destroy our enemies, you and I. No one will ever touch us again. No one will ever touch our family again.”

Robb’s eyes blazed, his chin lifted defiantly.

*This is the man they called the Young Wolf.* Jon realized. This is the man that rose armies, and won battles. Who dragged the Kingslayer from the field, who spit on Tywin Lannister. King Robb, who had claimed the Northern throne for the first time in centuries.

What would Robb have done? If Daenerys Targaryen had ordered him to bend the knee in return for an army?

Together we are so much stronger, Jon resolved. He reached out, and placed a hand on Robb’s shoulder.

“We will,” said Jon. “I swear it to you. Here and now. No one will touch us again.”
Sansa woke to her mother running her fingers through her hair. She rolled over to see Catelyn watching her with a small, sad smile. Sansa sighed, and pressed her head into her mother’s hands.

Catelyn began to hum, low and sweet. It was a hymn that Sansa recognized from when she had been small. *I went down to the river to pray.* Sansa basked in the moment, feeling as though she was being cradled in the palm of her mother’s hand.

“I’m sorry, Mother,” Sansa whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

Catelyn urged Sansa to sit up. She did, and her mother unwove her long braid. Sansa allowed her head to fall back as Catelyn began to pull a brush through her hair.

“You have such beautiful hair, my darling,” said Catelyn. “Red as the weirwood. It is your crowning glory.”

“I love my hair,” murmured Sansa. “I love that I look like you.”

Catelyn hummed, and worked diligently until Sansa’s hair streamed like red silk down her back.

“Before,” Sansa said, hesitating. “I dyed my hair to go unnoticed. I hated it. I felt like I had lost myself, like I wasn’t your daughter anymore.”

She waited with bated breath for her mother to respond. It was quiet.

“Tell me.” Catelyn began braiding Sansa’s hair.

So Sansa spoke. Told her mother that she had fled King’s Landing after the death of King Joffrey. That she had pretended to be the bastard daughter of a nobleman. A man that slid his hands beneath her skirts even as he forced her to call him father. That she had been sold away to marry the bastard Bolton who desecrated their home.

Sansa was careful in her telling. She did not tell her mother that it was Littlefinger’s face that she saw leering in the shadows. She did not say that sometimes in her dreams Lysa’s cruel fingers dragged through her hair, and she was falling through the moon door.

“I prayed to the gods after you told me,” said Catelyn. “I fell to my knees in the sept and begged them for mercy.”

“I’m sorry, Mother.” Sansa bowed her head. “I did not want to burden you with this. I never wanted to hurt you.”

“She.” Catelyn knelt before her, and clasped their hands together tightly. “I want you to listen to me, just as I have listened to you. If what you have told me is true, then you have lived through terrible things. You have been forced to endure things that no child should, without me and without
your father.”

“I am no longer a child, Mother.” Sansa’s tears thickened her voice. “I haven’t been a child for years now. I have survived my trials, I am a woman grown.”

“You will always be my child,” whispered Catelyn. “No matter the woman you have or will become. You have bore your responsibilities with grace and dignity, but that does not mean that you should have ever had to suffer what you did. You have done beautifully, my love, but you must share your burden now. I am your mother, it is my job to dry your tears and mend what has been broken. Never feel that you must hide your suffering in order to protect me. Promise me this. In return, I will promise to always listen and to trust what you say is true.”

“Family, Duty, Honor.”

“These are the words of my father’s house,” her mother had told her when Sansa was small. “They are a part of you.”

“Family, Duty, Honor,” Sansa had repeated crossing her stitches as she did.

“Tullys draw their strength from the river.”

Sansa watched her mother’s fingers fly, sure and swift with her own needle and thread.

“The river does not alter course. It does not bow to any obstacle. Its power is as old the gods themselves, and just as unyielding.”

Sansa had shivered. Her mother’s words had sounded strange and eerie. Old Nan had told her once of a little girl who had thought to cross a frozen river, and had been dragged below by the black waters when the surface cracked. Ever since, Sansa had dreamed of dreadful things that lived in the dark bottoms of rivers, forever grasping for her with their pale hands.

“You are a child of the river.” Catelyn continued. “We carry that strength inside us. Always remember that.”

None of the maidens in the songs and stories that Sansa loved were strong. They were as beautiful as a blooming rose, as dainty as the finest lace. They sung sweetly, and danced like feathers on the wind. Sansa longed to be like them, lovely and fair as the dawn.

When her septa spoke of her mother, she praised Catelyn’s beauty, her devotion to her husband and children. Her fine bloodline and southern graces. She never said a word about her mother’s sharp eyes and quick tongue. The way her mother stared down the Northern Lords who spoke to her with disparaging words. How Catelyn could recall the names and faces of every person who crossed the threshold of Winterfell, in addition to many of those across the Seven Kingdoms.

But Sansa had promised her mother she would remember. She didn’t know then, the strength that her smiles and curtseys would one day hold.

“Thank you for trusting me,” said Sansa. “I promise to trust you in return.”

Catelyn pressed a kiss to the side of her head, lingering there for a moment.

“Mother,” said Sansa. Anxiety rose up in her throat. “Can I ask you one more thing?”

“Anything, darling.”
“Jon.”

Catelyn’s breath hitched, and she leaned back from Sansa. Apprehension settled heavy over her mother’s face, and Sansa wondered exactly what it was that Catelyn thought she was going to say.

“I do not ask that you love him,” said Sansa. She held her head high and straight, needing her mother to hear her, to listen. “But Jon was the first one who fought for me. He saved me, Mother. He saved Rickon, together we took back our home from the Boltons. He…” Sansa struggled with the words. “He sacrificed himself to try and stop the end of the world. I ask that you treat him with respect, nothing more.”

“You think I was wrong to treat Jon Snow as I did.” Her mother did not ask it as a question.

“I do not presume to know what it was like to have my husband bring another woman’s child for me to raise beside my own,” Sansa said. “You are my mother, and I love and honor you. But Jon is not at fault for Father’s choices. Jon is here, beside me, beside us. Please recognize that.”

“You ask this of me?” Catelyn’s jar was tight.

“Yes,” said Sansa. “Please.”

“I will not promise it,” said her mother, slowly. “But I will not dismiss what you have said. I will consider it.”

“Thank you, Mother.”

Anxious to soothe the sudden tension, Sansa reached for her mother and Catelyn willingly took her in her arms.

“You can come to me with anything,” Catelyn said, holding Sansa tightly. “No matter what comes to pass, I will always love you.”

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Sansa looked at the faces of her loved ones. They were grim, terrified, but they were here. She placed her hands on Father’s desk, and rose to her feet.

“We are gathered here, all of us, to change what is to come,” said Sansa in a measured tone.

“Aye, like a war council,” called Arya.

“A bit like that, yes,” agreed Sansa. “Though we will endeavor to delay the outbreak of war for a while yet. What’s coming for us now is the catalyst of it all. When Jon Arryn is murdered, Robert Baratheon will ride North with the Lannisters to ask Father to be his Hand. It was the beginning of the end for us.”

“So we stop it,” said Ned. “I’ll take a horse and some men and ride hard South. We’ll apprehend the murderer and alert Jon.”

Sansa drew a quick breath. “Yes,” she said. “But no. That’s not what we’re going to do.”

Ned reared back from her. Catelyn and Robb looked shocked.

“You’re asking me to let Jon Arryn die,” said Ned in disbelief. “Sansa that man raised me. I loved him like a father. He rode to battle rather than hand my head to the Mad King.”
“Let Sansa explain,” Jon cut in. “She would never suggest this if there weren’t good reasoning behind it.”

“First of all,” continued Sansa, with an uneven breath. “You cannot apprehend the murderer. I doubt Jon Arryn would believe you if you told him.”

“And who is this murder?” demanded Ned.

Sansa met her sister’s eyes. Arya gave her a barely perceptible nod.

Sansa turned to Catelyn. “You promised me, Mother. Anything I say, you will listen. You will trust me, even if it is painful to you?”

Catelyn stared at her. Finally, she nodded, reaching out to take Ned’s hand. He held it tightly.

“Lysa Arryn will murder Jon Arryn using a poison called the Tears of Lys.”

Sansa ignored her mother’s cry and continued.

“She will drop the poison in his wine as he takes supper. After his death, she will flee King’s Landing with young Robert to await the arrival of Lord Petyr Baelish. He was the one who supplied her with the poison. Lysa loved him desperately since she was a girl. She was horribly jealous of the fact that he loved you, Mother. Loves you still, sickly and obsessively.”

“No,” whispered Catelyn. “Lysa wouldn’t… she wouldn’t have the courage… she wouldn’t.”

“She will,” said Sansa. “She told me herself. This is what he asked her for.”

“I knew Petyr as a boy,” gasped Catelyn. “Lysa and I both did. He had a boy’s affection for me - I begged Brandon to spare him, he was no threat.”

“He’s a festering worm of a man,” snarled Arya. “I slit his throat for his crimes. You don’t know what he did to us, Mother. We were pawns in his little game. You don’t know what he did to Sansa, what he terrors he inflicted upon her.”

Catelyn appeared shaken from her stupor. “What… what did he do to you, Sansa.”

Sansa looked away. Shame made her hot and uncomfortable. “I was young, and frightened. I thought he was a friend, that he would save me from the Lannisters. He said he would help me because he had loved Catelyn Tully all of his life. He could never have you though, so he settled for me. He smuggled me into the Vale disguised as his bastard daughter, Alayne. Kissed me and told me how beautiful I was, the spitting image of my mother. Kissed me while he made me call him, Father. Aunt Lysa was furious when she saw him touch me. I had thought she would love me, that she would be kind, but she was blinded by him. She accused me of seducing him, and tried to throw me out the Moon Door. Littlefinger stopped her, and pushed her out instead. Later, he sold me to Roose Bolton’s bastard, who hurt me in terrible ways. They haunt my dreams still.”

“It’s true,” said Brienne to Sansa’s relief. “Every word of it. Lady Sansa was half-dead in the snow when I found her surrounded by Ramsey’s hounds. She leapt the ramparts of Winterfell to escape the Bolton bastard. Littlefinger is one of the most dangerous men in the Seven Kingdoms.”

“It is Littlefinger who orchestrated our demise.” Jon’s voice was tight with fury. “He doomed us all, not that he ever lived to see the end of what he wrought. I will take pleasure in wrapping my hands around his throat, and wringing the breath from his lungs.”
Sansa looked at her parents. Ned’s hands were clenched in fists so tight, his flesh was white. Catelyn was taking short, sharp breaths and staring into space.

Robb stood suddenly, and walked across the room. He seized a vase and vomited noisily into it. When it was done, Robb set the vase down, and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. If anything, Sansa noted in shock, expelling his stomach had put some of the color back in his cheeks.

He sat down next to Sansa, and squeezed her hand. She was grateful for the warmth of his hand.

“We’re here,” said Robb. “To make a plan. Sansa, you were in the middle of telling us that plan. Tell us what we must do.”

Sansa nodded, and looked at her parent’s grief-stricken faces.

“Lord Arryn would not believe this even if you told him,” said Sansa. “We have no proof save our own memories. Furthermore, this is just the first assassination attempt that succeeded. Jon Arryn has many enemies in the capital. Even now, he is investigating his suspicions regarding the parentage of Robert’s children. Once he discovers that Cersei’s children are not Robert’s, he will certainly be killed by the Lannisters.”

“All of the Queen’s children are her own brother’s,” said Ned. “Is that right? The Kingslayer?”

“Yes,” confirmed Sansa. “Jon Arryn will realize this while investigating all of Robert’s other bastards. Bastards who were born with hair that is Baratheon black. If Jon Arryn lives, then he will tell Robert, and he will disinherit Cersei’s children.”

“Surely that is necessary,” said Ned, exhaling hard. “If that happens, the Lannisters’ will lose their grip on the crown and be forced to retreat.”

“No,” said Sansa. “If it were that simple I would send you at once. The Lannisters will not be so easily vanquished. The Crown is millions of pounds of gold in debt to Tywin Lannister. The Lannisters control the Westerlands, and all its armies. If Robert dis inherits, the realm will be thrown into chaos. Chaos which will run one of two ways. Either Robert will chose to legitimize one of his many bastards, or pass the throne to one of his brother. If a bastard inherits, he will be torn to pieces by the Lannisters and the Baratheon brothers. If one of the brothers inherits, the wronged one will rip the other’s throat out. Either way, we will be facing down a war that will rip the South to shreds and spit it out.”

“And we need the South to be at peace for a while longer,” said Jon. “We need to mine dragonglass from Dragonstone, and we need to bring the materials and gold that will allow us to build glass gardens. Both of those things are absolutely paramount if we are to increase our odds against the Others.”

Sansa looked to her father. He sat silently, grief etched into his solemn features.

“I cannot do nothing,” said Ned. “I cannot, and I will not. Sansa, child, to save a man’s life is no small matter.”

“To delay the start of the war will save hundreds, thousands perhaps,” said Arya. “I lived that war, Father, I know what happens to men and women, to children in war. It is not dishonorable to think of the larger picture.”

Ned was silent.

“Jon Arryn’s death will not be your doing,” Sansa said gently. “And I wish for your sake that it
wasn’t so. But this is a choice we must make.”

Ned said hunched, his great shoulders bent with guilt and indecision. Sansa thought of the boy her father had once been, a warrior at the head of Jon Arryn’s rebellion. He would have never left a man behind. But the world was so much changed.

“Sansa is right,” said her mother. Catelyn’s eyes were sharp and steady.

“Aye,” said Robb. “I support this choice. This war must be held off at all costs.”

“And we have another war to contend with,” said Jon. “A war of cunning. The moment we find ourselves on unsteady ground, we will be lost.”

It was a long time before her father spoke. They sat quietly, giving him the peace to think. Finally, he did.

“I pride myself on being an honorable man,” Ned said deliberately. “It is who I am, who I have always been. It has served me well in life. I have had little cause to doubt that in life, yet I find myself faced with such doubt now. I do not want my family to suffer again, I do not want the people of these kingdoms to suffer. I will not abandon honor, and I will question our decisions now and in the future. But I see the reason in what you say. I will mourn Jon Arryn deeply. I will honor him when we put this kingdom back together.”

Sansa could see the sweat on her father’s brow, the tension in his shoulders. She was all at once terribly proud, and terribly sad.

“When Robert comes for me,” said Ned. “What would you have me say for him?”

“The King is not a man to be refused,” said Sansa. “He is not one to be ignored either. However, he still harbors love for you and the boyhood you spent together. You can bargain with him. Accept the position as the King’s Hand. Ask for two things in return. Ask that Stannis Baratheon allow the North to begin mining dragonglass. And ask that the Crown offer financial assistance in the creation of more glass gardens in the North. Robert will suggest a betrothal between myself and Joffrey. Carefully refuse him. Tell him that I am too young yet. While in the capital, we will do our best to extend Robert’s life. At least another year if possible. We need to get as much raw material into the North as possible. After Robert’s death, we will leave for Winterfell at once.”

“You and myself?” asked Ned.

“You, me -”

“Me,” said Arya.

“And I,” said Brienne.

“Not I,” said Jon. “I’ll be riding for the Wall.”

Sansa shot him a sharp look. It was irrational, she knew, to feel the hot stab of anger and disappointment, but it could not be helped. She had not even allowed herself to imagine that Jon would be by her side in the South, yet the disappointment in her throat told her that some part of her had been hoping for it.

“I should come with you to the capital,” said Catelyn. “I couldn’t bear it, to let you go into such danger.”
“No, Mother,” said Sansa. “I need you to stay here, to watch over Winterfell. Robb, Bran, and Rickon will stay here. You and Robb will keep order in the North. The castle needs to be prepared for Winter, and for the possibility of war.”

“We will see to that,” said Robb, coming around to place his hand on their mother’s shoulder. Catelyn put her hand over his.

Her father’s eyes were far away as he gazed into the fire. Sansa knew that his decision about Jon Arryn was the kind of choice that would live in his bones for the rest of his days. A man like Ned Stark never forgot.
I realized while writing this chapter that Ned receives the letter about Jon Arryn the same day they find the direwolves. I had been thinking there was more time between those events. So, chapter nine has been adjusted to include a conversation about Jon Arryn. Enjoy!

Ned felt as fragile as a leaf. The weight of Catelyn in his arms, and the heavy furs atop him did nothing to settle him. Her tears were still wet on his shoulder as he gently ran his fingers over his wife’s arm.

“I’m proud of you,” whispered Catelyn. “I know this was a difficult choice, my love.”

“No,” said Ned in grief. “Do not. Do not be proud of me for this.”

How absurd it seemed that he almost wished for Jon’s counsel on this. It had been years since he last laid eyes on Jon Arryn. The passage of time had not been kind to Jon as he struggled under the weight of ruling Robert’s holdings and his own. Yet, he had remained as steady as ever, holding the kingdoms together with a patient, prudent hand.

Even now, Ned remembered the first time he had climbed the steps of the Eyrie. He had finished the journey, dizzy and wretched, terribly sure that his father had been mistaken and he was to return at once to Winterfell to feel the solid earth beneath his feet.

But Jon had been there to steady him, handing him a stiff, warm drink.

“You’re not used to the air up here, lad,” Jon had explained. Ned sputtered and puffed when he tried to drink, and it dribbled down his chin. The girl who had led Ned’s mule up the mountain giggled behind her fingers.

The Eyrie was beautiful and deadly all at once. Its slim, white towers seemed to Ned like dangling spirals of ice. Nothing like the solid, grey stone of Winterfell.

“Your lungs will open before long,” Jon told him. “This is your home now. Your breath will come back to you.”

And it did. Ned felt as if he had never breathed so well. No longer was he the second son of a great house. Now he was the pride of Jon Arryn, brother to Robert Baratheon, a warrior and a man in his own right.

He missed his home and his family. He saw Lyanna in the girls who hopped up the steps to the Eyrie as deft as mountain goats. He saw Benjen in the stable boys that tussled in the hay, and Brandon in the brash sons of the Lords of the Vale. But there was a delight in him that settled in his chest when Robert teased that he was much too like their foster father, even in the sameness of their solemn faces.

He had thought of Jon when he held his sister’s child in his arms. The tiny babe had squalled when he carefully taken him from Lyanna’s limp arms. Ned thought he should hate this child, the curse
that Rhaegar Targaryen had left upon his sister. But he did not. Instead, he held the babe to his chest, and swore Howland Reed to secrecy.

And he had given the babe the name Jon. A good name, a kind name. He had never told Jon Arryn the truth of his namesake, but he was sure that Jon would have understood. Would have nodded slowly and thoughtfully while Ned explained that the life and safety of his sister’s child was more important than Robert’s vendetta, than his wife’s trust, than what the kingdom thought of his honor.

And what would Jon say now? Now that Ned thought to let him die to hold a fragile peace.

I was an old man when we rode to war, Jon’s voice whispered in Ned’s ear. An older man still when I took on Hand of the King. And now, all these years past. What is the life of an old man against a kingdom?

Catelyn pressed her lips to his neck, and then drew back.

“I was thinking of Jon,” murmured Ned. “And what counsel he might offer me.”

“Jon Arryn is a man of duty,” said Catelyn. “He would tell you to do right by the kingdom. No matter the cost.”

“I think he would,” Ned admitted. “But I am no less grieved.” He turned to his wife. “What of your sister? She will be vulnerable without Jon. A single woman at the head of the Vale with a sickly heir.”

Catelyn squeezed her eyes shut as if in pain. “I cannot save Lysa from herself. She has had a harsh life what with the loss of so many babes. But she has chosen to walk this path. I cannot forgive her for causing such pain and chaos to suit her own needs. And to think she would forsake my child out of jealousy. I do not doubt Sansa’s words are true, I only wish it wasn’t so. To think she would choose a lover over a child of her own flesh and blood.”

And Ned could feel the echo of her rage and sorrow pounding in his chest.

“Peace has been wrenched from me ever since I have learned of the horrors that could await us,” said Catelyn. “I doubt I shall ever find it again.”

“We will make it then,” Ned promised, thinking of long summer days and their children’s laughter on the breeze. “I give you my word.”

Catelyn held tighter to him, hiding them both beneath the furs. She shivered, and Ned drew her closer trying desperately to make her warm.

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“You knew I had to leave,” said Jon. “It is the only way.”

“Just because it is inevitable does not mean that I should have to pretend to be pleased about it,” snapped Sansa.

She could feel herself receding into herself, becoming cold and angry. The guilt that started to seep across Jon’s face was almost too much. She wanted to shout at him, rake him, make him as angry as she was.

Instead, he was so soft it unmoored her.
“I’m sorry I have to go,” he whispered. “I wish nothing more than to stay. I never wanted to leave you.”

Sansa felt as lifeless as a doll. “I’m…” She stuttered, unsure. “I’m so tired, Jon. Everything that must be done, everything thing that is yet to come. How can I be so weary when we have not even begun?”

She shivered, and Jon drew her to his side, wrapping their cloaks around them. Sansa watched the shadows of their lantern dance on the trees. The wind whistled softly through the leaves.

“When this is all over,” asked Jon. “What would you like to do?”

Sansa frowned at him. “It’s not good to think of such things. It will only make me despondent of the work that we have yet to do.”

“I like to think of it,” said Jon. “It gives me hope.” He turned to Sansa. “We could go anywhere we wanted, do anything we wanted. I could take you to Dorne, to see Highgarden like you always wanted. Eat lemoncakes amongst the roses. And Winterfell will be waiting for us to return.”

“Is that what you pray for?” Sansa asked.

“Yes,” admitted Jon. “Some of it.”

_Some of it._ Sansa stiffened and pulled away.

“You’ll be able to do whatever you wish,” said Sansa. “You’ll be King of the Seven Kingdoms. Sitting at the side of the Dragon Queen.”

_She imagined them together, draped in decadent silks, scarlet against black. Her on the Iron Throne and Jon at her side, their dragons circling overhead. And she would have to proffer herself before the Dragon Queen, watch the woman’s cool, violet eyes drift over her. And Jon would be lost to them. Winterfell was no place for a Targaryen king._

Jon sucked in a quick breath. “Daenerys -”

“ - I don’t care to hear of her.” Sansa’s chest was tight again. “I know we need her dragons to fight the Others. I know we wouldn’t stand a chance without her as an ally. I know this. I don’t need to hear it again.”

“Sansa -”

“No!” said Sansa with fury. Her words cut through the night air. “I don’t care that you laid with the Dragon Queen. I don’t care if you loved her, or if you didn’t. If you pitied her or revered her. What I care about is our Kingdom, our family! You were gone for months and months, and we barely received word of where you were. I placated the Northern Lords - your bannermen wanted to crown me Queen, and I refused them! I vouched for you, spoke for you, waited endlessly for you to return. And you came back with _her_. And you were her lover, her family.”

_Not mine_, she stopped herself from adding. She would not dare let that thought come to light.

He was angry now, his jaw hard and his eyes dark. “I can’t help who I am!” He shouted back. “I can’t help who my mother was, who my father was. All I did, I did for you. We needed her dragons. What chance did we stand without them? We would have died -”

“We did die,” cried Sansa. “I burned! Arya burned! Rickon burned! Bran burned!”
Their cheeks were wet with tears. Jon was trembling in the wind.

“I thought you knew what I was doing,” Jon said. “You told me to listen to you, and I did! I was trying to be clever, I thought if I could sway her to our cause, it would all be worth it. I didn’t know... I didn’t know who I was, what I was to her. I didn’t know it would all go so terribly wrong.”

“I didn’t understand,” Sansa ground out. “How could I know? No word from you except to tell me that you’d bent the knee and handed away our kingdom!”

“I was trying to play the game like you told me to! I was trying to be manipulative! There are things you never shared with me. I didn’t know you had sent for the knights of the Vale, and yet they were what saved us that day.”

Sansa went cold. “You think I’m manipulative.”

A truer daughter there never was, Littlefinger whispered in her ear.

“Stop that,” Jon ordered hoarsely. “Stop twisting my words. Stop pushing me away.”

Sansa struggled for words. “I’m... I’m so angry, Jon. I’ve tried so hard not to be, but I cannot help it. It consumes me.” She stared up at him. “I thought we had suffered enough. It wasn’t enough.”

Jon was silent, his face in shadow.

Hesitantly, she touched his hand. “It was not just of me to treat you with anger. It was not you, it was... everything. Everything was sharp and painful and wrong.”

Jon folded her hand carefully in his. “I won’t make excuses,” he murmured. “Not to you. Never to you. I should have consulted you. I could have never taken our home back without you. You were the only person I trusted to rule the North. I should have trusted you more with other things. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want you to consult me because I brought you an army,” said Sansa. “You should consult me because I am a valuable, important, and worthy advisor. And your...” She could not think how to finish the thought.

“And I love you.”

“Yes,” said Sansa, the word slow and melancholy on her tongue. Not how I wish you would. I suppose that too.”

She sat down, tired and unsteady on her feet. He looked like a kicked pup, and she imagined she looked much the same.

He knelt in front of her. The cloak she had made for him pooled on the ground of the godswood. He offered his hands to her. After a moment, she reached out and took them.

“Will you forgive me,” he asked. “For what happened?”

Sansa was quiet for a moment. “You’re not at fault for what happened to us, Jon. You mustn’t think so.”

“I cannot help it,” said Jon, his voice cracking. “If I had only not made so many mistakes. If I had been faster somehow, stronger, better -”
“But we did make mistakes,” said Sansa. “All of us. So many mistakes. And that is what will allow us to change this world. We will not make the same mistakes again. We cannot change the past, but we can learn from it, and grow. Together.”

He met her eyes, and Sansa felt some of the tightness around her heart loosen. She closed her eyes, and dipped down so that their foreheads pressed together.

She listened to Jon’s sigh of relief, and then the steadiness of his breathing. There was so much threatening to drag them down. But they could weather it together.

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“I have received word that a deserter from the Night’s Watch has been found and been captured.”

Everyone went silent. Sansa had been expecting this when her father called them together, but his words still sent a frisson of fear through her. Everything was starting. This man represented the end of their summer.

“He is to be executed tomorrow.”

“We will go with you,” Arya said at once.

“Aye,” said Jon. “We must hear what he has seen.”

“I cannot spare him,” warned Ned. “He has broken an oath, and it is my duty to ensure that he faces punishment. I cannot be seen as faltering.”

“Aye,” said Jon, his smile strange. “He’s broken his oath.”

“So we go to this execution tomorrow,” said Robb. “And ask the man what he has seen. Then what?”

Despite the morbid hush that filled the room, Sansa felt her heart swell with absolute delight.

“The Direwolves,” she said, her eyes shining. “Tomorrow we will find them. I shall see Lady again.”

“Nymeria will be there,” sighed Arya.

“Ghost,” said Jon with a grin.

Robb leaned forward eagerly. “What name shall I give my wolf?”

“We can’t just tell you,” said Arya with a roll of her eyes. “Honestly, brother. You must pick the name that suits him.”

“But you already know which name I will pick,” said Robb squinting at her.

“Yes,” said Arya, laughter in her eyes. “And sometime tomorrow, so shall you. I hope. Unless you mess it up.”

“What happens if I mess it up?” demanded Robb.

Arya shrugged.

“Stop teasing, Arya,” Sansa scolded. “Robb don’t trouble yourself over it. You will know your
wolf when you see him, just as my heart will know Lady.”

“We must be careful tomorrow,” mused Jon. “Theon will be accompanying us, and he will be listening.”

“Does Theon choose a wolf as well?” Ned asked in disbelief.

“No,” said Jon. “He does not.”

“Bran is coming too, I think,” said Sansa turning to her father.

Ned leaned back in his chair, and stroked his chin. “I was thinking of bringing him,” he admitted. “He is just old enough now, and it is important that he see this.”

“Ned,” Catelyn protested. “He is still a babe yet, let him stay one a little longer.”

“Bran is a summer child,” Ned told her. “And autumn is fast upon us. He must be strong enough to face it.”

Catelyn looked displeased, but relented. And Sansa knew the feeling, of wanting to wrap Bran and Rickon up in furs and hide them away somewhere pain could not touch them.

But the boys were so much stronger than their mother knew.

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“Will they remember us?”

Sansa turned towards Arya, her eyes fluttering open. She had just been on the verge of sleep.

“Who?” Sansa murmured, frowning slightly.

“The wolves.”

“Oh.” Sansa could not say. Her stomach twisted up at the thought of Lady remembering her death. Of how Sansa had failed to protect her.

“I suppose it doesn’t really matter,” said Arya, fiddling with her furs. “They seemed to know us the first time too. Like they were destined for us.”

“We won’t lose them this time,” promised Sansa.

It was quiet.

“I’ve never apologized to you,” said Sansa. “About that day with the butcher’s boy, by the river.”

“It doesn’t matter, any longer,” Arya muttered into her pillow. She paused. “Mycah. His name was Mycah.”

“Mycah,” Sansa repeated. “It does matter. I hurt you, I hurt the Mycah. I should have taken your side, tried harder to defend you. Told the truth. You are my sister, I will be always be on your side.”

Arya sighed. “What could you have said? Joffrey was to be your husband, and he would have never forgiven you had you spoke against him. I should have known better than to play with Mycah, it was not safe for him.”
“No,” said Sansa. “Never blame yourself for that. You were a child, you did nothing wrong.”

“So were you,” said Arya softly. She turned over and reached her hand out to Sansa. Sansa grabbed it tightly. They hung on to each other. Sansa fell asleep holding her sister’s hand.
“Why have the girls come with us?” asked Theon. He craned around to stare at Arya and Sansa who rode somewhat behind the rest of them, deep in discussion.

“It is important that everyone witness this,” said Robb. He smiled down at Bran. “That’s why Bran has come with us today.”

Bran squirmed in his saddle. Jon put a hand on his shoulder.

“Do not worry, little brother,” said Jon. “It will not be so bad. But you must watch, and not turn away. Father will know if you do.”

“You’ll want to duck at the last minute,” added Theon. “To avoid the deserter’s blood.”

“Theon!” growled Robb. “Do not frighten Bran like that.”

“I’m not frightened!” cried Bran, though his heart had stuttered in fear at Theon’s words. “A knight cannot feel fear!”

“Knight’s feel fear,” said Jon. “But they do their duty despite it.”

“If you are going to be a knight,” said Robb. “Then you will need training. More than you are doing now.”

“Really?” asked Bran, gripping his saddle.

“Yes,” said Robb. “You are a Stark, and if you wish to be a Knight then you must be a great one. You must know how to protect yourself and others. We will begin seeing to your lessons immediately.”

“We?” snorted Theon. “I’m not wasting my time fighting a child. The swords are bigger than you, boy!”

“You will if my father commands it,” Robb shot back. “If I command it. And you will not call my brother, boy.”

Theon’s grin turned ugly and sullen. He kicked his horse hard, and rode further up ahead, near Ned and his men.

“You need to be careful with Theon,” Jon murmured to Robert. Bran craned his head to hear.

Robb swallowed. “Must I?”

“Yes.”

Bran looked between the two of them. All of the sudden it seemed a heavy weight had fallen across them.

“You needn’t defend me from Theon, Robb,” Bran said, sticking out his chest.

Robb laughed at that, and Bran deflated slightly. But then Robb leaned over and tousled his hair, and Bran felt a bit better.
“It’s my job to protect you,” said Robb. “Even from Theon. But we will let this slide. No use getting up in arms over something so small.”

“What did you say to Theon?” Sansa rode up near them, her blue eyes fixed on Theon’s hunched form that radiated tension.

“Nothing,” said Jon. He reached out as if to put his hand on Sansa’s arm, but then drew it back. “We will tell you later.”

Sansa’s pretty face was scrunched up. Was she angry? Why would she be angry? Bran did not know. Perhaps Theon was right. Sansa and Arya should not have come. They might fear the blood.

They arrived, and Bran strained to see the deserter. He was disappointed to find nothing but a small, scrawny figure dressed in ragged, black clothes. Bran had been expecting something more exciting, a menacing monster.

Father dismounted, and ordered the man brought to the block. The deserter muttered and twisted in the guardsmen’s grasp.

“You have broken the oath you swore and been sentenced to death for desertion,” Father said solemnly. “Speak, what would you say for yourself?”

Everyone leaned forward to hear. Arya almost toppled off her horse, but Sansa snatched the back of her cloak. Bewildered, Bran tried to listen as well.

“White Walkers,” the man choked out. “I saw them m’lord. The White Walkers, I saw them with my own eyes.”

The hairs stood up on the back of Bran’s neck, and he shivered. Jon exhaled hard beside him.

“Where?”

“Beyond the Wall. The Haunted Forest.” The man’s eyes darted frantically about. After a moment, he seemed to pull himself together. He looked up at Father. “I know I broke my oath, I know I’m a deserter. I should have gone back to the Wall and warned the brothers. But I saw what I saw. People need to know what’s coming. If you can get word to my family, tell them I’m not a coward. Tell them I’m sorry.”

“On my honor, I shall get word to your family,” said Father. He then said something so softly to the man that Bran could not make it out. Whatever he said made the deserter sag and go limp.

The guardsmen pulled him over the block, and Father drew Ice from his scabbard.

“In the name of Robert of the House Baratheon…”

Father’s voice became a rushing in his ears. But Bran did not look away as the great sword wrent the man’s head from his body. It happened so quickly. One minute the man was was there, and in the next his eyes were blank and empty.

*May the Others take them*. Bran had heard the curse fall from the lips of countless men whether in jest or anger. He knew the stories, knew how the brave heroes had slain the monsters thousands of years ago.

*Brandon was the oldest of the Stark names tracing all the way back to Bran the Builder. He was the first of Winter’s Kings, and the man who raised both Winterfell and the Wall from the ground*
with the help of giants.

Bran wondered what fear a man must have felt to build walls so high and so thick. White Walkers. Surely his father didn’t believe what this man said. He was rambling, chilled to the bone and starving after weeks of running.

It couldn’t be true. Monsters only existed in fables and dark fairy tales. Jory had told him so once when he was small and had cried at the thought of riding into the dark woods.

But if it was true. Bran looked at his sibling’s faces. They didn’t look as if they thought the deserter to be lying. They looked solemn and grim. Robb even looked a bit fearful, his brows drawn together in worry.

Bran touched nervously for the small sword that Father had gifted him to wear on special occasions. He needed to be brave for Robb, and Jon, and the girls and even baby Rickon. He would become the greatest knight the seven kingdoms had ever seen, as great as one of the men from the age of the heros. Then he’d be strong enough to fight any monster.

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“There!”

Sansa whipped around at her sister’s shriek, only to see Arya scrambling from her horse and falling clumsily to the ground.

“Arya!” screeched Sansa, pulling up the reins on her pony.

“It’s a stag,” called Arya. “A dead stag.”

Sansa slid down to the ground, followed swiftly by Jon and Robb. Theon and Bran seemed to regard them with shock, before dismounting as well.

The stag made a bloody sight, its belly ripped and one antler missing.

“What did this?” asked Theon, staring at the great beast. “A mountain lion?”

“There are no mountain lions in these woods,” said Ned. “Fan out and search for what did this.”

Arya and Sansa ran through the wet summer snow. Arya’s cry echoed out when they spotted the great direwolf laying in the sun. They stopped, unsure before the carnage. The direwolf’s blood was dried brown in the snow, and the stag’s broken antler stuck out crookedly from her neck.

There was movement below her, and Sansa knelt with tears in her eyes to pull Lady from the huddle of whimpering pups. She cradled Lady like a babe in her arms, kissing her sweet head. Lady’s tiny pink mouth nuzzled and searched at her fingertips.

Beside her, Arya had found Nymeria and was holding her tight. Arya’s eyes were closed as she rocked her wolf in her arms.

“By the gods,” said Jory Cassel, as he and Ned dismounted beside them. “Look at that great beast.”

“It’s a direwolf,” said her father softly. “She fought with the stag. They destroyed each other.” He knelt and withdrew the antler that was lodged in the wolf’s neck.

Robb knelt amongst the pups, looking over them intently. Finally, he bent down and picked up one
of the grey ones. It was small enough to sit in the cradle of his hands. He carefully stroked the pup’s head.

“Can I have one too?” asked Bran, his eyes wide with delight.

“Choose your pup,” said Robb triumphantly as he gazed down at his own.

“Direwolves don’t belong this far South,” Jory warned. “We ought to put them down before they lose their milk teeth. I wouldn’t like to face a pack like this when they’re grown.”

“I’ll start,” said Theon with a leer. He reached for his sword.

“No!” Bran cried.

“No,” said Sansa sharply. The look she leveled at Theon seemed to take him aback. “We will keep them.”

“Keep them?” Jory said, incredulously. He turned to Ned. “My Lord, it is far too dangerous to have these creatures running around.”

But her father only smiled. “We are Starks. And we do not fear the sigil of our own house.”

Jon came around with Ghost in the crook of his arm. “Six direwolves. One for each of my father’s children. It is meant to be.”

Sansa watched with pride and delight as Bran picked up Summer, and tucked him under his chin. Summer’s pink tongue flicked out, and Bran laughed.

“One left for Rickon,” said Robb. He picked up the last pup and handed it to his father.

“Please, Father!”

“Bran,” said Ned sternly, though his eyes were soft. “You may keep them, but owning a creature such as this is no small matter. You will feed them, care for them, train them. I will not have direwolves running wild in the castle.” He tucked Rickin’s pup into his cloak gently.

“Yes, Father!” Bran bent down, and rubbed his nose over Summer’s head.

They rode back, the pups safe in their arms while Jory looked on in disbelief. *Oh my sweet Lady,* Sansa thought. *You’ll grow this time. As fierce and strong as your siblings. And I will always keep you safe.*

So enamoured was she with the pup that lay tenderly against her breast, Sansa forgot for a moment, why her mother looked as pale as snow when they returned. She stood by the gate with Brienne, whose hand rested above her sword as if ready to defend Catelyn from invisible enemies.

“Bad news from the capital, my love,” Catelyn said to Ned. “Jon Arryn has passed.”

Sansa looked quickly to her father. He betray nothing. His face slid into the mask of Lord Stark that he had worn only just this morning.

“May the gods rest his soul,” said Ned evenly. “I will mourn him.”

“There is other news as well,” said Catelyn. “The King and his retinue ride for Winterfell. They are already traveling up the Kingsroad.”
“We must prepare for their arrival,” said Ned, dismounting and handing his horse off. “There is a great deal we must do if we are to host Robert and his court.”

Her father instructed Theon and Jory to take the horses back to the stable. Bran ran to their mother.

“Look, Mother,” said Bran happily. “Father says we can keep them!”

Catelyn examined the pup in his arms. “You must take great care, Bran. He will be a danger if you let him run wild. But train him well, he will always protect you.”

“I will, Mother,” said Bran. “Look, we’ve brought one for Rickon as well.”

“Greywind,” Robb blurted out. “His name is Greywind.”

Arya snorted. “Good work, brother.”

“Mine will be named Summer,” announced Bran.

“Brienne,” said Arya, holding up her pup. “This is Nymeria.”

“The Rhoynish Warrior Queen,” Brienne note with a smile. “A suitable name.”

“What do you name yours?” Ned stepped beside Sansa, and put a hand on her shoulder. Sansa leaned into her father. He smelled good, like smoke and snow. Safe.

“Lady,” murmured Sansa. “Her name is Lady.”

“Jon’s got a wolf too!” Bran said. “Except his is all white.”

“An albino,” said Ned. “He will have red eyes when he opens them.”

“He’s not moving much,” said Bran, peering at the little bundle in Jon’s arms. “Will he live?”

“He’s a runt,” said Jon affectionately, running his finger down Ghost’s nose. “He’s just a bit smaller than the others. He’ll grow.”

“What’s his name?” Bran asked.

“Ghost,” said Jon with a grin. “One day he will look like a ghost when he runs through the trees.”

“Summer will run faster,” Bran said, looking down at his wolf. “He’ll be the fastest wolf in the whole North.”

“Bran,” said Sansa. “Would you like to introduce Rickon to his pup. He’ll need to give him a name as well.”

“Oh yes!

“I’ll escort him there,” said Brienne. “Come along, my lord.”

Ned handed Rickon’s pup to Brienne, and she and Bran headed back into the castle. Bran was chattering away, urging Brienne to admire Summer’s velvety ears.

“We have much to do,” said Ned when Bran had vanished from sight.

“We’ll need enough food and drink,” mused Sansa. “Warm chambers and feather beds must be readied. Cersei needs to feel safe and comfortable. Her suspicions cannot be aroused.”
Catelyn nodded. “I will see to that. She will find no need unmet as long as she is within our walls. We will be ready when they come.”

Her father took her mother by the arm, and they left together. Sansa wondered if they sought sanctuary in the godswood or the sept. Perhaps both.

Lady mewed, and Sansa let her suckle at her finger.

“We need milk from the kitchens,” said Sansa. “We’ll feed them with rags until they are old enough to hunt on their own.”

Arya glowed with happiness. Jon’s shoulders were loose and relaxed. Robb looked at his wolf with awe. And Sansa felt as if they were gathering up the shards of a shattered dish, one by one.
Sansa sat in the godswood, her eyes searching the faces of the great heart tree.

“Did the children truly carve them?” she had asked Bran, before.

“Yes,” Bran had responded, “every face.”

“They must have known everything,” Sansa had said.

“Not everything.” Bran said, his face expressionless, “only the three-eyed raven knows everything.”

Sansa had turned to him. “You know everything now? Everything?”

“I am everything.”

Bran had frightened her. Her joy at seeing him home safe had dwindled as she realized the truth. Bran had never made it back from beyond the wall. The three-eyed raven was no brother to anyone.

“You’re going to catch a cold.”

Sansa turned to see Arya trudging through the snow.

“I’m basking in the cold,” said Sansa, “before we go south.”

Arya nodded thoughtfully, sitting beside her. “Can’t sleep can you?’

“No,” admitted Sansa, “it’s been weeks, since the letter. They can’t be very far.”

“Are you sure I shouldn’t just slit Joffrey’s throat?” Arya asked, “I promise I’ll wait until I see the whites of his eyes.”

“Tempting,” said Sansa smiling grimly, “I would love to see the expression on his face. Murdered by a little Northern lady. You should doll up in silks and ribbons for the act. Could you get past Ser Clegane though?”

“I’m too fast for the Hound to catch now,” Arya said with a wicked grin, “Joffrey would be dead before he could blink an eye. His blood staining my pretty silk dress.”

“The kingdom would mourn their gallant prince,” said Sansa, eyes glinting, “such a terrible loss of one so kind and noble. A friend to the lords and smallfolk alike.”

Arya snorted. “You should write his history after his death. Life and Deeds of Prince Joffrey Lannister: Wretched Scum of the Earth by Sansa Stark.”
“It would be quite good,” agreed Sansa, “I could put it on the shelf next to The Fall of Littlefinger: A Sniveling Dog and His Rightful and Timely Execution by the Sisters Stark.”

Arya clutched her belly and laughed.

Sansa giggled in delight, but sobered quickly, “we shouldn’t laugh. It’s too dangerous yet.”

“It would be better for you to laugh than cry,” said Arya ruefully, “I know you’re dreading their arrival.”

“It’s been so long since I’ve been afraid of Joffrey,” said Sansa shaking her head, “he didn’t disappear, just faded. I wonder now, if he is the most terrible person in all the world. He has been given many competitors for the position.”

“You won’t be betrothed to him this time,” said Arya, “Father will make sure of it. Brienne and I will be by your side every second. You have nothing to fear.”

“I hope he dies like he did last time,” Sansa said spitefully, “if we can’t do it, I’d like it to be like that. Choking on his own bloody spit on the day of his wedding.”

Arya nodded. “It can be arranged, my lady. I’ll see to it.”

That’s how she would survive Joffrey this time, Sansa thought. She would look upon his face and imagine it mottled purple, and covered in dripping blood. She would look into his emerald eyes and see the light leaving them.

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“I see the King!”

“My lord! Climb down!” Brienne shouted, “your lady mother forbid you climbing the castle walls while the king is here!”

Bran scrambled down. “Brienne,” he said cheerfully, “the king has yet to enter the walls yet.”

Brienne shook her head and clutched his shoulder briefly. “Run now and tell your father,” she instructed, “he must be here to greet the king.”

Bran ran off.

Brienne threw back her shoulders, and laid a hand reassuringly on her sword.

Winterfell’s population gathered in the courtyard. Ned and Catelyn emerged leading the children. Brienne’s eyes flitted over her charges.

Catelyn looked pale, but Brienne saw the same resolution written on her face that had inspired her to take up Catelyn’s service.

Sansa and Arya were hidden behind the boys, almost unnoticeable. Sansa was dressed in a dour grey gown, her hair pulled severely back into a simple braid.

Arya was dressed in some of the new clothes Sansa had made her. Handsome breeches and a simple tunic.

Sansa hunched herself slightly, making herself less of a target, Brienne realized. Arya rubbed her
leg unconsciously. Perhaps she had hidden a knife there.

Brienne walked so she stood just behind the girls. She thought she saw Sansa relax her shoulders slightly.

The finest of King’s Landing streamed through Winterfell’s gates. Joffrey led them, high on his prancing white horse, followed closely by the Hound. Brienne’s lip curled.

They were followed by guards, bannermen. A carriage followed them from which the Queen and her children emerged. The queen held Myrcella and Tommen’s hands. She stepped gingerly into the muck, with a disgusted expression on her face.

“Ned!”

King Robert himself rode in. He hoisted himself off his horse and moved to greet Ned.


Robert embraced him and slapped him hard on the back. “Gods, Ned you’ve gotten fat,” chortled the King.

Ned raised an eyebrow, and Robert burst into laughter.

“It’s good to see you old friend,” said Robert grinning. “And Cat! Come say hello to your king.”

He embraced Catelyn. “It is good to see you, your grace,” Catelyn said with a fixed, pleasant smile, “I trust you had a good journey?”

“Pleasant enough,” snorted Robert, “I never understood why you love this country, Ned. Cold miserable muck, all of it.”

He turned his attention to the rest of the line. “These must be all of your fine sons,” said Robert.

“Yes,” said Ned smiling, “Robb, Bran, and the little one is Rickon.”

“A good strong name your father gave you,” Robert said to Robb, “you look like a man who deserves it.”

“Thank you, your grace,” said Robb humbly.

“And your daughters?” Robert asked.

“Sansa and Arya,” said Ned. He motioned them forward. Reluctantly, they moved.

“You’re a pretty one,” said Robert eyeing Sansa, “pity you’re dressed like such a northerner.”

“Thank you, your grace,” Sansa smiled. Brienne thought her teeth looked sharp.

“And you’re Arya,” Robert said, looking with little interest at her, “we don’t let our daughters dress in breeches in the South.”

“Pity for them, you grace” said Arya smiling up at him.

Robert let out a short bark of laughter. “You’re clever then I’ll give you that. And I knew another Stark daughter who loved a pair of breeches.”
He turned to Ned. “Take me to the crypts, Lord Stark, I’ll pay my respects.”

“We’ve been riding for a month, my love” said Cersei, walking up, “surely the dead can wait.”

“My queen.” Ned and Catelyn knelt, followed by the rest of the Starks. Brienne knelt, reluctantly. She felt Cersei’s eyes pass over her curiously.

“Take me to her Ned,” said Robert, ignoring his wife.

Ned bowed and he and the king strolled off.

Catelyn moved to take Cersei’s arm. “My queen,” she said, “allow me to personally escort you to your rooms. They have been furnished exquisitely to the southern taste. I know what it is like to come North and feel the cold in your bones.”

“Thank you Lady Stark,” said Cersei coolly, “we’ve had a rather exhausting journey. My children and I must rest.”

“Of course,” Catelyn assured her, “right this way.”

“Ser Jaime,” hissed Sansa impossibly softly, catching Brienne off guard.

Brienne’s head jerked up, and there he was riding in with his brother by his side.

She was surprised at how much he resembled Cersei. His long golden hair, his proud green eyes, his shining cloak. Both his hands gripped the stallion he rode with a careless grace.

Beside him, rode the Imp. Brienne had admitted a grudging respect for Tyrion Lannister in the end. But he was no queen’s hand now, just a disgraceful second son with a penchant for women and drink.

She met the Imp’s eyes and grimaced. He grinned at her and turned to murmur something to Jaime. Jaime looked over, lazily. His eyes widened when he saw her. “Seven hells that’s a tall woman,” she heard him mutter. There was no recognition in his eyes.

Brienne felt her heart drop, just a bit. She hadn’t really allowed herself to hope that Jaime Lannister would remember her. But it was disappointing nonetheless.

She was overjoyed to have the Starks beside her. Sansa, Arya, Jon, they were all a great comfort. But she was their protector, not their friend. She would have liked to ride beside the Kingslayer once more as soldiers in arms.

He and Tyrion rode away without a second glance.

Brienne shook it off and turned her attention to the children. Robb Stark had a strange glint in his eyes as he watched the Lannisters disappear into the castle.

“Come along,” said Brienne startling them all out of their thoughts, “we must attend to our guests. Ensure their every need is met.”

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Robert walked quickly. Ned examined him as they went. He was longer the striking warrior that Ned remembered. The warrior who had brought down Rhaegar in the battle of the Trident. All his beautiful rubies mixing in with reddening water.
He was fat and red-faced. Dressed in velvets and silks that were close to breaking as he moved.

They entered the crypts. Ned lit a torch. It drenched them both in a flickering light.

“Tell me about Jon Arryn,” Ned said quietly as they walked.

“Damndest thing,” said Robert, “one minute he was fine, and then… burned right through him, whatever it was. I loved that man.”

“We both did,” said Ned heavily.

“He never had to teach you much, but me… you remember me at sixteen?” Robert asked, “All I wanted to do was crack skulls and fuck girls. He showed me what was what.”

“Aye,” murmured Ned, casting his eyes over his King.

“Don’t look at me like that Ned,” Robert sighed, “not his fault I didn’t listen. Now, I’ve come here for a purpose Ned. I need you down in King’s Landing. Not up here, where you’re no damn use to anybody. Lord Eddard Stark, I would name you hand to the king.”

Ned felt cold. He dropped to his knees. “I am not worthy of the honor, your grace,” he said softly.

“I’m not trying to honor you,” Robert scoffed, “I’m trying to get you to run my kingdom while I eat, drink, and whore my way to an early grave. Damn it, Ned, stand up. You helped me win the Iron Throne, now help me keep the damn thing. We were meant to rule together. If your sister had lived, we would have been bound by blood. Well, it’s not too late. I have a son, you have a daughter. We’ll join our Houses.”

Ned’s breath caught in his throat. “Sansa?” he said, the words like rocks in his mouth, “she is young, Robert.”

“Aye,” said Robert, “and girls younger than her are betrothed everyday. They won’t marry yet of course. Not until they’re older.”

They stopped in front of Lyanna’s crypt. Robert breathed heavily and Ned looked over to see tears in his eyes.

“She shouldn’t be here Ned,” croaked Robert, “I would have buried her up on a hill. Surrounded by wildflowers.”

“She’s a Stark,” Ned said quietly, “this is where Starks come to be buried.”

“It’s been so long,” Robert said, “I should have come years ago to pay my respects.”

“You married,” Ned said, heart clenching, “you had a kingdom to rule.”

“I never forget though,” said Robert gruffly, “I would have given all of it up to have her instead.”

Silence fell. Ned felt as if he were watching himself and Robert from up above. Perhaps through the eyes of Lyanna’s statue.

“I need you Ned,” said Robert finally, “I call on you again after all these years. Ride to my side, brother.”

“Catelyn,” said Ned, his wife’s name spilling out, “I must discuss this with her.”
“Aye,” Robert cufféd him hard on the shoulder, “take the night to discuss it with Cat.” The King grinned. “And tell me yes in the morning.”
“None of them seemed strange? None of them asked questions?” asked Jon.

Sansa shook her head. “I don’t think any of them remember,” she said, “Arya?”

Arya pursed her lips. “I did not notice anything unusual,” she admitted, “but one of them still might. We can’t know for sure.”

“Ser Jaime doesn’t,” said Brienne shifting awkwardly, “I know this for a fact.”

“Did you speak to him?” asked Sansa.

“No,” Brienne admitted, “but I met his eyes. And he doesn’t know me.”

“Do you know the Kingslayer well, Brienne? Catelyn asked with a frown.

“Yes, my lady,” Brienne said, “King Robb took him prisoner during the war. I was sent to escort him to King’s Landing to make a trade for Arya and Sansa. We traveled together a great deal. He rode beside me in the battle against the Night King as well.”

“I took the Kingslayer prisoner?” asked Robb in interest, “from what you were telling me, I thought I was the worst commander who ever lived.”

“You were good at winning battles,” said Sansa with a sad smile, “not so much at winning wars.”

“That’s something I suppose,” said Robb morosely.

“What of the King, Father?” Sansa asked, turning to him.

Ned sighed heavily. “It was just as you said. He asked me to be his hand, and for you to be betrothed to Joffrey. I declined both, asking him if I could have time to speak with your mother. Although I didn’t get the impression that I had much choice of it.”

“You did well, my love,” Catelyn said softly, taking Ned’s hand.

“Aye,” said Ned, kissing her hand, “you handled the queen gracefully as well.”

“Vile woman,” whispered Catelyn, “when I look at her face, I see nothing but death.”

“You are right to think it, Mother,” said Sansa, “Cersei Lannister is cruel woman. She would have smiled if she could have seen us burning.”

“I do not like it,” said Ned, his jaw set and tight, “to feel afraid in my own home.”

“It feels like a poison,” said Robb staring into the fire, “like we’ve poisoned the wine at our own table.”

“Aye,” agreed Arya, “but we know now not to drink it.”

“Arya is right,” said Sansa, “we have the upper hand. We’d be fools not to feel fear, but it does make the situation slightly more bearable. Father, you will ask for terms tomorrow?

“Yes,” Ned affirmed, “I will ask Robert for the dragon glass, and for financial support to build the
gardens. Do not worry, my darling, I will not accept this betrothal.”

“If he insists, you must,” said Sansa her brow furrowing, “but ask for an extended betrothal. It must be far, far in the future. Joffrey won’t want me anyhow. I’m going to wear my ugliest dresses and wear my hair plain.”

Arya laughed. “I’ll help you pick your clothes.”

Ned smiled sadly at his daughter, “that won’t make you any less beautiful, child.”

“Yes,” said Sansa, “but Joffrey does have a rather short attention span. That can work out in my favor.”

“How long until you leave?” whispered Catelyn.

“A few weeks,” said Sansa, “Robert won’t want to linger. He hates the North.”

“And you will go with them,” Catelyn grieved.

“Not forever, Mother,” Sansa said, gazing at Catelyn, “we will return, and be all together again. I swear.”

“It is still too long for me to bear,” murmured Catelyn, “a mother likes her children close.”

“I will protect them,” said Ned, “I will return our children to your arms. Just as you once gave them to me.”

Catelyn sighed and laid her head on Ned’s shoulder. He stroked her hair.

“There is one more thing,” said Ned, “I received word back from Castle Black. Benjen is headed to Winterfell.”

“Good,” said Jon grimly, “we will need him. Jeor Mormont will be more inclined to trust me if I go with Uncle Benjen. And I need all the trust I can get from the Watch. They’re not going to like what I’m going to offer them.”

“What are you going to offer them?” asked Robb.

Jon sat back, and sighed. “The White Walkers march on the world of the living. All the living. This includes the Free Folk beyond the Wall.”

“Free Folk,” said Ned, “you mean Wildlings. You mean to bring the Wildlings through the wall.”

Catelyn gasped in horror. Robb looked stunned.

“Aye,” said Jon fiercely, “I mean to bring the Wildlings over the Wall. And if I don’t, every single one of them will be another foot soldier in the Night King’s army. I’d rather have them over here, fighting.”

Robb shook his head. “Wildings won’t fight for us ever.”

“I’m not asking them to fight for us,” said Jon, “I’m asking them to fight for their own lives. Right now, Mance Rayder is gathering an army of Wildlings, one hundred thousand strong. We cannot lose them to the Night’s King.”

“The Watch won’t accept it,” said Ned, staring at Jon, “they’ll never let them in.”
“They will after I’ve shown them what we’re up against,” said Jon, “fear has a way of changing men’s minds. It will hard and they will fight me, but it will happen. We are going to defeat the Night King. I am going to defeat him.”

“You’ll have to change Benjen’s mind too,” said Ned, shaken, “he won’t like this either.”

“We’ll tell him the truth,” said Sansa suddenly, “he may not believe Jon. But he will believe all of us.”

“Aye, that is a good idea,” Jon said, “I trust Uncle Benjen with my life. I would trust him with this.”

“He will arrive within the week,” said Ned, “we will discuss it with him then.”

Ned ran his hand over his face. “I am sorry, but I must rest,” he said, “I must try to get some sleep before speaking with Robert tomorrow.”

“That is a good idea,” Catelyn said, drawing Ned to his feet, “goodnight my darlings. Goodnight Brienne.”

Catelyn paused, and looked at Sansa. Then, she nodded at Jon, a short jab of her chin, and stepped through the door with her husband.

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“You can’t be serious, Ned,” Robert sighed heavily, “it's too early in the morning for nonsense like that.”

Ned had gone to him early on purpose. Wanted him sober when he proposed his terms. Although that had been wishful thinking. Even at this hour, Robert was nursing a cask of wine.

“You’re telling me that you believe this fairy tale, that some deserter fed you before his execution?” Robert demanded.

“I only know,” said Ned, “that the Wall needs this. The Wall’s numbers are dwindling as it is. We should take any measure to make the men feel safer, whether these tales are true or not.”

“Dragon glass,” said Robert, stroking his beard, “I’ve heard of it. Not bloody useful though. Otherwise we would have mined it into nothing. Oh very well, I can’t refuse you, Ned. It’s not doing me any good sitting under Stannis’ arse. If you want it, you can have it. Write the letter tonight if you like, I’ll sign it, and it can be off tomorrow.”

“Thank you, your grace.”


“There is one more thing, Robert,” said Ned carefully, “Winter is coming. I know it in my bones. This summer has been long, a harsher winter will follow it.”

“Get to the point, Ned,” Robert said impatiently.

“We need to build more glass gardens in the North,” said Ned, “the one at Winterfell is not enough. When Winter comes, the Northern houses will need another source of food. I would like to ask the crown for financial support and the raw materials.”

“Done,” said Robert, waving a hand carelessly, “and as my hand you’ll make it happen. Do
whatever you wish.”

“Thank you, Robert,” said Ned.

“You’ll bring Cat and the girls then?” asked Robert, “it will be good for the little ones to play together. And Sansa and Joffrey can get to know one another.”

“Not Cat,” said Ned carefully. "Bran and Rickon are too young yet to be separated from their mother. But the girls will accompany me. I do not... oppose a marriage between Joffrey and Sansa. Nothing would give me more joy, than to see our families united. But I have to insist. Sansa is too young for a betrothal yet. She is still a child. In a few years I would gladly join our houses.”

“You’re too soft, Ned,” Robert sighed, “you always have been. But very well, the betrothal will wait. You can’t hide that pretty child away forever though. She will do well in the south.”

“I hope so, your Grace,” Ned said heavily, “I hope so.”

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“He took it well,” said Ned softly, “everything that I asked for, he granted me.”

“He’s getting your life in return,” snapped Catelyn, “the Hand of the King is a thankless job.”

“Aye,” said Ned. He rolled out of bed, and went to the window. He turned at the knock at the door.

“It’s Maester Luwin, my lord.”

Catelyn felt ice grip her spine. She flew from the bed and to the door. “What’s happened?” she gasped, wrenching open the door.

Maester Luwin looked alarmed. “Nothing terrible, my lady,” he assured her. “Only a bit unusual. A rider came in the night from your sister.”

Catelyn took the note with trembling hands. “Thank you Maester Luwin,” she whispered, “that will be all.”

“My lord, my lady.” Maester Luwin bowed and left.

Catelyn sunk onto the bed, her shoulders shaking. Ned came to her side and wrapped an arm around her. She opened the letter and read it quickly. She looked up at Ned. Her eyes were glassy.

“Throw it in the fire, Ned,” she whispered, “burn it.”

He took it from her and tossed it into the flames. Then knelt in front of his wife and took her hands. “What did it say, Cat?”

“Lysa wrote that she has been betrayed by the Lannisters. That Jon Arryn was poisoned by the Lannisters. She says she fears for the King’s Life,” Catelyn said numbly.

Sansa’s words flooded Ned’s senses.

_Littlefinger. Lysa loved him since they were children. He told her to poison Jon Arryn. Told Lysa to write Mother. Told her to lie and say it was the Lannisters. He knew it would unleash terrible chaos._

“Sansa said she was not well when she saw her,” Ned said softly, stroking his wife’s back, “the years apart have changed her. She isn’t the sister you once knew.”

“She hates me,” Catelyn said, bitter tears running down her face, “because of Petyr Baelish. A lowborn boy my father made the abominable choice of fostering. Who fell in love with me because he thought I was prettier than Lysa. For this she would murder her husband. Send my husband into the hands of the Lannisters. She is not sister of mine. Not anymore.”

She looked at Ned fiercely.

“We’re going to save our children, Ned.” Her body shook, but her voice was steady. “We’re going to save them from those who have already dug their graves.”

Together, they watched the fire burn, until it was nothing but embers.
Robert roared with laughter that shook the great hall. Grasping a flagon of ale he careened wildly between the tables, cuffing men on their shoulders and pulling at maids' dresses.

Sansa sat quite still. She was seated at the high table, between her mother and Cersei. The side of her facing Cersei felt much colder. The queen looked upon her king with ill-concealed disdain.

“Your mother says you’re quite a skilled embroiderer,” said Cersei. Her gleaming, green eyes studied Sansa.

“Yes, your grace,” Sansa said demurely, “I do like to embroider. I can’t speak to my skill of it though.”

“Did you do the wolf on your chest?” Cersei asked.

“Yes, your grace,” said Sansa, placing her hand on her chest, protectively over her work.

“Beautiful,” said Cersei, “you must make something for me one day. Or my son. Joffrey would love to have a favor from such a talented girl.”

“Thank you, your grace,” said Sansa ducking her head so Cersei couldn’t see her eyes, “Prince Joffrey is a handsome and gallant prince. I wish to please him.”

“And you will,” said Cersei with a false smile, “no wolves for my son though. A lovely little stag perhaps. I hear that the Stark children keep wolves as pets.”

“Yes, your grace,” Sansa said with a smile, “all of my father’s children have wolves. My wolf is a lovely creature. I named her Lady because she’s so docile.”

“Ladies must be docile,” Cersei agreed, “wolves though, not so much. I would caution you against bringing the wolf with you to the capital. Such a wild beast will not please Prince Joffrey.”

“Oh no, your grace,” Sansa said eyes wide, “Lady is the tamest creature that ever lived. Joffrey is so kind and gentle, he will love Lady.”

Cersei’s lips pulled back over her teeth, “perhaps. The South will be different, Lady Sansa. We must get you into some lovely silks. Some ribbons for your pretty hair.”

Cersei reached out and fingered the end of Sansa’s braid. Sansa fought the urge to slap her hand.

“Oh thank you, your grace,” Sansa gushed, “I wouldn’t know how to wear such pretty dresses though. You must show me.”

Cersei smiled flatly at her, and turned back to sip her wine.

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Jon’s blood was thrumming through his veins. He hacked savagely at the training dummy. The din of the banquet drifted into the night. He had gone to the banquet, sat at the end of the table like a good bastard. He had watched Sansa giggle as Cersei spoke to her. It was unbearable to watch that,
and be able to do nothing.

He trusted Sansa implicitly. If anyone was clever enough, strong enough to survive King’s Landing it was Sansa. But watching her with the King and Queen reminded him that they would be parted soon. She would be at the mercy of the Lannisters, a thousand miles away from him. A thousand miles away while he fought distant enemies, unable to touch the ones that surrounded her.

“Is he dead yet?” His uncle appeared, gesturing to the hacked up dummy.

Jon turned. “Uncle Benjen!”

He embraced his uncle, holding back tears. He hadn’t seen his uncle since he’d sacrificed himself to send Jon back to the Wall.

“You got bigger,” said Benjen smiling at him, “I rode all day. Didn’t want to leave you alone with the Lannisters. Why aren’t you at the feast?

Jon smiled grimly, “It isn’t proper to have a bastard at a royal banquet.”

“Well,” Benjen sighed, “you’re always welcome on the Wall. No bastard has ever been refused a seat there.”

“Father told you I was interested.”

“Yes,” said Benjen frowning down at Jon, “But the Wall isn’t going anywhere, son. You don’t understand what you’d be giving up. We have no families. None of us will ever father sons. You should live your life before making this kind of commitment.”

Jon shook his head. “I’m ready to go, Uncle Benjen,” he said, “we can discuss it with Father.”

“Aye, we will,” said Benjen, “I’m off to rescue him from his guests now. But we will talk later.”

He ruffled Jon’s hair and disappeared into the hall.

“Your uncle’s in the Night’s Watch.”

Jon nearly came out of his skin. He turned to see Tyrion Lannister standing in the flickering torchlight.

“My lord,” he said hoarsely, eyeing the man, “forgive me. I was started.”

“I’ve been told I’m a startling man,” Tyrion said, watching him, “I’ve always wanted to see the Wall.”

“Have you?” said Jon, “why?”

“I want to see the greatest structure ever built by men,” said Tyrion, “I want to stand on the edge of the world and piss off the side of it.” He cocked his head and examined Jon. “You’re Ned Stark’s bastard boy.”

“Aye,” said Jon in a measured tone, “and you’re Tyrion Lannister. Lord of Casterly Rock.”

Tyrion snorted. “My dear boy, I am not lord of anything. If my father dies without discovering a way of disinherit me, then perhaps I will be Lord of Casterly Rock. But I doubt that very much. I have more faith in my father’s hatred for dwarf sons.” He grinned crookedly at Jon.
“Being a dwarf is a bit like being a bastard, isn’t it?” asked Jon.

“Very wise words,” Tyrion said looking at him curiously, “I’ve always said that all dwarves are bastards in their fathers’ eyes.”

“We must wear our titles like armor,” said Jon, “then they can never be used to hurt us.”

“A very smart bastard you are,” said Tyrion. He looked at Jon intently. “I feel like we might be good friends, you and I.”

“Perhaps,” said Jon mildly.

“Are you planning on going to the Wall when your uncle returns?” asked Tyrion.

“Yes,” said Jon, “I will go with him when he returns. The Wall’s a bit more forgiving of bastards than the court of Winterfell.”

“Would you take a dwarf with you?”

Jon hesitated. Tyrion Lannister needed to be kept alive. Jon disliked the idea of taking him on such an arduous journey. But, Jon supposed, he had done it once before.

“I could be convinced,” said Jon, “it’s not a pleasant journey though, I warn you.”

“I’m an unpleasant man,” said Tyrion. "Seems this journey and I will be fit for each other. Have a good night, Snow."

He wandered off, a drink hanging loosely from his fingertips.

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Sansa tucked her dressing gown snugly around her shoulders as she hurried through the dark halls. Her candle flickered in the corridor.

She slipped into the library, quiet as a mouse. Carefully, she removed several texts that she had hidden beneath a chair. Settling at the desk, Sansa returned to what she had been reading of the glass gardens. The first architects had recorded their processes. These drawings would be invaluable to the creation of new gardens.

As Sansa read, she felt her mind relaxing. It was wonderful to distract herself from her current troubles. She had been forced to engage Joffrey at the feast. She had flattered him endlessly. Every compliment crawled like spiders over her skin.

Suddenly, the door to the library burst open. A stumbling figure fell to the ground in the doorway before righting himself with a laugh. The stench of ale pervaded the air.

Sansa was frozen with horror, until the figure stepped into the light and revealed himself.

“Lord Tyrion.”

Sansa relaxed. Tyrion would never lay a hand on her, no matter how drunk he was.

Tyrion swung his head around and stared at her.

“Lady Sansa Stark,” he slurred, “I’m so sorry to interrupt you, my lady”
“It is not trouble at all, Lord Tyrion,” said Sansa, smoothly closing her book, “I do hope you enjoyed the banquet tonight. If you’ll forgive me, I should take my leave and go to bed.”

“Do you like to read?” said Tyrion sounding baffled.

Sansa paused. “On occasion,” she said, “it can be a relaxing pastime.”

Tyrion shook his head. “You don’t… you don’t look like a lady who likes to read, Lady Sansa.”

Sansa glared at him. “You don’t look like a man who knows much of ladies.”

Tyrion chuckled, and sat down heavily in a chair, the word scraping harshly across the stones. Sansa flinched from the sound.

“Did I scare you, my lady?” asked Tyrion. His eyes looked glazed. He was having trouble focusing on her.

“No Lord Tyrion,” said Sansa, “you could never frighten me.”

“That’s good, that’s good,” said Tyrion shaking his head, “I hear we may be family soon. You are engaged to my nephew.”

“No,” said Sansa, “you have heard incorrectly. Joffrey and I are not engaged.”

“Joffrey is a handsome prince,” said Tyrion spreading his hands, “and you, my lady, are a beautiful girl. This is the way the world works.”

“Not always,” whispered Sansa, “sometimes the songs aren’t true.”

Tyrion surged unsteadily to his feet. Sansa scrambled back as he slammed his palms down on the desk.

“Songs, songs, my lady,” Tyrion mumbled. He tried to step forward, but tripped. He smacked his chin on the desk, and fell to the ground. The flagon in his hand bounced across the stones and clattered loudly.

“My lord!” Sansa cried. She picked up her skirts, and kneeled by his side.

Tyrion’s head lolled on his neck. She put a hand on his face to steady him, and met his eyes.

"You love songs," he slurried, blinking up at her, "Little Wife."

Chapter End Notes

I loved writing this chapter! Tyrion is such a good character. I've been updating quite a bit lately, before school starts. Updates will probably slow after this one, but I won't forget about this story!
Hospitality

Jon woke with shout, his heart pounding as someone dragged him from his bed.

“Hush, Jon,” hissed Sansa, “do you want to wake the castle?”

“Seven hells, Sansa” gasped Jon, “you scared me half to death. What is it? What’s wrong?”

At the end of his bed, Ghost whined in annoyance, before turning back around in a circle and falling back asleep.

“You need to come with me,” Sansa insisted, “something’s happened.”

“What? What?” whispered Jon, “is anyone hurt?”

He frowned at her, taking in her bedraggled appearance in the moonlight. “Why do you smell like ale and vomit?”

“Because,” said Sansa tersely, “Tyrion’s just thrown up on me in the library.”

She appeared to have rendered Jon speechless. He stared at her with bleary eyes.

“Come,” said Sansa, again. She grabbed his cloak, threw it around his shoulders, and grabbed his hand, leading them out into the hall.

She walked quickly, dragging Jon behind her.

“Tyrion’s… thrown up on you?” said Jon slowly, as if testing out the words.

“Yes,” hissed Sansa, “I was reading about the gardens in the library, when he came stumbling in massively drunk.”

“Did he hurt you?” asked Jon angrily.

“Of course not,” scolded Sansa, “Tyrion Lannister is hardly a danger to me. He wanted to talk.”

“He’s always bloody talking,” said Jon tartly.

They reached the door to the library. Sansa spun around, lifting her candle between them so the light flickered on their faces.

“Jon,” Sansa said haltingly.

He searched her eyes. They looked darker in the candle light.

“Jon,” Sansa said again, “I think he called me ‘wife.’ Before he passed out.”

Jon felt his stomach drop. He stood still, stunned.

“Are you sure?” he managed to choke out after a moment.

“Fairly sure,” Sansa whispered, her eyes apprehensive, “that was what he used to call me, ‘little wife.’ It’s possible it was just the drink… but I’m inclined to think not.”

Jon shook his head, bewildered. He pushed the door open and found Tyrion, just as Sansa had said.
Passed out in a puddle of his sick.

“I’ve put him on his side,” said Sansa, regarding her former husband, “it’s what Shae told me to do whenever he came in drunk and passed out.”

“Aye,” said Jon, getting down on his hands and knees to peer at Tyrion’s slack face, “better for drunk men to sleep on their sides. There’s a danger of them choking when it all comes back up.” He glanced down at the mess. “But I think he’s past that point.”

“What are we going to do with him?” asked Sansa, grimacing.

“We could leave him here,” said Jon, standing up and wiping his hands, “it wouldn’t be too much of a stretch for him. To have fallen asleep, drunk in the library.”

“We can’t leave him here,” said Sansa, impatiently, “we have to be there when he wakes up. To interrogate him. What if he remembers what he said to me?”

“If he drank this much, he shouldn’t remember,” Jon assured her. He frowned, “you’re right though. We need to speak to him the moment he wakes.”

“He’s bled all down his doublet too,” Sansa noted, “we’d better get him cleaned up.”

Jon made a face. “We can put him in the stables,” he suggested, “dump some water on him.”

“Absolutely not,” hissed Sansa, “what if he does remember? He needs to want to help us. That won’t happen if you throw him in the stables and try to drown him. We’ll put him in your room, it’s the closest.”

“Aye,” Jon agreed, unwillingly, “not my bed though.”

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“Put him on the bed,” Sansa ordered.

Jon groaned, but did as she asked.

“Stay here, with him. I’m going to get some rags and some bandages.” Sansa vanished into the hallway.

Jon glared at the man snoring on his bed. He had no doubt that the furs would smell of ale for weeks.

*Tyrion Lannister.* Jon stared intently at the future Hand of Daenerys Targaryen. He was a brilliant man. Clever and strategic. Too clever sometimes. The last time Jon had spoke to Tyrion, they had been stranded in blizzard, several hundred miles from the fallen Wall.

“We’re going to lose this war, Jon Snow.”

*Jon had glared at the Hand.* “Daenerys still has two dragons,’ Jon had said tightly, “they won’t fall like Viserion. Not with riders on them.”

*Tyrion had gritted his teeth.* “Do you even know how to ride the blasted thing?” he had spit, “the creature will buck you off before you've left the ground.”

“What do you suggest then?” Jon had asked furiously, “that I go home? Tell them we’ve already lost, it’s no good trying?”
"We’re going to lose,” Tyrion had reiterated, “we’re going to be torn to shreds by fucking zombies. And then whatever is left of our straggling army will be eaten alive by my sister.”

“I thought you were on my side.”

“There’s no more sides to be taken, boy,” Tyrion had snapped, “the Wall has fallen, the king of the dead rides his own dragon. It’s done. I’m going to advise that Daenerys use our remaining time to evacuate the North. She’s stubborn, as stubborn as you. But I’m going to try.”

“Where do you suggest I take Sansa? Arya? My little brothers?” Jon had said heatedly, “where shall I tell them that they’ll be safe? I’m no craven.”

“It’s smart to be craven, occasionally,” Tyrion had said tightly, “greater men than you, Jon Snow, have made that decision. True, they may not have their stories whispered around the fires for generations, but they enjoy other things. Like the rest of their lives.”

“If we run now, they’ll be no one left to tell stories to. Dead men light no fires.”

Would Tyrion be willing to try again? Jon had no idea. It would be better for him if he picked up and ran now. But, he hadn’t yet. He’d come to Winterfell for some purpose.

Sansa entered the room, and quietly shut the door behind her. She sat by the bed with a bowl of water and a pile of rags. Gingerly, she began dabbing at the blood on Tyrion’s chin.

Jon sighed and stood up. She handed him another cloth, and Jon began wiping some of the sick away.

“Did you speak to him at all, since he’s been here?”

“Yes,” admitted Jon, “earlier in the night, during the banquet. He was tipsy then.” He smiled, shaking his head. “I might have… teased him.”

“Teased him?”

“Aye,” said Jon, huffing, “Tyrion Lannister thinks he is the cleverest man alive. I remember what he said to me all those years ago. About being a bastard, a dwarf. I used his own words. I thought he was impressed. Apparently he might have only been humoring me.”

Sansa snorted and shook her head. “He always did like having the upper hand,” she said, “he must have been relishing this. Knowing all of his family’s secrets, their futures.”

“No one’s going to be happy about this.”

“They won’t, won’t they” murmured Sansa, “Although, I am a bit.”

“Are you?” said Jon, incredulously.

“Of course,” said Sansa frowning at him, “Jon, who better to have on our side? He has power, influence, intelligence....”

“Will be be on our side?” muttered Jon.

“He was last time,” said Sansa quietly, “I see no reason for that to have changed.”

“We’ll see.”
Tyrion opened his eyes, groaning. Seven hells, his head was swimming. Although he was lying in a particularly soft bed. Winterfell. His location drifted to mind. So he had managed to find his bed last night. Or someone’s bed for that matter.

He sat up slowly, clutching his head. There was a hammering pain in his jaw. He rubbed it, wincing at the bruise that was surely there.

Sansa Stark was fast asleep, curled up on a bench beneath the window. Beside her on the floor, sat Jon Snow. He slept, leaning back on the bench, his head thrown back and his mouth open.

Well. This was interesting.

He peered at the strange sight in front of him. He hadn’t expected Ned Stark’s children to come crawling into his chambers in the night. Most unexpected.

He swung his arm around, trying to push himself up. A bowl of bloody water that had been left on the bed went crashing to the floor.

Tyrion cursed the gods. Both children had opened their eyes immediately. They got to their feet, staring all the while at him.

“Is this how you treat guests in the North,” Tyrion rasped, “it’s a most distressing way to be woken up.”

They said nothing. Just watched him.

Tyrion wracked his brain. He had seen Jon Snow last night, he was sure of it. He had bantered with the boy, again, and found him to be a more astute young man than he remembered. But he had already been in his cups, and found it hard to bring to mind exactly what had occurred.

“Do you remember what you said to me last night, Lord Tyrion,” asked Sansa, tilting her head.

Gods. What had he said to her?

“I’m sorry, my lady, I do not recall,” he said, watching her carefully, “I’m afraid I must have had a bit more drink than was wise.”

She met his eyes and held them. “You called me something,” Sansa said, her eyes fierce, “you called me your wife.”

Tyrion exhaled hard. His headache forcefully hammered away in his skull.

“A mistake, my lady,” he said, “nothing more. You remind me of a girl I was once married to.”

“In truth, I was.”

“I beg your pardon, child.” Tyrion said sharply, searching her face.

“I was your wife once,” said Sansa, boldly, “and I think you remember that.”

“Exactly what do you remember?” demanded Tyrion.

“Everything,” said Sansa, “everything that happened to me. So does Jon.”
Jon Snow watched him with hard eyes.

“Is that so,” breathed Tyrion. He laughed, a short, sharp sound, “is that so? The Gods do have their little jokes on us poor souls don’t they.”

He turned to Jon. “Well, your grace,” said Tyrion with a twisted smile, “what say you?”

“Why have you come here?” asked Jon. “Why aren’t you halfway across the world, lounging about in the sand if you know what’s coming?”

“Were you happy last time, Jon Snow?” asked Tyrion raising his eyebrows, “happy with the way things turned out. Happy with what the world came to be? No? Neither was I. And I don’t intend to see it go that way again.”

“I’m glad to hear to say so,” said Sansa, “we are grateful that you have come to us.”

“Thank you, Sansa.” Tyrion softened at her words.

“It’s not just us though,” she continued. “Arya remembers as well. And Brienne of Tarth.”

“Really?” Tyrion gazed at her in interest, “so strange. I never considered that there might be others. I presumed the gods’ thought it best to dump all this on my shoulders alone. I suppose I should strive to be less egotistical in this life.”

“You’ve not told anyone, have you?” asked Jon.

Tyrion twitched in annoyance. “Who would I have told exactly? My loving family? My host of admirers? The girls in my favorite brothel?”

“I thought, perhaps, that you might have gone to Daenerys when you had awoken,” Jon admitted, “or written her a letter.”

Tyrion paused and drummed his fingers on the bed. “I considered it,” he said, “but ultimately deemed it unwise to seek out our Queen. She is too young. She knows her path. She will follow it with or without my guidance.”

“We told my mother and father,” said Sansa quietly, “and Robb.”

“Did you really?” said Tyrion, rubbing his swollen chin, “and?”

“And they believed us,” said Sansa, “it was not easy, but they believed us.”

“It was risky, nonetheless,” said Tyrion, “it could have gone terribly wrong.”

“They needed to know,” said Jon, “we need allies if we’re to fight this war at full strength.”

“And which war is that exactly,” Tyrion asked, leaning forward.

“The only one that matters,” Jon responded, softly, goading.

“Jon is right,” said Sansa, glaring at them, “in war, we need allies. We, here, are each other’s allies.”

Tyrion and Jon looked chastened. They pulled away from each other, settling back in their seats.

“Lady Sansa is thinking intelligently, as she always does,” said Tyrion. “I came here to gather
information, and to keep an eye on things.” He sighed, “in truth, I have also come to stop your brother from falling. These things will only be easier with assistance.”

“You’re here to stop Bran’s fall?” asked Jon, “why that? Do you care so much for him?”

“I do try not to make a habit of letting innocent children fall from towers,” said Tyrion smoothly, “despite what vicious notions are spread by fairytales and fables about dwarves. I act out of concern for the innocent, and of concern for the realm.”

“You’re trying to keep the peace,” Sansa said, eyebrows arching.

“Yes, my dear,” agreed Tyrion, “that is exactly it. If my blasted sister never sees your little brother peeping on her, then a whole chain of catastrophic events is erased. I also made a promise to myself the last time I was in the cells at the Eyrie. I vowed never to return, and I intend to keep that promise.”

“You’re going to have to speak before everyone,” said Sansa sighing, “Mother, Father, Robb, Arya, and Brienne. They all need to know you’re back as well.

“A pleasure it will be, I’m sure,” said Tyrion grimacing, “might I change out of this vomit soaked clothes first?”

“Aye,” said Jon, “you’re getting it all over the furs.”

“This is your room is it?” said Tyrion, looking around, “I did wonder at Lady Stark’s choice of decorating for her guests.” He stumbled off of the bed.

“Now if I only knew where my rooms were,” Tyrion said, looking at them expectantly.

“I’ll give you directions in the hall,” said Sansa, “I can’t be seen with you any farther than that.”

“Very well,” said Tyrion.

“You will come to Lord Stark’s solar tonight,” said Jon, “one of us will fetch you from your room.”

“I look forward to it. Your grace,” said Tyrion. His expression was unfathomable.
“My brother cared about you a great deal,” Tyrion said, breaking the silence, “or the person he became at any rate did. The person he is currently, however, is not capable of caring about anyone outside of his own family.”

Brienne walked silently beside him.

“I thought he might, remember me,” Brienne said stiffly, after a while, “I would have liked that I think. Not many people in the seven kingdoms gave me a respect as a warrior, as a woman. As both. Your brother did.”

“You changed him,” said Tyrion, “quite a feat, really. He was able to break free of Cersei because of you.”

“He did not leave Cersei for me,” Brienne said angrily.

“No,” Tyrion agreed, “he did not, but you gave him some of the strength to do it. I’d like to claim I gave him some as well. Loudly, preferably. Where Cersei could hear me.”

“I assume you’re not going to let him suffer again,” said Brienne, softer now. “You will prevent his capture.”

“I will give it my best,” sighed Tyrion heavily, “I could argue with myself that losing his hand made him a better man. Yet, I will still strive to prevent his pain in anyway I can.”

“As I would do as well,” said Brienne quietly.

Tyrion shifted uncomfortably as they got closer.

“This isn’t going to be a very pleasant meeting is it?” He asked Brienne.

“We will be discussing unpleasant things,” Brienne noted. She shifted her sword in her scabbard. “These are good people, Lord Tyrion, kind people that I’ve sworn to protect with my life. You must know this.”

“It is not always wise to trust people whose best qualities are their goodness and kindness,” said Tyrion raising an eyebrow, “sometimes they don’t make the best choices.”

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Tyrion stepped into Eddard Stark’s solar. It resembled the man himself, stern, unforgiving. A fire burned steadily in the grate.

Lady Stark stood near the fire with Sansa. They were inclined towards each other. Catelyn stroked her daughter’s loose hair.
Lord Stark himself sat behind the desk. He was speaking quietly to Jon Snow. They were on the verge of argument, it seemed, but not quite.

Arya Stark leaned casually against the wall. She was flipping a dagger in her tiny hands. So fast the steel blurred. Robb Stark was beside her. Watching his sister with a wary interest.

At their feet lounged their direwolves. Small, but they would grow.

As Tyrion’s presence bled into the room, the Starks turned to face him.

“Lord Tyrion,” Ned Stark called, “thank you for joining us.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Lord Stark,” said Tyrion easily, sitting on one of the hard chairs in front of the desk, “I look forward to working with you and your family.”

“My daughter speaks highly of you,” said Ned, nodding at Sansa.

“Does she?” Tyrion looked over at Sansa, who watched him calmly, “thank you, Sansa. I appreciate your generous words.”

“You were kind to me when you had no reason to be,” said Sansa, “I will never forget that.”

“Nor will I,” said Ned, leaning forward, “where shall we begin?”

_Shall we begin?

_Tyrion smiled. “I suppose we should get right to it. Tell me your plans, I’ll tell you mine. I’m sure they will cross over in quite a few places.”

“Aye,” said Ned, “Sansa -”

Tyrion was surprised, but pleased. Sansa should be running the show of course, and would end up doing so either way. But it was nice to see her father had faith in her too.

Sansa walked over, and settled herself into one of the chairs. Her hair was done in such a way, it seemed her braids crowned her.

“Our goals are such,” she began, “every single one of my loved ones will be standing at the end of this endeavor. The Others will be wiped from existence. Our enemies will be destroyed. And the Iron throne will be sat on by someone who deserves it.”

“Bold goals, my lady,” Tyrion said gazing at her.

Sansa tilted her head. “There is no justice in the world unless we make it. I intend to make it.”

Tyrion’s mouth curled up in a smile. “I have a list too. Quite a bit shorter than yours, but just as poignant.”

“Tell me,” said Sansa intently.

Tyrion marked them off on three fingers. “Myrcella. Tommen. And Daenerys Targaryen.”

“You ask for nothing for yourself?” Catelyn’s face was stern in the firelight.

“Lady Stark,” said Tyrion turning to face her, “all three are born of a deep selfishness. My niece and nephew. Sweet innocent children, my own flesh and blood, whose deaths I could not prevent in
our last life. It haunts me still. I would see that haunting lifted.”

“And the Targaryen girl?” Ned asked.

Tyrion chuckled. “Selfish,” he said, “I want to live in a kingdom that is justly ruled. I want to serve a Queen I respect. I want to be part of the greatness that follows Targaryen name.”

“And madness,” said Robb, “that follows Targaryens just the same.”

“That it does,” said Tyrion, “I won’t deny it. But Daenerys is not a cruel or incompetent leader. I do not put my faith in people, lightly, young Stark. I never have. But I put my faith in her.”

“Tell me more about your faith, Lord Tyrion,” Sansa commanded suddenly, “convince us. Convince me.”

“Sansa.” Tyrion regarded her with a hint of sadness, “it was not Daenerys fault, what happened. It was none of our faults. Too much had already gone wrong.”

“When I look at Daenerys Targaryen,” Sansa said in a measured tone, “I see a beautiful queen. With terrible beasts at her command. Armies at her back. None of these things tell me anything about how she would rule the seven kingdoms.”

“You didn’t get to spend much time with her,” admitted Tyrion, “before we left. She is… a singular person. She was born a princess only in name. She grew up close to the streets. Wandering from city to city. Begging for food. Such hardship shapes a person who knows the value of food, knows the value of life. In her travels, she has liberated every person whose path she crossed. She intends to do the same in Westeros. Liberate us from the tyranny that has plagued us these many, many years. She had a great deal of respect for you, Sansa. You and her have much in common.”

Sansa flicked her eyes to Jon. “Do we?”

“I believe so,” sighed Tyrion, “unfortunately it will be a long time until she enters the scene. Until then, there are many other matters to attend to. What do you plan to do once you reach King’s Landing? As satisfying as it would be to see my bastard nephew’s head roll down the steps, I do not sense that is your intention.”

“We’ve considered it,” said Arya, “it’s not off the table.”

“Joffrey is not an objective for King’s Landing. Neither is Cersei. For the time being.” Sansa gave her sister a knowing look.

“I’ll wait,” said Arya, “not forever.” She leveled a look at Tyrion, “they will be mine though.”

Tyrion regarded Arya. “I’ve heard rumours about you, little wolf,” he said softly, “whispers of the faceless men. Are they true?”

Arya bared her teeth. “Don’t worry about me, Lord Tyrion. Your face is safe. It doesn’t suit me.”

“Arya,” whispered Sansa.

Arya lifted her head up sullenly. Her family was staring at her. Robb, Ned, and Catelyn looked unsettled.

“I would not take your vengeance from you,” said Tyrion, “the gods know I have taken mine when it suited me.”
There was silence. Brienne of Tarth shifted. Her armor scraped against the stone.

“We will ride to King’s Landing with the King,” said Sansa finally. “Me, Arya, Father, Brienne, Nymeria, and Lady. We’re going to keep Robert alive for as long as possible. Already, there is a raven flying to Dragonstone, signed by King Robert. It instructs Stannis Baratheon to begin mining dragonglass and to send it North. When in King’s Landing, as Hand to the King, Father will organize materials and money to be sent North to build more glass gardens. We’re going to build a garden at Castle Black. Jon will ride to the Wall. He will begin negotiations to settle the Wildlings in the farmlands of the Gift. We aim to maintain peace for as long as possible, and that will last as long as Robert lives. After Robert dies, we will return to Winterfell.”

Tyrion nodded slowly, thoughtfully. “It is a good plan. With our luck, it will all fall to shit. But a good plan nonetheless.”

“But you’re going to help us?” asked Robb.

“I am,” said Tyrion, “first by riding to the Wall with Jon Snow. And then by joining you in King’s Landing.”

“Why would you ride North with me?” Jon asked with a frown, “you want to piss off the Wall that badly?”

“No,” said Tyrion with a laugh, “I did that once, I’m satisfied. I believe I can be of some assistance. I speak for the Crown after all. I can also take a look at these designs for your glass garden. I have quite the eye for design.” He paused. “I would also like to see the Wall stand again. Just to settled my own stomach.”

“You will ride South as soon as that is accomplished,” said Jon gruffly, “you’ll be needed in King’s Landing.”

“And I will,” said Tyrion, “your grace.”

Sansa hissed a breath in between her teeth in warning.

“Your grace?” said Robb, amused, “Jon’s not a king.”

Tyrion glanced at Sansa. Her eyes held warning.

“He was,” Tyrion said mildly, “King in the North. After you of course.”

“Oh,” said Robb his face falling slightly, “yes, I suppose that is right.”

“I’m not now though,” said Jon, looking coldly at Tyrion, “so there’s no need to address me as such.”

“Very well, Jon Snow,” said Tyrion his eyes narrowing, “I won’t mention it again.”

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“You don’t have to like him,” insisted Sansa. “But we have to work with him. It is a blessing that he remembers as well.”

“His name is Lannister,” said Arya She spat on the ground. “He’s on our side only as long as it suits his interests. Lannister will always be his name, his family.”

“We need allies,” said Sansa. “Tyrion’s name gives him power and influence. We cannot succeed
Arya was quiet. “He’s still loyal to Daenerys. Will you seek ally with her as well?”

Sansa’s stomach rolled. Arya’s question poked at the tender edges of thoughts she did not wish to entertain.

“I...I do not know,” said Sansa, looking down.

“We don’t need her.” Arya’s fingers were drumming a rapid staccato on her knee.”What good did those dragons do in the end? We can find another way to defeat the Night King. Without Targaryens.”

“He’s a Targaryen.” Wyman Manderly roars the words. “He’s betrayed the North, brought disgrace to Winter’s crown!

Sansa’s head is throbbing, and the shouts of the lords are beating against her skull.

“...southern whore...”

“...no king of ours...”

“...never trust a bastard...”

Beside her, Arya has gone still. Sansa can feel the blankness emanating from her. Her sister is starting to drift away, and Sansa must be strong for her.

The lords are rolling with restlessness. For months she has placated them, ruling in Jon’s stead, but it all in danger of slipping from her grasp. She cannot defend Jon without placing her own motives in question. And there is anger and hurt coiling up in her that she does not wish to push away. That she has been left to hold the world together, a world that seems to be crumbling beneath her fingertips.

But she is a Stark of Winterfell. She has dug her fingers into this land, her own freedom won in tandem with that of her kingdom. She will not let the cracks of mistrust and discord grow, they must be united if they are to survive. The North cannot be at war if they are to defend themselves from threats on all sides.

“She will come whether she is wanted or not.” said Sansa. “And we will be stronger when she does, more capable of engaging her.”

“Mother and Robb must begin defensives and stores while we are gone,” said Arya. She shook her head. “Strange, but I feel like I’m older than Robb. He seems so like a child.”

“I know what you mean,” Sansa murmured. “It won’t ever be the same as it was. But it is worth it, the strangeness.”

“It will always be worth it,” said Arya. “You did well tonight. I’m glad Father let you speak like that. He sees how strong you have become.”

“He sees strength in you as well,” Sansa said with a fond look at her sister.

But Arya’s face shuttered under her gaze. “They were afraid of me tonight. I could see it on their faces, Robb, Mother, Father. They feared me.

“Arya.” Sansa seized her sister, and drew her close. “They don’t fear you. They fear what has
happened to you.”

Arya’s eyes were dark. “They have every right to fear me. Why shouldn’t they?”

“I don’t,” said Sansa. She sought to press the words into her Arya’s mind, force her to see the truth in them. “I will never fear you. And you can sit here feeling sullen, or you can accept that I tell the truth. If Father, Mother, or Robb feel any terror when they look at you, it is terror borne from sorrow. For what you have been forced to endure.”

“It is easier for you,” said Arya. “You have a place. What will I do? When I have slain our enemies, and laid waste to their houses?”

“You will be Arya Stark,” said Sansa. “And Arya Stark kneels before nothing and no one. Not even her own fears. And until you decide your path, and after, I will be by your side. I won’t leave you alone, ever. Even if you pull away.”

She placed her hand on the crown of Arya’s head, and ran her fingers through her short, dark hair. Arya didn’t answer, but Sansa felt her lean into the caress. Just a bit.
“You never did tell me what happened to your face, brother.”

Tyrion grinned widely, rubbing the healing cut on his chin, and the green yellow bruise that painted his jaw. “Only a gift from Wintertown’s whores, brother. They were simply mad with lust at having the famous Imp of Casterly Rock in their beds. They got a little carried away at the end, I must admit, but no matter. I weather my injuries like a soldier fresh from the field.”

“And whom did you lay siege to?” asked Jaime, amusement dancing on his face.

“We battled bravely against the terrible chains of decency and morality. We won the battle, of course, not the war. Shame, I’ll have to give it another go tonight,” sighed Tyrion.

“You’d better not let the Starks hear how much you enjoyed our Northern excursion,” said Jaime, “old, honorable Ned Stark would die from shock, and then what would we have made this wretched trip for?”

“The man’s like his country,” said Tyrion, “cold, barren, bland. He’ll be quite the complement to our King’s opulence.”

“If he thinks he can rein in Robert, he’s quite mistaken,” Jaime distastefully, “the sooner that fat fool drinks and whores his way into the grave, the better off we all will be. May the Gods will it to be soon.”

“Treason? From a man of the Kingsguard? That’s not like you,” Tyrion japed.

A shadow crossed Jaime’s face, tempering the playfulness that was in his eyes. “Careful, brother,” Jaime warned, “you should really bite your tongue more often. I am forgiving, but others are not always so.”

“Bite my tongue?” asked Tyrion laughing, “if I did that I’d be a shell of a half-man. No, I’ll keep my wit close, thank you very much. Don’t worry Jaime, you won’t have to endure me much longer. I won’t be returning to King’s Landing with you after all. I’m going North.”

“North?” said Jaime arching his eyebrows, “you’re going more north than Winterfell?”

“I’ve always wanted to see the Wall,” said Tyrion, “and the opportunity has presented itself. Ned Stark’s brother is bringing his bastard son back to the wall. I plan to join them.”

“They’ll make for scintillating company I’m sure,” said Jaime, “do drop us a raven if you decide to stay, I’ve heard the Wall has lovely accommodations. I wonder why we use it as a punishment.”

“I won’t be staying long,” said Tyrion, “just looking for a bit of greatness in this miserable place.”
“You’ll find nothing but starving criminals,” scowled Jaime, “sitting in their own filth in a pile of snow.”

“I’ll have a full report for the court when I return.” Tyrion grinned. “Down to every last frozen piece of shit.”

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“Is this really what knights do when they train?” Bran fiddled with the rope Robb had tied around his stomach.

“Yes,” said Robb, tightening the knot, and tying the other end of it around his own belt loop, “when they’re training, squires are tied to a knight. That way, the squire can observe all of his daily activities and learn what it means to be a true and honorable warrior.”

Robb started walking briskly towards the training yard, and Bran tripped, trying to keep up with his older brother as he was tugged along.

“But you’re not a knight,” Bran said reasonably, “so I can’t be a squire for you.”

“I am your brother,” scowled Robb, stopping so Bran bumped into him, “and you’ll do as I say.”

“Why haven’t you gone with the King on his hunt?” asked Bran, running beside Robb as he walked, “everyone else went.”

“I don’t feel like spending the day with a bunch of Southern twats,” said Robb gruffly, “and besides, Father’s gone hunting. I need to be here in case I’m needed.”

“I wish I could go,” sighed Bran, “I’d like to ride with everyone through the woods. With all the Kingsguard.”

“You wouldn’t like the end part,” said Robb, “when they’ve killed the game. That’s a messy business.”

Bran puffed out his little chest. “I can handle it. I didn’t look away when Father executed that deserter.”

“No, you did well,” Robb agreed, “you’re well on your way to becoming a man.”

“Jaime Lannister is a true knight,” said Bran wistfully, “he rode in on a white stallion, with his white cloak. I wish I had a white cloak.”

“That doesn’t make him a true knight,” said Robb irritably.

“Do you think Ser Jaime went on the hunt?” Bran asked.

Robb sighed, flicking his eyes over to the tower of the first keep, for just a moment. He could almost hear the crunch of bones hitting the ground. He shuddered, and shook his head.

“Probably,” Robb said finally, “where else would he have gone?”

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“What did you tell Uncle Benjen?” asked Jon.

“I asked him to come speak with us regarding your decision to join the Watch,” said Ned sighing,
“which is not a falsehood.”

“In the time before,” Jon said slowly, “I was elected Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. The 998th.”

“Were you?” Ned smiled tiredly at him, “that is an impressive accomplishment.”

“Just before the election, Stannis Baratheon had offered to legitimize me. To make me a Stark at last,” said Jon, watching the fire, “it was all I ever wanted, but I refused him. Chose to take commander instead. Too loyal to my watch.”

“An honorable decision,” said Ned softly.

“I was betrayed by the men of the Watch soon after. They stabbed me, one by one, and left me for dead in the snow.”

Ned was silent. He got to his feet, and walked over to Jon, laying a hand on his shoulder.

“I died,” said Jon, “they left me for dead and I died.”

Ned froze in surprise. “I thought you died after?” he said, “during the last battle?”

“Yes,” Jon admitted, “that was the second time I died actually. The first was at Castle Black. A priestess of the Lord of Light brought me back from the dead.”

He looked at Ned, whose great brow furrowed at Jon’s words.

“Well,” said Ned gravely, “this would be the third life you have lived, would it not?”

“I suppose,” said Jon, shaking his head, “I hadn’t thought about it like that.”

“This one will be different,” said Ned, squeezing Jon’s shoulder lightly. He hesitated. “I did promise your mother, that I would protect you,” Ned said quietly.

Jon tensed slightly at his words.

“I must do better on my promise this time around.”

There was a sudden knock at the door. Jon hurried to open it, and Benjen stepped through.

“Well,” sighed Benjen, “there’s a somber air in this room. I take it you’re set on going, Jon?”

“We were discussing it, just now,” said Ned, waving a hand towards the chairs, “have a seat, brother.”

Benjen and Jon sat. Jon gripped the arm of the chair, turning his knuckles white.

“It’s alright to wait, son,” Benjen told Jon warmly, taking in the tension in Jon’s jaw, “it’s a big decision. I’d rather you waited until you have seen the world a little more.”

Jon shook his head. “No, Uncle Benjen,” he said, “I’m going. I won’t be deterred. I have work to do there.”

Benjen frowned. “There’s always work at the Wall, but we’ll manage. You don’t need to trouble yourself about it now.”
“I have a job to do there,” Jon said, sitting up straighter, his eyes glinting, “and I must accomplish it now, before Winter.”

“What are you speaking of?” Benjen studied him, concern etched deep in the lines of his solemn face.

“I’m speaking of the Night King and his army.”

Benjen pulled back, regarding Jon with apprehension.

“Son, - “ he began, but Jon interrupted.

“You’re First Ranger, Uncle Benjen,” said Jon fiercely, “you’ve been out there, beyond the Wall. You know exactly what’s creeping around in the night, and it’s not Wildlings. If you haven’t seen them yet, you’ve felt them. You know they’re coming for us as well as I do.”

Benjen stared at him. “You’ve not been out there Jon,” he said slowly, “you haven’t seen the Wall. A hundred leagues long, seven-hundred feet tall. Regardless of what’s beyond the Wall, of what you heard young Will tell you, it’s not here, not on our side.”

Jon’s jaw worked uncomfortably. He glanced at Ned who looked pained.

“There’s something more,” Benjen said uncertainly, “what are you and the boy not telling me, Ned?”

“We’re going to tell you something that may sound impossible to you, Benjen,” said Ned, cautiously.

“Tell it to me,” said Benjen, without hesitation, “I’ve seen a great more impossible things than you can imagine. I know lying men, and you, brother, are not one of them. Cast aside your worry and tell me, so that we may move forward.”

Ned clasped his hands, tightly, and leaned forward. “Jon has already lived this life, “ Ned deadpanned, “he was killed at the age of twenty, fighting the Others after they destroyed the Wall. He awoke, after dying, to find himself a child again at Winterfell.”

Benjen opened his mouth. The word ‘impossible’ began to leave him, despite his earlier convictions.

“It’s true Uncle Benjen,” Jon said heavily, “every word of it. I’ve been to the Wall, over the Wall, beyond it. I know the ramparts and the tunnels. I know the Silent Tower, the Lord Commander’s Tower, Hardin’s Tower, the Lance. I’ve dug graves in the lichyard on the eastern road. I’ve supped with Maester Aemon, fought beside the likes of Jeor Mormont and Qhorin Halfhand. I’ve climbed the Fist of the First Men, on the edge of the Frostfang mountains. I’ve cleared trees from the Haunted Forest. I’ve slept in Craster’s ungodly keep. I’ve been all the way to the Wildling Village of Hardhome on the Shivering Seas.”

The only sound in the room was the men’s breathing and the crackling fire. Benjen was looking down at his lap shaking his head.

“Night gathers, and now my watch begins,” said Jon softly, “it shall not end until my death. I shall take no wife, hold no lands, father no children. I shall wear no crowns and win no glory. I shall live and die at my post. I am the sword in the darkness. I am the watcher on the walls. I am the fire that burns against the cold, the light that brings the dawn, the horn that wakes the sleepers, the shield that guards the realms of men. I pledge my life and honor to the Night’s Watch - ”
“- For this night and all the nights to come,” finished Benjen, “aye, I know the words well.”

“By the gods, Benjen, it’s true,” said Ned, “Jon knows things, things to come.”

“You’ve seen the Night King?” Benjen asked Jon, his eyes suspicious and troubled.

“I’ve seen him, fought him.” Jon let out a shuddering breath. “Winter is coming and he’s stirring. He’s coming for all of us. His army grows more powerful each day. Every ranger who’s ever fallen, every wildling that’s been left for dead, every single one of Craster’s baby boys left lying in the snow.”

“The Wall will stand,” said Benjen hoarsely, “it has for thousands of years.”

Jon shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. Last time, the Night King burned the Wall. Even if he hadn’t, Winter had come hard and deadly. The water around Eastwatch-by-the-Sea had frozen over. They’ll come one way or another.”

Benjen stood, gripping the back of his chair, hunched over. “You said you have work to do,” Benjen croaked.

“Aye,” said Jon, “I’ll not lose to the Night King again. I know what he plans to do, and I’m going to intercept him.”

“How?” demanded Benjen, in shock, “how?”

Jon gritted his teeth and looked away. “You won’t like it,” he said, “but it needs to be done. And it will be done.”

Benjen stared at him wordlessly, with a hollow face.

“We’re going to bring the Wildlings through the tunnels,” said Jon.

Benjen choked, a painful angry sound.

“We’re going to settle them in the farmlands of the Gift,” Jon continued, unflinching, “and we’re going to fight with them against the Others. There’s only one side for the living to take in a war against the dead. While they live and breath, we will fight with the Wildlings.”

“You ask me,” said Benjen in a shaking voice, “to fight beside men that have slaughtered my brothers, that have been the bane of my life’s duty.”

“I am the shield that guards the realms of men,” Jon repeated, “the Wildlings are men. People who sleep, eat, love, piss, fight and fuck. I’m not scared of Wildlings. I’m scared of dead things that take a sword through the belly, and keep right on walking.”

“Jon will have support for this decision from the Crown and from the Warden in the North,” said Ned.

Benjen turned to him. “Robert knows of this and agreed to it?” he said, incredulous.

“I am the Hand of the King now,” Ned deflected, “you will have the Crown’s support on this.”

“They won’t come,” said Benjen desperately, “the Wildlings will never trust us enough to come on the other side of the wall.”

“They come now,” growled Jon, “right now, Mance Rayder is gathering a hundred thousand
wildlings from ninety different clans who speaking seven different languages. They plan to take Castle Black by force, and settle the Gift that way.”

“And you want to help them over the Wall?” asked Benjen angrily, “knowing that they plan to take Castle Black and slaughter us?”

“They’re scared. And they’re running,” said Jon, eyes flashing, “we could fight them. We haven’t got nearly enough men to do so, but we could fight. They’d kill all of us, we’d kill some of them. Or, we could all save our skins for the real fight that’s coming. If we leave them outside the Wall when the Others come, we’ve just handed them an army.”

Benjen paced furiously.

Jon’s heart was in his throat. “Uncle Benjen, you do believe me?”

“Of course I believe you!” snapped Benjen, “I’d be a fool not to. A similar conclusion your father came to I’m sure. But Wildlings, Jon, Wildlings. It’s too much.”

“It’s all too much,” whispered Jon, “and yet it’s coming. We don’t have time to waste.”

“Even if I agreed to this,” said Benjen, “which I don’t. You’ve got the rest of the Watch to convince. How exactly do you plan to do that?”

Jon chuckled, without humor. “We’re going to bring them proof of what’s coming for them. We’re going to capture a wight and bring it to Castle Black."
Sansa knocked softly at Robb’s door. When he didn’t answer she opened it, and stepped through. He was sprawled across his bed, still in his clothes and boots from the training yard, snoring loudly.

She smiled at the sight, moving to drape a fur over him, and bending to blow the candle out on his bedside table.

“Wait, Sansa” Robb called sleepily. She paused, leaving the candle flickering. Robb groaned, sitting up on the side of the bed. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“I can see that,” said Sansa, raising her eyebrows and gesturing to his boots.

Robb chuckled, and bent to remove them.

“Bran and Rickon are asleep then?” Sansa asked, sitting next to Robb on the bed.

“Fast asleep,” said Robb, “put them in their beds myself. Old Nan was surprised that I would want to do such a thing. I said they’re my brothers, and I’m going to see them safely beneath their furs tonight with a story.”

“Rickon must have loved that,” Sansa said laughing.

“He certainly seemed to,” agreed Robb. "Gods, Bran tuckered me out today, he never stops running. And him being attached to me meant that I was running too.”

“You’re a good brother,” Sansa taking his hand, and squeezing it hard, “you did well today. Bran sleeps safe tonight because of you.”

“And you,” said Robb looking at her, “you make the plans, I’m just following them.”

“You’ll have to make your own plans when we’re gone,” Sansa said looking at him with a critical eye, “I trust you with this, Robb.”

“Do you?” said Robb, with a troubled smile “I didn't think that you would after my mistakes. No, don’t say anything. I know what I did, Sansa. Jon told me that I didn’t send Brienne to trade the Kingslayer for you and Arya. Mother was forced to release him in the dead of night against my orders. What kind of man was I if I was willing to leave my sisters in the hands of the enemies that killed our father?”

“When a man becomes a king, he is no longer the master of himself,” said Sansa gently, “he is a servant to his people.”

“You say that now,” said Robb angrily, “now when we have a chance! Tell me Sansa, how did it feel when you found out that I wasn’t coming to save you? That I couldn’t be bothered?”

Sansa’s composure faltered. "You eventually lost the Karstarks because Mother released the Kingslayer," she said finally.

Robb sighed in frustration. "I can imagine how you felt," he said, "and I never want you to feel that way again. I never want Arya to feel that way. You're my little sister, I'm meant to protect you. And yet, now, you stand here protecting me instead."
"There’s nothing shameful about that," Sansa said smiling sadly, "the wisest men know when they need help. Even from their sisters. Even from their mothers. Just promise me Robb, that you’ll be smarter this time. I trust you, Robb, I do. You’re brave, and fierce, and inspiring. Just remember to think. Wait before you act. Take counsel before you make decisions."

“What if it goes wrong?” asked Robb fiercely, "what if something happens we lose you to King’s Landing again. What would you counsel me to do then?

Sansa closed her eyes. "Leave us. Conserve the northern forces. You and Jon will work together to push back the Others when the time comes. Arya, Father, Brienne and I can take care of ourselves. Your job is to take care of the North."

"Are you speaking as Sansa?” Robb asked softly, “or as Lady of Winterfell?"

Sansa opened her eyes, and looked at her brother. “Both Robb. I must always weigh both.”

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Tommen screeched in pain as the flat of Bran’s practice sword thwacked his leg. The little prince dropped his own weapon, and clutched his leg.

“Never drop your weapon,” scolded Brienne, “drop your weapon, and you’ve lost the fight for yourself. Again.”

Trembling, Tommen picked up his sword and faced Bran again. Bran was grinning. They began to spar.

“Don’t be brash, Bran,” instructed Brienne, “you haven’t won yet. The best fighters are the ones who are always wary.”

“Do you think so? I always thought a bit of confidence did wonders for a man’s prowess,” said Jaime Lannister, striding up beside Brienne. His eyes flitted up and down her, “or a woman’s, I suppose. I confess I’m not quite sure. I’ve never met a woman knight.”

Brienne regarded him with apprehension, her eyes narrowing.

Bran had stopped sparring when Jaime walked up. He regarded the Kingslayer with an open-mouthed wonder. Tommen took the opportunity to knock the sword from Bran’s hand.

Bran cried out embarrassed and angry. “That’s dirty fighting,” he shouted at Tommen, his small face pinched.

“Prince Tommen,” Brienne admonished, “to attack a man when his back is turned is to admit you cannot defeat him face-to-face. And Lord Bran, that is no way to speak to your prince.”

Both boys mumbled an apology, scuffing their boots in the dirt.

Jaime looked amused. “She’s right you know,” he said to Tommen, “you should never let your opponent know your estimate of them.”

He turned to Brienne. “Lady - ?”

Brienne shifted, meeting his eyes and then looking away. “I’m no Lady, ser. I’m Brienne of Tarth, sworn shield to the Starks.”

“Tarth,” repeated Jaime, mulling it over, “the Sapphire Isle. Seven hells, you left that glittering
paradise for Winterfell? What possessed you?"

“I met Lady Catelyn once, in the South,” said Brienne, “her fortitude inspired me. I decided to honorably serve her and her family.”

Jaime shook his head with distaste. “No amount of honor could make me spend my days in this frozen wasteland. I can’t wait to get south of the Neck again. Will you be joining us when we ride for the capital?”

“Yes,” said Brienne nodding, “Lady Catelyn hopes I will be of some use to her family on this trip.”

“Again!” she called to the boys, who were busy examining each other’s bruises.

“Perhaps I will see you in King’s Landing,” said Jaime, “we could have a go in the training yard, you and I. I’d like to see how the Maid of Tarth fights.”

“Is that a jape at my expense, Ser Jaime?” Brienne asked cooly.

“Brienne of Tarth, you wound me,” said Jaime exaggeratedly, “I am a very serious man. And that was an entirely serious offer.” He was grinning.

“Men like you are never serious,” Brienne said with hard eyes.

“My dear lady,” Jaime drawled, leaning closer to her, “there are no men like me. There’s only me.”

Instead of enticing her, like he intended, his words made her pull away, and look at him coldly.

“You’re wrong,” Brienne said stiffly, “men like you are everywhere. Every single one of them thinking they are the only one in the world.”

With that, she moved forward to position Tommen’s arm, for a better strike, clearly dismissing him.

As he strolled away, he casually turned to see if she was looking back at him. She wasn’t.

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“What do you think?” asked Sansa, running her hand over the old ink drawing, “can these designs be realized?”

“Yes, I believe so,” said Tyrion thoughtfully, “you’ll certainly need a glassblower to be in residence at the building site. Castle Black will have to dedicate a workspace to them.”

“I’ll have Robb write to Wyman Manderly, ask him if he has any suggestions for glass workers” said Sansa, beginning to stack the relevant texts.

“White Harbor,” noted Tyrion, “why him?”

“I’ve arranged - or rather under Father’s name I’ve arranged - to receive the dragonglass and the garden supplies at White Harbor. The Manderlys will then send everything North. In exchange, we’ll give them assistance in building a glass garden at New Castle.”

“Very clever,” Tyrion said shaking his head and smiling, “House Manderly is rich and devoted to the Starks. You could pick no one better to trust with this operation.”
Sansa smiled, pleased. “I don’t think the first shipment will arrive at Castle Black while you’re still there. However, I expect that you will make the proper preparations for their arrival.”

“I’m at your service, my lady,” said Tyrion drumming his fingers on the table, “is there anything else you require of me while I’m there?”

Sansa looked at him carefully over the parchment she was rolling. “Keep an eye on Jon,” she said finally, “it’s not going to be easy for him. He’ll be facing down the possibility of betrayal from both the Watch and the Wildlings. There will be danger from every side.”

“Jon Snow has a habit of attracting danger,” Tyrion said with a wry smile, “and an insistence to be in the middle of things.”

“He needs to exercise care if he is to be successful,” said Sansa frowning, “and that is not a strong suit of his. I’m hoping that Uncle Benjen will be able to temper some of his impulsiveness.”

“Without you by his side, someone must.” Tyrion grinned at her.

“Hopefully he will think of me before attempting something foolish,” Sansa said, “otherwise, I’ll be no help to him, a thousand miles away in King’s Landing.”

“I’m surprised that you’re going back,” said Tyrion peering at her, “I never thought you would step foot past the Neck again.”

“I didn’t either,” Sansa admitted, “I had resolved to never leave Winterfell again.” She thought of green flames. “Although, in a way, I never did.”

Tyrion looked grim. “I’m very sorry about that you know,” he said softly placing his hand on hers, “I’m sorry that it came to that. You never should have had to make such a decision.”

Sansa looked down. “We must all make difficult decisions when the time comes, regardless of what we want. I’m not going South because I want to. I’m going South because it’s necessary.”

“Necessity aside,” said Tyrion, “it’s a difficult choice to return to places that haunt us. You should take pride in your decision, Sansa.”

“Do you remember what you said to me?” Sansa asked him, tilting her head, “after Joffrey had me stripped and beaten in the throne room?”

Tyrion smiled. “Lady Stark, you may survive us yet,” he quoted.

“I took comfort in that for a long time,” said Sansa, “whenever I would look at Cersei’s face, or Joffrey’s, or Littlefinger’s, or Ramsey’s. I thought of how I would be still be standing when they’d all fallen.”

“You will again,” Tyrion agreed, “you’ll be standing when this is done, I have absolutely no doubt of that.”

“Only this time,” Sansa continued, her eyes glinting, “I won't be aiming for survival. I'm aiming for much more.”
Arya packed her trunk with only slightly more finesse than she had the first time she had left Winterfell.

She liked what she was packing more, she supposed. Sansa had made good on her word, and Arya currently possessed several outfits all made of thick, warm wool and leather. Outfits that would suit her as she rode, ran, and fought.

Her mother hadn’t bothered her much about her style of dress. Arya suspected that it was the least of her concerns.

Even so, Catelyn had stopped by earlier to give Arya a blue wool dress trimmed in silver.

“I know you don’t want this,” her mother had told her when Arya bristled. “But I’m going to ask you to bring it with you. I’m your mother. I will always want to see you in a pretty dress. And I won’t forbid you from wearing what Sansa has made for you, but I won’t contribute to it either.”

She sat down on Arya’s bed, and took Arya’s hand. Arya rested her head on Catelyn’s shoulder.

Catelyn gestured to the dress in her lap. “Bring it with you. Wear it or not, but when you look at it you can think of your mother, and know that I made it for you with love. I can’t come with you to protect you, so I will send you with this. I hope you find use in it.”

Arya fingered the edge of the dress. Every stitch was neat and tight, every hem laid perfectly. Catelyn kissed her temple, lingering for a moment before she stood to leave.

“I’ll let you finish packing, darling. You must get some rest. There is a long road ahead of you.”

Her mother turned to the door.

“Mother?” called Arya.

Catelyn watched her, softly, patiently.

“Thank you.”

Her mother smiled at her, and shut the door. Arya folded the dress, and placed it in the bottom of her trunk.

It was still there, buried beneath the rest of Arya’s things. It was comforting.

“Almost done?” Jon poked his head in. He smiled as he was forced to step carefully over the mess on her floor.

“Nymeria is helping,” said Arya, pointing to her wolf who was asleep with several shirts draped across her back.
Jon nodded, feigning seriousness. He shifted his weight, his hands tucked awkwardly behind his back.

Arya squinted at him. “What have you got?”

His grin spilled over. “I have a present for you,” he said, drawing out a package.

His delight was infectious, and Arya couldn’t help but be swept up in it. “You’ve gotten me a present?” Arya said, arching her eyebrows. “The day before I’m to leave for King’s Landing. Whatever could it possibly be?”

“I could take it back,” teased Jon, lifting the package high above his head. “Bran might like your present. He’d certainly be more grateful.”

“No!” Arya cried, lunging for it. Jon laughed and held it aloft. “I want it!” Arya demanded. “Give it to me, I do!”

“Alright, alright,” Jon agreed, keeping her away with his elbow. “Hands out, then.”

Arya obediently stopped, and Jon placed the thin package in her hands. She unwrapped it immediately, anxious to feel the familiar weight of her sword.

“I noticed you hadn’t commissioned a sword from the smithy, yet,” said Jon, watching her fondly and rubbing his neck. “At first I thought that maybe you would prefer a longsword. But when Mikken asked me what I wanted... all I could think of was Needle.”

Arya was absurdly pleased. Already, she was buckling the scabbard around her waist, and sliding Needle into its proper place.

“It’s perfect,” said Arya, beaming up at him. “As perfect as the first time.”

She looked at him mischievously. “I just can’t seem to remember,” Arya said, shaking her head playfully. “Which end am I supposed to stick them with?”

“The pointy one,” Jon said. He bent forward, cupped her head and kissed her hair. “Always the pointy one.”

“Be careful,” said Arya, the humor fleeing her eyes. “Come back please.”

“I will,” said Jon with a sad smile. “Take care of yourself. Take care of Sansa, and Father, and Brienne. As much as they will let you. Be brave and smart and quick and clever. All the things I know you already are.”

Arya jumped into his arms, and he caught her and hugged her close. She buried her face in his shoulder. She would not let herself wonder if it would be the last time.

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“Robb said you wanted to see me?” Jon stepped into Ned’s solar.

Ned looked up, and smiled as Jon entered. “I did,” said Ned. He put down a letter he had been writing. “I wanted to ensure that we had time to speak before we parted. Have you prepared to leave?”

“I am as ready as I will be,” said Jon, sitting heavily in a chair. “Which is to say, not very. But there are things that must be done, and I am the one to do it.”
“You do me proud,” said Ned, with a terribly loving smile. “As your father.” He hesitated while saying the last, but said it nonetheless, looking at Jon with a touch of apprehension.

Jon swallowed. “Aye,” he said, his voice cracking slightly. “I am proud to be your son. I have always been proud to be your son.”

“I have things for you,” said Ned, after a quiet moment. He shuffled the papers on his desk, pulling forth two sealed envelopes. He handed them to Jon, who turned them over curiously.

“The first is a letter that contains details and instructions for the construction of the glass gardens,” said Ned. “I’ve also included a mention of the dragonglass shipment, but I will trust you to explain what that is for. The second, commands the Night’s Watch to grant you safe passage through the Wall and back again in order to complete a special task. These bear my signature as Warden in the North and Hand of the King, and the seal of King Robert himself. He sure not to lose these letters, they will be invaluable to you in your efforts.”

Jon exhaled sharply. “Thank you. Thank you.”

“It may not be enough,” Ned warned him.

“It will have to be,” Jon said grimly. “There is only one way forward.” He started to rise, but Ned waved him to stay.

“I have one more gift for you,” Ned said. “I have thought long and hard about how I may best ensure your protection and success on the dangerous task you are undertaking. Do not think that I have taken this choice lightly, for I do not. I have decided that this is the best way to ensure your survival and safety, as well as that of the North.”

Jon leaned back. “My lord?”

From below his desk, Ned withdrew two scabbards, wrapped in grey cloth. He took one of them, and laid it in front of Jon.

Jon could just see the white pommel that poked out, a direwolf.

“You will carry this sword with you,” said Ned. “This is my gift to you.”

“Thank you,” Jon reached forward to unwrap the sword. “I - ” His words died on his lips.

Ned watched him closely as Jon held the sword, stunned. In his hands. Jon held a longsword of Valyrian steel.

“This is fresh-forged,” whispered Jon. “Fresh-forged Valyrian steel. How - how did you do this?” He looked to the other sword, still laying on Ned’s desk.

“Aye,” Ned confirmed, unsheathing the other. “This one is Valyrian steel as well.”


“I did.”


Ned smiled at him sadly. “I spoke to Lord Tyrion, regarding his intention to travel with you to the Wall. He mentioned how Valyrian steel possessed a similar capability to dragonglass. He also spoke of his father’s decision to reforge Ice after my death. It turned out that he had investigated
quite a bit into the process, and thus was able to assist the blacksmith I enlisted. A Braavosi man, I
knew of, living near White Harbor who had studied in Qohor."

“I cannot take this,” choked Jon. He placed the sword back on Ned’s desk. “I am no son of House
Stark.”

“You will always be a son of House Stark,” Ned said. “As long as you want to be. “You will take
this sword with you when you ride North. Benjen will take the other. I can fight our enemies with
castle-forged steel. It will be of more use to you than it is to me.”

“It belongs to Robb,” Jon insisted. “I will not take this from him.”

“I have already spoken to Robb of this,” Ned said firmly. “He agrees. You may ask him if you
wish.”

Jon shook his head.

“I have made my decision,” said Ned. “You will honor this choice by accepting it.” He met Jon’s
eyes, and held them.”

Hesitantly, Jon reached out, wrapping his fingers around the cool hilt. It was as light as
Longclaw. He sheathed it at his side. “I accept your decision,” said Jon. “And I will honor it with
every strike against the Others.”

“What will you call it?” asked Ned. “You must name it well.”

Jon considered it, his eyes dark and thoughtful. “Its name will be Sigligon ,” he said.

Ned’s brow furrowed. “That is a Valyrian name.”

Jon smiled. “Sigligon. It means rebirth.”

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Jon tossed and turned in his furs, unable to find sleep. He climbed from the bed, and walked to the
window. The moon shone full and bright in the velvety, black sky, bathing the world in light. He
placed his hand against the wall, reveling in the feel of the rough stone beneath his fingertips. It
seemed to hum against his hand. It sang of home and of comfort. Of childhood and safety. His
songs would soon be only of ice.

His door creaked in warning, and he spun around. But it was only Sansa, standing there in her
nightdress and robe. A candle flickered in her hand, making her hair shine like copper in glow of
the light.

“Sansa,” he whispered, anxiously. “What is it?”

She shook her head, dipping her face into shadow. “I couldn’t sleep.”

To his surprise, she moved closer, slipping into the circle of his arms. He wrapped himself around
her, holding her tightly to him. Her hair smelled like smoke and snow, and the faintest sweetness of
soap and lemons lingered in the curve of her neck. He breathed her in deeply, trying to press the
moment into his memory.

“I’m afraid, Jon.” She said. Her voice was muffled by his nightshirt. “I’m afraid, and I cannot
afford it.”
He ran a hand down her hair tenderly. “Aye,” he said softly. “I feel fear as well, I won’t deny it. I can only promise that nothing will stand in my way to ensure your safety. And the safety of our loved ones.”

She pulled back at his words. Her eyes were very blue and deep in the darkness. “You must be safe as well. Promise me, Jon. When you’re running off, fighting monsters, imagine me beside you. Telling you that you must come home in one piece.” Her hands came up to cup his face.

He smiled at the warmth in her hands and in her words. “I always imagine you beside me.” Unable to bear it, he dipped his head so that his lips brushed the palm of her hand in a kiss. He could feel the hard calluses from her needlework under his mouth.

She inhaled sharply, and dropped her hands. “Sit,” she instructed. “I have a gift for you.”

He sat, almost as if in a daze. “I have your handkerchief,” he said, touching his breast lightly. “I will carry it with me.”

Her eyes followed his fingers, and she bit her lip softly. “I’m glad,” she said. “But this is another gift.”

She handed him a small, white satchel. He took it from her and pulled it open. Inside, rested a lock of red hair, gathered and tied carefully with a blue ribbon.

He dragged his thumb over the lock, feeling the silken strands catch on the rough pad of his finger. “You hair. You cut your hair.”

“I did.” Her cheeks held the faintest blush. “So that I may look at the place where it was cut and think of you. And you may look at my favor and think of me.”

His breath caught. She watched him, her eyes searching.

He re-tied the satchel, and tucked it deliberately next to the handkerchief beside his heart.

“Thank you,” he murmured, the words seem slow and heady on his tongue. “I confess, I have nothing to offer you in return.”

“Come home,” Sansa said. “That will be your gift to me.”

“I swear it.” Jon was suddenly desperate to prolong the moment. He bent and kissed her hands, letting his lips drag across her knuckles.

It was quiet, but she had not pulled away. He stroked his thumb across the palm of her hand. A question.

Carefully, slowly, she bent and kissed him. He stilled when she did, waiting until she had almost pulled away. Then he sank forward, and cupped her jaw to kiss her back.

He had never been so close to hear the beat of her heart, and he could hear it pounding now where she was pressed against his chest. She pulled back, and he followed, brushing her nose with his own.

“Come home,” she said again. Her lips were so close that they touched his when she spoke.

“I will.” He bent and kissed her jaw. Her hands dug briefly into his hair, and dragged down the back of his neck.
“Can I sleep here tonight?” Sansa asked. “I want to stay.”

“Yes,” Jon breathed.

She climbed into his bed, and laid down her head, waiting for him to join her. He did not hesitate to go to her, drawing the furs snug around them. The heavy, silken weight of her hair was strewn across his pillow like a living flame.

It was quiet. Only the sound of the fire, crackling and spitting broke the silence.

Jon felt himself becoming drowsy. His eyes were drifting close even as he tried to count the golden eyelashes that lay against Sansa’s cheek. He was warmer than he had ever remembered being with her safe in his arms.

“Jon?” Sansa murmured, sleep in her voice.

He made a soft sound in response.

She twisted up, putting her lips at his ear. “Your furs still smell of ale.”

It took a moment for her words to sink though his pleasurable haze, but when they did he grumbled, and she laughed. The shaking of her laughter vibrated against his chest.

“I cannot bring myself to mind at the moment,” he told her. He kissed the amusement from her mouth.

Too soon, they fell asleep. And they woke at dawn.
The day dawned, cool and bright. Sansa rose at first light. She woke Jon, and kissed him lightly before slipping back to her room. Already, the castle had begun to stir.

Arya slept soundly, her head pillowed on Nymeria’s stomach. Lady was lying along Arya’s side, her head resting on Arya’s hip. Lady raised her head as Sansa entered, looking, Sansa thought, like she was asking where Sansa had spent the night.

Scratching Lady’s ears to soothe her, Sansa bent down and woke Arya. Her sister’s eyes fluttered open reluctantly. She sat up, rubbing her eyes.

“Why did Lady sleep with me?” Arya asked sleepily.

“Your bed must be warmer than mine,” Sansa said mildly.

Arya frowned, but asked no further questions. She and Sansa dressed quickly, as the stewards came to take their trunks away. Just as they were finishing, Septa Mordane came to the door.

“Are you girls ready?” Septa Mordane asked, looking troubled, “I do not like sending you off to court on your own.”

“Do not worry, Septa Mordane,” Sansa assured her, “Father and Brienne will be there with us. And the King’s men will be at our service. Queen Cersei has also agreed to let us join Myrcella in lessons with her Septa. Isn’t that lovely?”

“Yes,” said Septa Mordane, “and Lady Stark has kindly offered to let me stay on and care for the other girls here. I cannot shake my doubts, however. You must pray to the seven for protection on this journey.”

“And we will,” Sansa said with a half smile, “may the Mother’s light shine on us.”

“Gods be willing,” Septa Mordane said, “come along now.”

Sansa walked slowly through the halls of Winterfell, painfully aware that she would soon be gone. Lady kept pace with her, her warm side brushing Sansa’s leg every step.

In the courtyard, Cersei and the children were already climbing into the carriage. Robert stood of to the side yelling at his bannermen, and drinking heavily from a wineskin in his hand.

“Lady Sansa!”

Joffrey pulled his horse hard, so the creature whinnied and stopped in front of her and Arya. Joffrey leaned down giving her a winning smile. Sansa thought it looked sickly on his wormy lips.

“I wish you pleasant riding today, my lady,” said Joffrey, looking down at her.

“Thank you, my prince,” said Sansa sweetly, “I hope to fare well, although I’m not much of a rider.”

“Ladies aren’t meant for riding,” said Joffrey in an understanding tone, “perhaps I’ll ask Mother if you can ride in the carriage with her.”

“How thoughtful of you,” Sansa exclaimed, “however, I simply couldn’t accept. I always get
terribly sick on carriage rides. I wouldn’t want to expose the Queen to such a travesty.”

Joffrey’s mouth turned down slightly in disgust. “Yes, perhaps not then. Lady Sansa, if you will excuse me.”

“Of course. Safe travels, my prince,” Sansa called after him.

As soon as he left Arya leaned over. “I’ll give you a whole gold dragon if you get in that carriage tomorrow, and vomit on Cersei,” Arya whispered in her ear, “I swear it by all the gods.”

Sansa bit back a laugh. “I’d only accept if I really did get sick on carriage rides,” she whispered back, “unfortunately I don’t. So I would be stuck in there the whole day with her.”

“Pity,” Arya grunted.

They hurried over to where their mother was standing with Robb, Rickon, and Bran. Bran looked utterly miserable, and kept sniffing every few seconds.

“Arya gets to go,” Bran hiccuped as they approached, “why can’t I?”

“Your father and I have already decided that you will stay here,” Catelyn said sternly. She smiled sadly as Arya and Sansa walked up.

“Bran,” said Robb, “You must stay here to help me run the castle in Father’s stead. While he is in the South, I’m acting Warden of the North. You’re to be my second in command.”

Bran looked slightly mollified by this. Sansa bent and kissed his curly head.

“Robb’s going to need help,” She told Bran, lifting his chin with her hand, “are you up for the job?”

Bran pouted slightly, but nodded.

“Good,” said Sansa smiling. She bent down, and hoisted Rickon onto her hip, covering his face in kisses.

“Goodbye, little brother,” Sansa said softly, “be a brave boy for Mother while we’re gone.”

He grabbed for her hair with his chubby little hands. She evaded him, kissing him on the nose and handing him to her mother.

Beside her, Robb bent, picking up Arya and hugging her fiercely. Sansa leaned into Catelyn’s side. Her heart beat terribly fast.

Brienne appeared, dressed in full armor. “The horses are saddled and ready, my lady,” Brienne said solemnly, “Lord Stark was just finishing.”

“Thank you, Brienne,” Catelyn said, “I think the girls are ready.” She looked down at Sansa, who nodded.

It was difficult to let go of her mother’s hand, but Sansa did it with effort. Robb put Arya back on the ground, and Catelyn embraced her youngest daughter.

Sansa turned to Robb and pressed herself tightly to him. He held her close.

“Remember Theon,” she murmured softly in his ear.
She felt Robb nod, and he released her.

Ned led over four horses, already saddled. “Ready?” he asked them, his eyes gentle.

“Where’s Jon?” asked Arya, desperately, looking around.

Ned pointed to the approaching figures of Jon and Benjen. They were dressed warmly, in black clothing. Jon wore the clothes that Sansa had made him. Identical scabbards hung at their hips.

Arya ran to Jon, and he scooped her up in his arms. He reached out for Sansa, pulling her close, so that he held both of them. Kissing Arya’s cheek, he dropped her back down, and then bent, kissing Sansa’s hand. He met her eyes while he did so.

“Be safe, brother,” Robb said moving forward to hug Jon.

Jon nodded. “You too.”

Jon lifted Bran in the air, and hugged him tightly.

Finally, Jon turned to Rickon, whom Catelyn still held in her arms. Gingerly, he met Catelyn’s eyes. She looked coolly at him, but it lacked the disdain that he was used to seeing. He reached out carefully and touched Rickon’s cheek. Rickon squirmed and giggled.

“We’re all ready,” said Benjen rubbing the back of his neck, “just waiting for the Imp to saddle up.”

“Fear not,” said Tyrion walking up, “I haven’t decided to leave you bereft of my charming company. My horse is saddled and ready.” He bowed in front of Catelyn. “Lady Stark, I cannot thank you enough for your patience and hospitality. You have been an exquisite host.”

“Thank you for your kind words, Lord Tyrion” Catelyn said with a sharp nod, “I hope I did you and your family justice.”

“For sure, my lady,” Tyrion said with a crooked grin, “you are a testament to your house.”

Ned stepped forward, embracing Jon. He pulled back, resting both hands on Jon’s shoulders, and smiled at him.

Ned turned to Arya, reaching a hand out for her. “Up you go,” he said, helping her onto her horse, where she sat, looking miserable.

Brienne swung into her saddle as well, standing beside Arya.

Ned was reaching for Sansa too quickly. She began to panic, until she felt Robb’s hand at her back. Regaining her resolve, Sansa allowed Ned lift her up into the saddle.

She stared down at her family, as the bustle and noise of the courtyard began to fade away. The world became silent as she looked at them.

“Ned!” King Robert’s voice shattered the silence, “we ride!”

She watched as her father quickly turned to her mother. Ned kissed Catelyn deeply, and she clung to him. They parted, and Ned bent to each of her brother’s, hugging them. He pulled himself up on his horse. Catelyn reached out desperately for him, and he caught her hand and squeezed it. Then they were moving, their mounts falling into place in the long train of men, horses, and luggage that began moving sluggishly out of the courtyard.
Sansa twisted around, and looked back. Her mother stood tall like a pillar beside Robb and Bran, Rickon held firmly in her arms. Uncle Benjen was waving. Tyrion stood beside him, arms tucked gravely behind his back.

Jon stared after her, his eyes meeting hers. She held his gaze as long as possible.

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Jon turned away when he could no longer see the last man in the King’s retinue.

Catelyn was handing bundles of food and drink to Benjen, which he gratefully loaded into their saddlebags.

Jon got on his horse, walking him to stand next to Tyrion. He could feel the man watching the side of his face, but he didn't turn to acknowledge him.

“I’ve packed extra wine for you, Lord Tyrion,” Catelyn said, handing it up to him, “and I was asked to make sure that you have the relevant materials from our libraries.”

Tyrion chuckled, taking the package from her, “again, thank you, my lady. Wine will keep me warmer than these furs. And I do have everything I need.” He patted his bags.

Jon shifted uncomfortably in his saddle, wanting to turn away from Catelyn before she could do it to him. But she didn’t. She turned to him, silently handing him a bundle of food. Her cheeks were still wet with tears from when she had kissed Ned.

“Thank you, Lady Stark,” Jon said taking it from her. He glanced at Robb, who looked surprised, but pleased at his mother’s actions.

“I trust you will accomplish your objective,” Catelyn told him stiffly, “for my children’s sake.”

Jon nodded, his face set in determination, “I will not fail.”

“Then I wish you good fortune.” Catelyn stepped back.

They rode away. Bran broke free of Robb’s hand and ran after them. He stopped at the gates, waving his little arms madly. Jon waved until he disappeared.

“We’re meeting Yoren at the edge of the Wolfswood,” said Benjen, “He’s bringing more recruits.”

“Two,” Jon corrected, “two rapists from the Fingers.”

Benjen, nodded slowly, absorbing this. “I had hoped he would have more men,” he said finally, “we’re woefully undermanned.”

“No pride in freezing on the Wall anymore,” Tyrion noted, “men would rather have warm weather and wives.”

“There is still some pride in us, yet, Lord Tyrion,” Benjen said, rigidly.

“Of course,” Tyrion said, “and Westeros will be pleased that there is still such pride when they see the dead at their doorstep. I saw them, it was a truly terrible sight.”

Benjen swallowed. “I was not aware that you had seen the Others. Lord Tyrion. My brother did not mention that.”
“I did,” said Tyrion, uncomfortably, “it is not a sight I would ever wish to see again, and yet I think it will be unavoidable.”

“You don’t look like much of a fighter,” Benjen said, casting his eyes over Tyrion.

“Lord Tyrion is a skilled orator,” Jon said with a grim smile.

Tyrion looked darkly amused. “Jon is correct,” he said with a wry smile. I do seem to have a way with words. However, in the capacity of battle, I consider myself to be an excellent strategist. I create the ideas that will win wars and build worlds. I have been Hand to two rulers in my lifetime. I engineered the defeat of Stannis Baratheon as he attacked King’s Landing, ending in miserable defeat for him.”

“You used Wildfyre,” Jon said, eyes hard, “Sansa told me.”

“Yes,” said Tyrion faltering, “an unimaginable weapon. I intend to look into it the moment I step foot in the Red Keep. Ever since learning of Aery’s intention to burn the city to ashes, Cersei has kept the idea of Wildfyre close, just in case. I am not sure if she has begun production yet, or how much of it lies already beneath the Red Keep.”

“I thought maybe it was a myth,” said Bejen, “such a substance actually exists?”

“It does,” Tyrion confirmed, “volatile, deadly. It burns brighter than the sun, even on water.”

“It would burn on snow then?” asked Benjen, “Jon, you say the dead burn under fire.”

“It’s possible,” Jon said, reluctantly, “it is a deadly and dangerous weapon. I do not know if it would kill us all before we before we had the chance to utilize it in battle.”

Tyrion shook his head. “It can be made safe for travel. As safe as Wildfyre ever can be. I will have to think on how it can be used effectively against the Others. I cannot fill a lake with it, they cannot swim. Perhaps if we could launch jars of it strategically. Perhaps we could bait them into a trap of it.”

“I do not like it,” Jon glowered, “it is too dangerous.”

“Dragons are dangerous, unpredictable, and volatile,” Tyrion said, “much the same as Wildfyre. And yet you would take dragons to battle.”

Benjen inhaled a shaky breath. “Dragons,” he said, “dragons are gone from this world. They have been for centuries”

“No,” Jon said, “they live yet. Right now, Daenerys Targaryen stands in Pentos, having been gifted three dragon eggs. She will hatch them on a burning pyre with the help of blood magic, bringing three dragons into the world.”

“And you plan to have her fight with us against the Others,” asked Bejen, “this exiled Targaryen girl? She cannot be more than a child. The Targaryens have no more hold in Westeros.”

“Three large dragons are a rather convincing sight,” said Tyrion, “she will come to Westeros after amassing wealth, armies, and land. She will wield incredible power.”

“How do you intend to convince her of the threat beyond the Wall?”

Tyrion glanced at Jon. “It’s been done before. It can be done again. Daenerys is a smart woman,
and a champion of the people. She will come to our aid again.”

“Dragons,” murmured Bejen, “dragons in Westeros. It seems that every creature from the otherworld is clawing its way to the light.”

“A foreboding thought,” said Tyrion grimly, “I do hope that the likes of Grumkins and Snarks are planning to stay put. There is only so much a man can handle.”

“I think they’ll stay hidden,” said Jon, “they must fear the Others as well. The Night King has not allies but the ones he creates.”

“You mean to take his allies before they can become so,” said Benjen, looking away from Jon.

“Yes,” said Jon, “it is the only way.”

“We shall see,” said Benjen his eyes fixed on the horizon, “we shall see.”
“I have news fit for the ears of my Hand,” Robert said, pulling his horse close to Ned’s, “Daenerys Targaryen has married a Dothraki Horselord. A man who commands a horde of a hundred thousand riders.”

“Shall we send a wedding gift?” Ned said wryly.

“I would send a knife perhaps, a good sharp one, and a bold man to wield it,” said Robert.

“She is a child, Robert,” Ned said, “The Dothraki command no ships, and are said to fear the water. The girl has tied herself to the land across the Narrow Sea. She will live out her days there.” The words felt false in his mouth. He could imagine the shadow of wings falling over Westeros, and the shrieks of Dragons.

“Children turn into women,” said Robert gruffly, “and women bear children. Soon there will be more Targaryen blood polluting this world.”

“Do not speak of it,” advised Ned, “this child is out of your reach, and poses no threat to you.”

“Oh it’s unspeakable to you?” said Robert angrily, “what her father did to your family, that was unspeakable. What Rhaegar Targaryen did to your sister, the woman I loved. That was unspeakable. I would hunt the Targaryens to the ends of this earth.”

“But you cannot,” said Ned, “and so you should not concern yourself with it.”

“The boy lives,” grunted Robert, “he’ll not rest easy while I sit on the throne. He was a Prince in this land, he will not take kindly to life as a beggar in the company of savages.”

“If Viserys Targaryen somehow manages find ships and forces the Dothraki aboard them, then we will throw them back into the sea,” said Ned, “your grace, you called on me to advise you. I advise you to not concern yourself with the Targaryens.”

Robert pulled away slightly, his anger simmering. “I won’t act now, Ned. But the moment I catch wind of their ambitions, I will not hesitate to strike them down, as I did Rhaegar. And their blood will be as bright as Rhaegar’s rubies”

“Pardon me, m’lady,” muttered the boy, scrambling away from Arya.

Arya rubbed her shoulder, where the boy had bumped her.

“You’re Mycah,” she said, “the butcher’s boy.”
“Yes, m’lady,” Mycah said, his eyes lowered to the ground, “I did not mean to disturb you.” He looked warily at Nymeria, who stood beside her.

“You didn’t disturb me,” scoffed Arya, “I’m a lot tougher than that.”

Mycah peeked up at her. “You are a lady,” he said, “Ladies are delicate.”


Mycah grinned at her, eyeing her breeches. “Aye, m’lady. I did not think you looked very delicate, not really.”

“This is Nymeria,” Arya said, rubbing her direwolf’s head, “she’s not a lady either. You can pet her if you like. Nymeria won’t hurt my friends.”

Mycah edged carefully forward, until his hand met Nymeria’s nose. Her long, pink tongue rolled out, and licked his fingers. He laughed in delight.

“Where were you running to?” Arya asked him.

Mycah squirmed. “I’m supposed to be helping father skin the game,” he admitted, “but I wanted to go wading in the river.”

Arya’s eyes glowed with excitement. “Are you looking for rubies?” she asked, “from Prince Rhaegar’s armor?”

Mycah beamed at her. “If I found rubies,” he confided in her, “my father could sell them to the jewelers in King’s Landing. We’d be as rich as the King.”

He hesitated, toying in the dirt with his foot. “Would you like to come with me?” he asked, “we could split the treasure!”

Arya wanted to say yes. It hung heavy on her tongue. With great effort, she stepped back shaking her head. “I cannot,” Arya said, “my father and sister would not approve. I wish I could.”

Mycah nodded. “Aye, m’lady, it is better if you do not dirty your clothes.”

Arya bit back a response, looking longingly at the river.

“I’ll bring you the rubies if I find them,” said Mycah, “you can hold them if you like.”

“I’d like that,” Arya said smiling at him, “I hope you find them.”

She began to walk away, but stopped and turned around. She came very close to Mycah, and pinched the edge of his shirt between her fingers. He was startled at her closeness, and tried to edge away. She held him firmly.

“Beware Prince Joffrey,” Arya whispered, “he will hurt you if your cross him. Be safe, Mycah.”

Wide-eyed, Mycah nodded rapidly. She released him, and he stared at her for a moment before running away towards the Trident.

She looked after him, with hope, before taking Nymeria and walking back towards camp.

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“Where were you?” Sansa asked, as Arya and Nymeria trotted up. She bent down, rubbing Lady under her chin. The wolves had stayed glued to their sides, every second of the journey. Sansa was even reluctant to let Lady go hunting alone.

“Speaking to Mycah,” Arya said softly. Sansa opened her mouth to reproach her, and Arya waved her concerns away. “I didn’t put him in danger,” she said, “he bumped into me by the river, and we spoke briefly. I told him to beware getting in Joffrey’s way.”

“Of course, you were right to do so,” said Sansa nodding, “I did not mean to suggest that you would. It was smart to do that, it will prevent any interaction he might have with Joffrey.”

“Who’s coming?” asked Arya, squinting at where Cersei stood, waiting for riders who were quickly approaching.

“I believe it is the Kingsguard,” murmured Sansa, “stay close to me Arya.”

The two riders approached the queen. Only one wore a flowing white cloak.


Arya hissed angrily.

Sansa took her hand and turned, intending to leave before they were spotted. They were stopped by the looming presence of the Hound, who looked down at them knowingly, with a mocking smile.

“You are shaking girl,” he said, looking at Sansa, “do I frighten you so much?”

“No, Ser Clegane,” Sansa said staring up at him, “it is not you who frightens me.”

The Hound regarded her suspiciously, but stepped aside. His eyes turned to the figures of Ser Barristan and Ilyn Payne.

“Ilyn Payne,” he said softly, “the King’s executioner. You are right to be frightened, girl. Bolder men than you have been frightened of Ilyn Payne. That man sups on the cries of the condemned like a starving man at a feast.”

He was close to Sansa now, luxuriating in the fearful look in Sansa’s eyes. Arya bared her teeth and growled at him, just as Nymeria and Lady did the same, beside her.

“Hound!”

Joffrey came striding over. “Back off dog,” he growled at him. He turned sweetly to Arya and Sansa. “You’re scaring these gentle ladies.” Joffrey’s eyes flicked to Arya, as if reconsidering his use of the word ‘lady’.

The Hound bowed, and slid away through the throng of people.

“Never fear, my lady,” said Joffrey smiling at Sansa, “I have sent the beast away.”

“Thank you, my prince,” said Sansa, executing a low curtsey, “but Ser Clegane doesn’t frighten me, not really.”

Joffrey frowned her. “He would if you were smart,” he said carelessly, “the Hound is a mad dog my mother set to serve me. It is not wise to cross him.”
“I did not intend to do so,” Sansa said simply.

Joffrey rolled his shoulders, his breastplate catching the sun.

“Would you like to go for a ride, my lady?” he asked Sansa, “it is truly a lovely day. The sky is as blue as your eyes.”

“Oh I would love to,” said Sansa, simpering, “to ride next to a prince as handsome as you would be a dream. However, my father has instructed me to bring my little sister back to our tent. I must attend to that.”

Joffrey cast Arya a disgusted look. “She can find the way back on her own,” he spat, “come, my lady, we can spend some time getting to know one another.”

Just then, Arya screamed long and loud. “I won’t go I won’t,” she shrieked seizing Sansa’s skirts, “I’ll run into the woods! You’ll never see me again! I won’t go, I won’t go!” She wailed uncontrollably, catching the attention of the entire crowd, and the Queen.

Cersei turned towards the noise, a look of disgust spreading across her face.

“As you can see,” Sansa said in a calm tone with a pleasant smile, as Arya screeched at her feet, “I must escort my sister back to our tent. Thank you for the lovely offer, my prince. I look forward to the day when I can accept.”

Joffrey’s face twisted up as he looked at Arya, and he nodded tightly in Sansa’s direction.

“Go, my lady,” he said, “clearly you must deal with a wretch like that.”

Sansa gritted her teeth. “Oh, my prince, you must forgive my sister. She’s been missing home. If you will excuse us.”

Joffrey waved them off, and Sansa grabbed Arya’s hand. Her sister continued screaming as they walked toward the tent, only stopping once they were over the hill. Arya breathed deeply in satisfaction.

“You can’t do that every time Joffrey tries to talk to me,” Sansa scolded. But she was biting her lip to hide a smile.

“I know,” sighed Arya, “but let me have it this once.”

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“What was that dreadful girl shrieking about?” his mother asked. She reached out to smooth his hair, but Joffrey ducked away in irritability.

“Don’t, Mother,” he snapped in warning, “I don’t know why she was screaming, but it hurt my head. I asked Sansa to go riding, and she had to take her nasty little sister to their father instead!”

“You must try to spend time with, Lady Sansa,” reproached Cersei.

“And I just said I tried!” snarled Joffrey, “it’s not my fault!

“It’s possible that Sansa will be your queen one day,” said Cersei, “earn her love and trust, and she will be dutiful wife.”

“She has to be my wife whether she likes it or not,” Joffrey said, “I am to be the king of the seven
“But don’t you want a wife who is soft and loving?” prompted Cersei, “the girl doesn't appear intelligent, but she seems good-natured and devoted. Coax her to love you.”

“Yes,” muttered Joffrey, “she should love me. I’ll make her love me.”

“Try to get her alone,” suggested Cersei, “she already admires you. It will be nothing on your part to turn that to adoration.”

“I can’t get her alone,” growled Joffrey, “that hulking woman is never far behind her. And what kind of proper lady has a wolf as a pet? When we’re married, I’ll slaughter that beast, and serve it at the wedding feast. Its skin will warm my bedding.”

“You’ll lose the girl’s trust if you do that,” Cersei warned, “leave the beast alone. We’ll get rid of it more discreetly.”

Joffrey’s face turned down in an ugly grimace. “I don’t need her trust,” said Joffrey, his eyes glinting, “I can do as I please. I am the prince.”

He drew his sword threateningly, slicing it through the air.

"That you are, my love," said Cersei soothingly, "and one day you will be King."
“The recruits are quiet,” Tyrion murmured to Jon, “do you know them?” He and Jon had fallen slightly behind. Ahead of them, rode Yoren and Benjen with the two men.

“Rapists,” said Jon darkly, “Tom and Rast. Rast is one of the men that mutinied against Lord Commander Mormont. He tormented Sam for ages as well.”

“Sam is the one with the Wildling wife and babe.”

“Aye,” said Jon, troubled, “I confess, I’m not sure what to do about them. Sam is not yet here, he does not know of them. Gilly still lives in Craster’s keep. It would be difficult for me to snatch her and the babe from her father’s house. And I cannot murder Craster without reason. He is still an ally to the watch.”

Tyrion sighed, shaking his head. “Perhaps it is not meant to be,” he said gently, “you cannot save everyone, Jon Snow.”

“I don’t like leaving them though,” said Jon softly, “I know Gilly, I know little Sam. I know they will suffer if they are left in Craster’s hands.”

“Perhaps they can be evacuated with the other Wildlings?” suggested Tyrion, “if the girl fell in love with Sam once, it can happen again.”

“It’s a question of timing,” said Jon in frustration, “if Gilly has that babe, and I haven’t yet brought the Wildlings through, little Sam will be lost. Craster doesn’t keep his boys, only his daughters. They boys are left out in the snow, as an offering to the Others.”

Tyrion looked at him strangely. “He gives babes to the Others?” Tyrion asked, “what would they do with babes?”

Jon shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said hoarsely, “but Craster and his wives live and breath because of those offerings. There’s no other explanation for why his keep has been untouched by the dead.”

“There’s no explanation that will suffice for any of this,” muttered Tyrion.

He glanced up at Benjen, who rode ahead. “Your uncle remains unconvinced of your plans.”

“It’s....difficult,” said Jon slowly, “I cannot blame him for his hesitation. But, he does believe me about the Others, I can see it in his eyes. I have his trust on some things. I just don’t have the trust of the Watch or the Free Folk. Convincing them will be the real test.”

“Take your time,” advised Tyrion, “you’re coming to them, nothing but a green boy with some letters. You’re going to have to prove yourself. Do you intend to recite the vows?”

Jon gripped the reins of his horse in his hands tightly. “I can’t,” he confessed, “how can I take a vow that I know I do not mean to keep?”

“I think you should consider it,” said Tyrion, “it will give you credibility, a reason for you to be trusted.”

“And when it’s time for me to leave?” Jon asked, with a sad humor, “shall I call upon the men to
once again release me from my watch with their daggers?”

“Don’t be foolish, boy,” snapped Tyrion, “your brother is Warden of the North. He will possibly be King in the North one day. Your aunt will one day be Queen in Westeros. You yourself are the rightful prince of the seven kingdoms.”

“Hush,” Jon growled, “you will not speak of that here.”

Tyrion ignored him, and continued. “When the time comes for you to leave the Wall, you will receive a pardon. You’re too valuable to be left rotting away here.”

“I should just run then,” Jon said sharply, “abandon my vows? I’m not like you, Lord Tyrion, I don’t run like you, when my duty becomes inconvenient.”

Tyrion barked a laugh, an angry, hollow sound. “Who watched you fall from that dragon, boy?” he hissed, “who led your armies into the jaws of the damned after you were nothing but bloody flesh and broken bones on the ice? I didn’t want to die that, for nothing, but I did as my stubborn Queen demanded. And I died that day, with no glory. Just the taste of ashes in my mouth. Yes, I would have rather we ran. And you cannot tell me, boy, that you never considered running. Wanted it down to your bones. Because that is a lie. And I will not tolerate lies from you, Jon Snow.”

Jon trembled with fury and shame. They didn’t speak for minutes. The only sound was the whistling of the wind, and the constant noise of the horses’ hooves hitting the ground.

“I simply meant to say,” said Tyrion, recovering his composure, “that after you have resettled the Wildlings, you have other work to attend to. It is easy, up here, to lose sight of what you have left behind.”

Jon put his hand to his chest, over his heart. If he pressed hard enough, he could feel the shape of blue ribbons beneath his jerkin. “I will not forget what I have left behind,” Jon said quietly, “I assure you of that.”

“Well then,” Tyrion said, “whether you take your vows or not is up to you. But I very much advise you to consider your options. I can tell you that Jeor Mormont will be much more accommodating to a brother of the Night’s Watch, than he would be to the bastard of Winterfell.”

“Mormont’s a good man,” said Jon, “a smart man. Even before he saw the Walkers, he understood the threat of them. He knows his Wall wasn’t built to keep out wildling raiders.”

“I pray for your sake that is true,” said Tyrion, “but do not underestimate the sway that tradition has over men like Jeor Mormont. He may bend, but it will be with great difficulty. And there are those in the Night’s Watch that will break before they led wildlings over the wall.”

“I know which men will be trouble,” said Jon grimly, “it makes it easier to anticipate mutiny, not to stop it.”

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They saw the Wall before anything else. As they got closer, the outline of Castle Black appeared, a dark spot on the base of the white expanse of the Wall.

“It stands,” Tyrion said softly, as they approached, “as it has for thousands of years.”

“As it will,” Jon told him firmly, “for thousands more.”
Yoren had ridden ahead with the recruits. Bejen dropped back to ride beside Tyrion and Jon.

“You must be patient,” he told Jon quietly, “I will speak to Lord Commander Mormont when we return. Say nothing to anyone. Keep your head down, and stay out of trouble.”

They rode through the gates, and Jon was struck by the familiarity of the courtyard. He’d trained here, fought here. He had executed men, cradled the woman he loved, been betrayed by his brothers, all here. The white snow suddenly seemed to darken red before his eyes.

Where does all the blood go, Jon wondered, after it’s been spilled into the earth. Does it stay there forever? Surely, soil like that can only grow death.

He slid off his horse, dazed. Tyrion looked at him sharply, noting his glassy eyes, and hissed, “steel yourself, Jon.”

Jon shook it off, shivering. He looked around, shocked by the activity in the courtyard. The number of men that swarmed around him, was the smallest it had been in the history of the Watch. Yet, Jon remembered those numbers dwindling still further to almost nothing.

Yoren had brought his charges over to where a small huddle of new recruits were standing. Jon grimaced as he recognized Alliser Thorne as the man addressing them.

Benjen touched Jon’s shoulder briefly, and walked towards the Lord Commander’s Tower.

As soon as Benjen disappeared, Jon felt panic swell in him. He felt intensely visible, as the horses were led away to the stables. Beside him, Tyrion drank deeply from his wineskin.

“Well?” asked Tyrion, “what now, Jon Snow?”

“I thought we would be taken to Lord Commander Mormont, at once,” muttered Jon.

He shook his head and looked around. “We need a steward,” said Jon, “he’ll tell us where to put our things.”

“And who here is a steward?” Tyrion asked him.

Jon scanned the faces of the men, wincing when he landed on Bowen March, who was speaking to Yoren.


“A friend of yours?” japed Tyrion, “or did he stab you in the back?”

Jon gave him a dark look, and strode over to where Bowen and Yoren stood. The men looked up as he approached.

“This is Ned Stark’s bastard?” Bowen asked gruffly, regarding Jon.

“Aye,” said Yoren, “and Lord Tyrion Lannister, brother of the Queen.”

“Lord Snow, Lord Lannister,” Bowen greeted them coolly, “what can I do for such honored guests?”

“We need beds in the barracks,” said Jon, “if you could direct us to our spots.”

“Barracks are for the brothers,” said Bowen, “you’ll be in the King’s Tower.”
Jon could feel the recruits eyeing him. He swallowed. “I’d prefer the barracks,” Jon said, carefully, “we’re not kings, there’s no need for the tower to be prepared.”

“And I said, the barracks are for brother’s,” Bowen scoffed, “you’ll be in the tower, my lords.”

Bowen turned away, dismissing them.

“Come along, Snow,” Tyrion murmured.

Fuming, Jon picked up their bags and began walking quickly towards the King’s Tower. Wrenching the heavy door open, they climbed the dirty steps. There were several rooms in the tower. Three of them contained simple bed frames covered in weathered mattresses. Jon shoved open the shutters in one of the rooms, sending cobwebs and dust into the air.

Tyrion watched him wearily from the doorway.

“He disrespected me in front of the recruits,” snarled Jon.

“He disrespected a bastard boy,” retorted Tyrion, “it’s commonplace. You are no longer Jon Snow, Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. If you are to be successful here, you must remember that.”

“I know these men,” said Jon, “I know every inch of this castle.”

“But they do not know you,” stressed Tyrion, “and why should they? You are nothing to them, Jon Snow.”

Jon looked away, angrily. “I wanted to sleep in the barracks,” he said, “being in the King’s Tower distances me from the men.”

“As astute observation,” said Tyrion dryly, “I’m sure Marsh intended to distance us. The Night’s Watch is a brotherhood, one that does not look kindly upon outsiders from the south.”

Jon sat heavily on the bed, exuding frustration.

“Listen to me now, Jon Snow,” Tyrion snapped, “you lack many things at the moment. Your men do not know or trust you, you have no power, no accountability. You are a noble bastard, from the greatest house in the North who has come to gawk at a life he has no intention of participating in.”

“I - ” Jon started, furiously.

“I am telling you this,” Tyrion ground on, “so you understand exactly how the brothers see you. To know the estimation of one’s self from another’s perspective can be a valuable tool. They have low expectations for you, prove them wrong. Use what you know to sway them to your cause. A man’s power or lack therefore of is never a permanent condition. Take yours back. Lead, and they will follow.”

“Lord Commander Mormont once told me that I needed to learn how to follow before I could lead,” said Jon slowly.

Tyrion huffed a laugh. “Wise words from a man who no longer needs to follow. But this sentiment can be of use to you. Keep your head down, prove yourself, gain respect. Then you may lead.”

He left Jon, who sat on the bed, deep in thought. The sounds of the courtyard drifted through the open window, but Jon was separated from that din of activity, thanks to the likes of Bowen Marsh. That gap would need to be bridged. He needed to speak to Jeor Mormont as soon as possible. Jon
knew, that if left unattended, mistrust would only grow.

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“I’ve told Mormont that you need to speak with him,” Benjen said, entering Jon’s room. He looked around, “I’m surprised they put you in the tower.”

“It was Bowen Marsh’s doing,” Jon said sourly.

“Ah,” said Benjen rubbing his chin, “Marsh is stubborn man, very traditional.”

“I know that well,” said Jon, “he and I have never seen eye to eye. What did Lord Commander Mormont say?”

“He’s willing to meet you,” said Benjen, sitting down, “I’ve told him you’ve come as envoy for your father.”

“Thank you, Uncle Benjen,” said Jon, “thank you for everything.”

Benjen sat back in the chair, studying Jon. “How well do you know Lord Commander Mormont?”

Jon heard the hesitancy in his uncle’s voice. “I know him well,” Jon said, with a short nod, “I was his personal steward. He wanted me for command.”

“A steward?” asked Benjen, “not a ranger?”

“I wanted to be one,” Jon said with a bitter smile, “I wanted to be just like you. I was furious when I was assigned stewards. I thought Alliser Thorne was punishing me. But I am grateful to Lord Commander Mormont. He made me the man I became.”

“You know him then,” said Benjen stroking his chin, “how do you mean to approach him?”

Jon gazed off into the distance. “Everything I intend will be for the good of the watch, for the good of the brothers. I understand the hesitation to join forces with the Wildlings. They’ve slaughtered us, we’ve hunted them. It is an anathema to our traditions and principles. But it will save us in the end. For decades, Lord Commander Mormont has dedicated himself to the defense of the Wall. I believe that he will act when he sees the face of our true foe.”

“You really mean for us to do it?” asked Benjen in a hushed tone, “to capture the dead?”

“I do,” said Jon, “there is no argument that would speak as strongly as the sight of the Others. They will only be fantasy in the brothers’ minds until the truth is unavoidable.”

Benjen watched him, the flames dancing over his solemn face.

Jon stared back, chin lifted, eyes blazing. “You and I will make that truth unavoidable.”
It was not the stink of King’s Landing that turned Sansa’s stomach as they rode through the Dragon Gate, but the dreadful familiarity of that smell. Sweat and sewage and fish, the combination reminded Sansa of bruises, blood, and tears.

She did not relish the ride through the city. Lady trotted beside her horse, tense, her ears pricked. The smallfolk stared at them as they passed, murmuring praises and offerings to King Robert. They quieted in shock when Sansa and Arya rode past with their wolves.

Rhaenys’ Hill, and the Dragonpit atop it loomed above them. The large dome was jagged in the center where the roof had collapsed in. It looks dead, Sansa thought, but not for long.

Arya craned her head, searching the crowd that had gathered from Flea Bottom.

“Who are you looking for?” whispered Sansa.

Arya’s mouth twisted in disappointment. “My friends,” she said, “I do not see them.”

“We have time,” Sansa cautioned her sister.

Arya sat back in her saddle, and called soothingly to Nymeria who was nervous, caught between the horses and the crowd.

Suddenly, the Red Keep loomed in front of them. It had seemed so grand, once upon a time. Now, Sansa realized that it was smaller than Winterfell.

Her and Arya rode close to Ned and Brienne. They had took to riding at the front of the retinue. The King had taken to riding slowly or in the carriage. He had begun drinking steadily more and more the longer they were on the road.

Dusting, aching, they rode through the bronze doors of the Red Keep. There was a flurry of servants around them as Ned dismounted. Brienne lifted the girls from their saddles and set them on their trembling legs. The wolves swarmed around them, seeking Sansa and Arya’s hands.

One of the maids shrieked after catching sight of Lady.

“Our wolves are loyal to us,” Sansa assured her, “they will not hurt you.”

“My lord!”

A steward hurried towards them, looking at Ned. “My lord, Grand Maester Pycelle has called for an urgent meeting of the small council. He requests your presence there.”

Her father hesitated. “It would be more convenient on the morrow.”

“I will send them your regrets,” the steward said, bowing.

“No, damn it,” Ned said quickly, glancing at Sansa, “I will see them. Give me a few moments to make myself presentable.”

“Of course, my lord,” the steward said, “we’ve given you Lord Arryn’s former chambers in the Tower of the Hand. We shall deliver your things there.”
“My thanks,” said Ned wearily, “my wagons are still straggling through the city, I will need to borrow some appropriate clothing.”

“Of course, my lord.”

Ned turned back to them. “Brienne,” he said, “please ensure that you and the girls are safely settled in the Tower. I will attend to this, and be back as soon as I can.”

“Of course, my lord,” Brienne said firmly, “we will await your return.”

Ned nodded, closing his eyes briefly. He bent and kissed Sansa and Arya.

“You can do this, Father,” Sansa whispered.

Ned smiled at her, rubbing her cheek with his thumb. Then he was gone.

“I do not like to let him go,” said Arya softly, staring after him.

“Your father is a smart man,” Brienne said quietly, “and he knows now to be wary. Do not fear.”

“I can’t help it,” Arya murmured exchanging a glance with Sansa, “it feels like we have thrown him to the lions.”

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Ned swept his eyes over the small council chamber. The moment he entered, a bald man dressed in flowing robes rose to take his hands.

Varys, he heard Sansa’s voice whisper in his ear, a secret Targaryen loyalist.

“Lord Stark,” Varys said with a saccharine smile, “I’m pleased you had safe travels.”

“Lord Varys,” Ned said with a short nod, “the gods were good to us on the Kingsroad.”

He noticed Renly. “Renly!” Ned called to the grinning dark-haired man, “you’re looking well.”

“And you look tired from the road,” said Renly embracing him briefly, “I told them this meeting could wait, but - ”

“But we have a kingdom to look after,” interrupted a small man with a pointed beard, “I’ve hoped to meet you for some time, Lord Stark. No doubt Lady Catelyn has mentioned me.”

Ned felt his veins ice over, as he regarded the man. Littlefinger. He heard Sansa’s voice tremble. An urge to wrap his hands around the man’s slender neck nearly overtook him. Taking a steadying breath, he schooled his features into indifference.

“In passing,” Ned said coolly, watching Littlefinger’s face twitch, “Lord Baelish, I understand you knew my brother Brandon as well.”

“All too well,” Baelish said smoothly, “I still carry a token of his esteem from navel to collarbone.”

“Perhaps you chose the wrong man to duel with,” Ned suggested stiffly.

Littlefinger shook his head. “It wasn’t the man that I chose, my lord,” he rasped, “it was Catelyn Tully. A woman worth fighting for, I’m sure you’ll agree.”
Ned was saved from the red haze that began to permeate his vision by the interruption of Pycelle.  

“I humbly beg your pardon, my Lord Stark,” Pycelle called.

Ned turned stiffly to the man, “Grand Maester.”  

“He’s loyal to Cersei, never trust him.”

“How many years has it been? You were a young man,” Pycelle croaked.

“And you served another King,” remarked Ned.

“How forgetful of me,” said Pycelle eyeing him.  He rummaged through his robes.  “This belongs to you, now,” he said handing Ned a pin.

The Hand of the King.  Ned stared down at the heavy metal pin.  He rubbed it between his fingers for a moment before attaching it to his breast.

“Shall we begin then?”  Pycelle asked as Ned took a seat.

“We are only five” Ned said frowning

“If you wait for Robert to show up here, I’m afraid you will be waiting a long while,” said Renly with a dry chuckle, “Ser Barristan rides beside him of course.  And my dear brother Stannis left for Dragonstone shortly after Robert went north.”

Ned shook his head, “Robert should preside over his small council.”

“His Grace has many, many cares,” said Varys soothingly, “he entrusts some small matters to us so that we might lighten the load.”

“We are the lords of small matters here,” said Baelish grinning.

Renly reached out and clapped Ned on the back.  “First matter of business,” he said, handing Ned a scroll, “my brother has instructed us to stage a tournament in honor of Lord Stark’s appointment as Hand of the King.”

Ned read through the order quickly, his brow furrowed.  “This is far too extravagant,” muttered Ned.

“How much?” asked Littlefinger, leaning forward.

“Forty-thousand gold dragons to the champion,” read Ned, “twenty-thousand to the runner-up, twenty-thousand to the winning archer.”

“Can the treasury bear such an expense?” asked Pycelle.

Littlefinger stroked his chin.  “I’ll have to borrow it.  The Lannisters will be accommodating, I expect.  We already owe Lord Tywin three million gold.  What is another eighty-thousand?”

Ned distantly remembered Sansa telling him this.  Even so it was shocking.  “Three million?” he asked in disbelief, “the Crown is three million in debt?”

“Six million actually,” said Littlefinger.

“I do not believe that Jon Arryn allowed Robert to bankrupt the realm,” said Ned, angrily.  Jon Arryn’s name left a bitter taste in his mouth.
“Lord Arryn gave wise and prudent advice,” said Pyelle, “but I fear that His Grace does not always listen.”

“Counting coppers, he calls it,” Renly snorted.

“We cannot afford this,” Ned said shaking his head, “I’ll speak to the King.”

“As you will,” Littlefinger said sleekly, “but still, we’d best make our plans.”

“There will be no plans until I speak to Robert,” Ned snapped.

Littlefinger looked at him shrewdly.

Be safe, Catelyn’s words flooded him, do not let them see you. He took a deep breath. “Forgive, my lords,” he said contritely, “I had a long ride.”

“My dear Lord Stark,” Varys said, “you are the King’s Hand. We serve at your pleasure.”

“I am only the realm’s servant, Lord Varys,” said Ned wearily, “if Robert desires this tournament, then I will acquiesce. However, I will first try to dissuade him of this unnecessary expense.”

“You can try,” said Renly, smiling pityingly at him, “you know too well that Robert loves his indulgences. Being King has not stripped him of that.”

“Very well,” said Ned running a hand over his face, “my lords, I must take leave of you, I am weary from travel.”

He stood, unsteadily.

“Lord Stark,” called Littlefinger, “if you need assistance, I would be more than happy to escort you to the Tower of Hand.”

“No,” Ned said firmly. He would keep Littlefinger far from the girls for as long as possible. “That will not be necessary, Lord Baelish.”

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“My lady,” a maid called, slipping through the door to Sansa’s bedchamber. Sansa and Arya looked up from where they were sitting on Sansa’s bed.

Sansa held the girl’s eyes. Spying for Cersei no doubt. “Yes?” she asked, smiling blankly.

“Prince Joffrey requests that you join him for a walk in the gardens,” said the maid with a curtsey.

Arya’s hand crept towards Sansa’s skirts, but Sansa picked up her sister’s hand and squeezed it gratefully before setting it down.

“Of course,” said Sansa, smoothly, “if you’ll give me a moment.”

“Of course, my lady,” said the Maid backing out.

“Don’t go,” whispered Arya fiercely.

“I cannot arouse suspicion,” Sansa said quietly, “I need you to stay here. Keep Lady and Nymeria with you.”
“You should take Lady, at least,” Arya protested.

“I will not have Lady in the path of Joffrey’s temper,” Sansa told her firmly. “I will take Brienne with me. Keep the wolves with you and do not leave. Wait for father to return.”

She kissed her sister’s head, and walked to Brienne’s chambers, one floor below hers.

She knocked quietly on the door. Brienne answered quickly. She was dressed in clean clothing, her armor removed.

“My lady, what is it?” asked Brienne with concern.

“Prince Joffrey has asked me to take a walk with him,” Sansa said quietly, “will you accompany me?”

“Of course,” Brienne said grimly, “one moment.”

She disappeared into her room, and remerged in a leather breastplate, her sword at her side. They walked down the spiraling steps of the Hand’s Tower. Before the final turn, Sansa turned and looked at Brienne. Brienne put a hand on her pommel, and gave her a reassuring smile.

“Prince Joffrey,” said Sansa, sweeping into a low curtsy.

Joffrey smiled sweetly. It looked painful. “My lady,” he said with a bow. His eyes darted behind her, looking for the wolves, or Arya most likely. He found only Brienne. His lip curled up briefly, before replacing it with a pleasant expression.

“My sweet lady,” Joffrey said, taking Sansa’s arm, “there is no need for your… guard. The Hound follows me wherever I go. He can protect the both of us.”

“I have great faith in Ser Clegane,” Sansa said, her eyes flicking to the Hound, “but it’s not proper, my Prince, for us to be alone together, without the company of another woman.”

Joffrey seemed to struggle for a moment. “Oh very well,” he said, irritable. He offered his arm out to Sansa, and she took it, leaning on him with a smile.

“Where are we walking to, my Prince?” Sansa prompted Joffrey.

Brienne and the Hound trailed behind them. Brienne shot the Hound an unfathomable look. The Hound ignored her.

“I thought we might take in my sister’s gardens,” said Joffrey, “if it would please you, my lady.”

“Princess Myrcella is a lovely girl,” said Sansa truthfully, “I should love to see her gardens.”

“My sister shall make a lovely prize for some lord someday,” said Joffrey carelessly, “being sister to the King.”

“Indeed she will, my Prince,” Sansa murmured, “all women must do their duty. Noble ladies most of all.”

“Will you do your duty, my lady?” asked Joffrey tugging her arm closer, “I hear we may be betrothed one day. You would be my queen. Would you like that?”

“Every lady dreams of being a queen,” Sansa demurely, “I am no different, my prince.”
“I am pleased to hear that,” said Joffrey, grinning widely. He stopped near a rosebush. “Stand back, my lady,” he told Sansa gallantly.

She stepped back quickly.

Joffrey unsheathed his sword and struck the rosebush swiftly. Petals and leaves swirled to the ground. The bush looked dreadful, naked on one side. Bending down, Joffrey picked up the most intact rose and handed it to her.

“For the most beautiful lady in King’s Landing,” Joffrey told her, with a pleased expression.

Sansa forced herself to smile back. “Thank you, my prince. You honor me greatly.”

He took her arm again, and they strolled down the path. Sansa’s hand felt wet. She glanced down. She was gripping the rose so tightly, her hand had begun to bleed. Her blood was as red as the severed rose petals that dotted the grass.
“Robert’s going ahead with this damnable tourney,” said Ned gruffly, “and he’s doing in honor of my name. I’d knock that man upside the head if he wasn’t my king. *Six million gold dragons.* And most of it to the Lannisters! Robert says he dislikes them, yet he’s surrounded by lions everywhere you look. His wife, his children, his squires, his kingsguard. Tywin Lannister is Warden of the West, and Robert tells me that he plans to name Jaime Lannister Warden of the East. The Lannisters hold these seven kingdoms, not the Baratheons.”

“Cersei wants Joffrey on the throne as soon as possible to solidify that hold,” said Sansa, “Robert doesn’t have as much power as he thinks he does, but whatever little of it he exercises grates on Cersei. He hasn’t won any of her favor in their many years of marriage.”

“Why didn’t the Lannisters seize King’s Landing after the Mad King was dead?” Arya asked, “Why did they go through Robert?”

“You didn’t know Robert as he was,” said Ned bitterly, “He’s not a cruel man or a stupid one. Men picked up their swords and went to battle by the thousands to fight for the shining Robert Baratheon. As did I. But all I see now is a drunk who’s run this kingdom dry from indulging in his vices.” He shook his head. “Forgive me my darlings,” he told his children quietly, “I do not always wish to speak so frankly in front of you.”

“You must be frank with us, Father,” Sansa told him, “we must work together. And I know you are missing Mother’s counsel.”

“Aye,” said Ned, “it’s true. However, I do not like to put any more of a burden on you and your sister’s shoulders. You are still my children yet.”

He sighed and looked at his eldest daughter. “Arya said the Prince came for you when I was gone. Are you well, love?”

“Yes, Father,” Sansa assured him, sliding her injured hand into the folds of her dress, “Brienne accompanied me. I’m sure that Cersei has told Joffrey to win my favor. She would like her son to be wed to a malleable lady.” She smiled. “Which Prince Joffrey believes I am.”

“The Hound came with us,” said Brienne, “I did not think he was ever so whipped by the Lannisters.”

“He was alright in the end, I suppose,” said Arya, pushing her food around, “I bet he was the ugliest wight there had ever been. He couldn’t escape death forever.”

“Did you know the Hound well?” Ned demanded of his daughter.

“He kidnapped me,” said Arya stabbing her venison, “and went to ransom me off to Mother and Robb. After they died, he tried to take me to Aunt Lysa. Then she died. Brienne came upon us in the mountains of the Vale, and fought him. *And won.* I ran away though, I didn’t know.” She looked regretfully at Brienne.

“How could you have known?” Brienne said smiling sadly, “most of the Kingdom would have gladly sold you back to Cersei.”

“I didn’t mind him in the end,” said Arya, “in the end he was just a man.” She glanced at her sister. “He loved you though. He talked about you, his ‘little bird’ who sang so sweetly.”
Sansa’s mouth turned down. “He felt something for me,” she said, “I don’t know if it was love or pity. I was so desperate, then, for someone to be there for me. He was, in some ways.”

“Tell me you don’t mean to approach him?” Ned said anxiously looking between his daughters, “whoever he became is not the man he is now.”

“No,” said Arya thoughtfully, “I would leave his fate to the gods. Perhaps he will find the right path, perhaps not. It is his burden to bear, not ours.”

“What of his brother, the Mountain?” asked Brienne, “I have seen the devastation that man brought on the Riverlands. He is a monster.”

“I could dance with him,” said Arya gripping her knife, “I might be able to take him.”

“I did not mean that,” Brienne said sharply as Sansa gasped.

“Might? Arya,” Sansa said furiously, “might? You will not go after the Mountain on a whim. He is too strong.”

Ned looked at Arya with a troubled expression. “I do not doubt that you grew to be a formidable warrior,” he told her, “but you must not risk your life carelessly. A good warrior knows when to wait, and when to strike. Please take care with yourself, my love.”

Arya looked at her lap, and then nodded.

“And Sansa,” Ned said looking at her, “I know you mean to keep the peace with the Lannisters, but you must take care as well.”

“I will, Father,” said Sansa.

Ned sighed deeply. “We are assaulted from all sides,” he told them, “I will scarcely sleep while we are here.”

“Keep Robert alive,” Sansa reminded him, “that is what we are here to do. You must also speak to Littlefinger of the financial support for the glass gardens.”

Ned chuckled without humor. “It looks like Lannister money will build our gardens. Who would have thought? I dread asking that poisonous man for money. He had the nerve to speak your mother’s name to me in that meeting. As if he deserves to say her name.”

“Be polite, yet distant,” Sansa told him, “never let him slip through your defenses. We’ll use him to get the money. It’s said that Littlefinger can pull gold from thin air. Of course why would he need to when he has so much of Westeros ready and willing under his thumb?”

“And after we have the money?” Arya asked, darkly, “what use will Littlefinger be to us then?”

Sansa considered this, then smiled flatly. “Not very much at all.”

Brienne stopped as she came around the bend in the stairs. Arya stood on the tiptoes of one bare foot, balanced on the edge of the stone steps.

“Brienne!” Arya called, eyes tightly shut, “I’ve been waiting for you to come.”

“You could have come to me,” said Brienne, eyeing Arya’s trembling foot, “Arya, what do you
“Practicing,” said Arya, calmly switching feet in one smooth motion. She found her balance by throwing her arms out, then slowly brought her hands together, “I need to be in top condition, I haven’t found my perfect balance in this body yet.”

“Does standing on one foot help?” Brienne asked.

Arya nodded, opening her eyes, and blinking at Brienne. “I’m finding my roots,” she explained, “my first teacher taught me this. He trained me, right here, in this castle.”

Brienne shook her head. “I don’t think my first fighting lesson looked like this.”

“Of course not,” explained Arya, “You’re tall and strong. You’re perfectly suited to heavily armoured fighting with a strong blade. These work to your strengths. Anyone with sense would have given you a sword on first sight, and stepped back.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been called perfectly suited to anything,” said Brienne with a slight smile.

“But you are,” Arya insisted, “I would have given anything to look like you when I was little. Instead, I was always too small and skinny. But I found that I could turn that to my advantage. I could still fight, I just needed a different kind of fighting.”

“From what I remember,” said Brienne, “your fighting style is quite effective.”

“Agility,” said Arya, sweeping an imaginary blade through the air, “speed, elegance. These are the characteristics of the Braavosi Water Dance.”

“This King’s Landing teacher,” asked Brienne, “he taught you to fight?”

“Syrio Forel,” said Arya, her eyes bright, “the former First Sword of Braavos. He taught me the most important lesson a warrior can ever learn. *What do we say to death? Not today.*”

“*Not today,*” echoed Brienne.

“I wasn’t any good, when we trained together,” said Arya her smile dimming, “he was taken from me too quickly.”

“Does he live here?” asked Brienne quietly, “perhaps you can seek him out.”

“No,” said Arya bitterly, “I will not lead him to his death again. Besides - ” She looked down. “I do not know what he would think of me now. I do not know if Syrio Forel would respect the things I have done.”

“Sometimes,” said Brienne gently, “we do things we’re not proud of when we’re scared.”

Arya shook her head. “You don’t understand,” she said, “I am proud. If I had gone with you that day on the mountain, I never would have been anyone. I would have always been a little girl who ran and had to be rescued. I would have recited my little list, unable to do anything about those names. Now, I’m strong, powerful, deadly. I can hurt the people who hurt me.”

Brienne looked at her, feeling helpless.

“You think I’m wrong to feel this way,” accused Arya.

“I did not say that,” Brienne said slowly, but firmly, “there is nothing wrong in feeling this way. I
know what it feels like to desire strength. I have always wanted to be strong. I know what it is to be hurt by others. I never learned to accept these hurts, they wound me, still.”

“What do you do?” asked Arya, her eyes dark, “when people hurt you?”

Brienne smiled. “I think to myself, nasty little shits aren’t worth crying over. And then I decide whether they are worth my anger. Sometimes they aren’t. Sometimes they are.”

Arya laughed.

“Do not let your past weigh you down, Arya,” Brienne said, “do not be ashamed of the things that made you strong. But do not let them control you either. You must find your equilibrium.”

Arya rubbed her foot along the rough stone. “I told Sansa I didn’t know who I’d be after this is over,” she said, “and I don’t know still. She told me I’d always have a place beside her, but it’s not enough. A true warrior cannot cling to her sister’s skirts forever.”

“You don’t have to know,” said Brienne looking at Arya affectionately, “it may not feel like it, but you are still so young. You must try to release some of the pressure you put on yourself.”

“I might not be as strong,” said Arya bitterly, “without it.”

“You will,” said Brienne adamantly, “I promise you that. You will see it in time.”

“Maybe,” said Arya, unconvincingly, “but I cannot falter. Not here, not now.” She glanced over to Brienne. “That was why I wanted you. Could we spar? It’s been so long since I practiced with a worthy opponent.”

Brienne smiled warmly at her, disguising the worry she felt. “I will. But you must promise to show me what the First Sword of Braavos taught you. I may be built for a longsword, but perhaps I could learn to dance as well.”

Arya’s face lit up. She grinned.

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“Lord Stark,” Littlefinger greeted Ned as he entered the small council chambers, “I hear you have been asking for me.”

“Aye,” said Ned, schooling his features, “I have things to discuss with the Master of Coin.”

“But of course, my lord,” Littlefinger said with an exaggerated bow, “I’m at your service.”

“Robert has decided to go forward with the tournament, despite my best efforts,” said Ned, drumming his fingers on the table, “we will need gold for the prizes, for the food, for the wine.”

“It shall be done, my lord,” said Littlefinger, “it is my pleasure to serve.”

“There is another matter I would like to discuss with you,” said Ned, carefully, “concerning the Crown’s gold.”

Littlefinger waited, expectantly, his eyes bright with anticipation.

“Before accepting the King’s offer to be his Hand, I secured his promise that the Crown would assist the North in a certain venture.”
“The North could well use a bit of entertainment,” Littlefinger said, “tell me what you have in mind, Lord Stark.”

“Not entertainment, Lord Baelish,” said Ned gruffly, “survival. I request the Crown’s assistance in erecting more glass gardens in the North. It’s been a long summer. A long winter is sure to follow.”

“Glass gardens?” asked Littlefinger in interest.

“Yes,” Ned replied, “the ones at Winterfell are centuries old. They supply the castle with food, even in winter. The glass traps heat that is necessary for proper growth. The North will need more food than can be stocked away. We need supplies, and wages for glassblowers. House Manderly and my own vault will be supporting the endeavor as well.”

“Fascinating,” said Littlefinger smiling crookedly, “I’m sure something can be arranged. I will do some investigating, and report back to you with my conclusions.”

“My thanks,” said Ned, standing to leave.

“How are you finding King’s Landing?” Littlefinger inquired.

Ned sat back down heavily. “Hot,” he said, hesitantly, “this heat is unbearable. There’s far too many people in the South for my taste.”

“Quite different from the North, I’m told,” said Littlefinger, “I confess, I was surprised that Catelyn did not accompany you. She was always a lively girl. The isolation of the North must weigh on her. She would have been brightened by the company in the capital.”

“My wife is comfortable in the North,” Ned said shortly, “she has been the Lady of a northern house for many years. She has five northern children, and a northern husband. I do not believe she misses the South.”

“Perhaps.” Littlefinger leaned back, and stroked his chin. “Your daughters are here, are they not? I would love to make the acquaintance of Catelyn’s children. I hear the eldest has the Tully look. It seems the young prince is quite enamoured with the girl. Your daughter may be queen someday.”

“My daughters are still children,” snapped Ned, “much too young to be thinking of marriage.”

“Of course not,” said Littlefinger genially, with a slight bow of his head, “forgive me for suggesting otherwise, my lord. Was there anything else you require of me?”

“No,” said Ned, staring down into those sly eyes, “you have been most helpful, Lord Baelish.”

“I aim to serve.” Littlefinger exited with a flourish, leaving Ned alone in the small council room.

Ned wondered if Littlefinger could feel the hatred that threatened to spill from his grasp. He wondered what Littlefinger’s smile would look like covered in blood.
“I’d like you to oversee the training yard with Jory.”

“Me?” asked Theon frowning at Robb.

“Yes,” Robb said putting a hand on Theon’s shoulder, “Ser Rodrik is busy helping Mother attend to repairs on Winterfell. She’s considering restoring the Broken Tower in Father’s absence. It will be good room and storage for when winter comes. Jory can’t handle all the training on his own. I’d like you to help him.”

Theon looked suspicious. “Surely someone else - ”

“I don’t want someone else,” Robb interrupted, “I want you to do it. You’re a fine marksman, and tough swordsman. The little ones will respect you on sight, and the older ones will defer to you after you run them into the dirt. I trust you with this, Theon.”

Theon nodded sharply. Already Robb could see his shoulders were a little higher. His chest puffed out the tiniest bit.

“Thank you, Theon,” Robb said graciously, “report to the training yard tomorrow morning. I’ll tell Jory you’re coming. You are to be Jory’s partner in this, I want you to work together. I want Father to be proud of us when he returns.”

“He will be,” said Theon, resolutely, “I’ll make sure of it. I’ll whip our boys into shape. They'll be trained fighters before long.”

“Try to work with Bran,” Robb suggested, “he looks up to you. He’ll listen to you. The boy has passion, but he lacks structure.”

“I will see to it,” said Theon, bobbing his head.

Robb stretched after Theon left. He shifted the letters on Ned’s desk, glancing at Sansa’s most recent letter, informing him of everyone’s safe arrival at King’s Landing. Including Lady and Nymeria. Robb reached down, and scratched Grey Wind’s ears.

“Hear that?” he asked his wolf softly, “your sisters are safe too.”

Grey Wind blinked sleepily up at him, nose on his paws.

Hearing shouting from outside, Robb strolled to the window and peered down. It was Bran, shrieking with joy as Summer and Shaggydog chased him in circles. Rickon scrambled after them, falling quite often into the mud, but always recovering himself.

Robb grinned to see his little brothers so carefree and happy. The image of Bran, broken and bleeding on the ground faded a little more and more each day.
The door creaked behind him. He turned to see his mother, weary, but smiling.

She crossed to him and kissed his cheek. “How was your day, my love?”

He squirmed at the pet name, and tried to stand up tall, like Father.

“Just watching the grounds,” he said, stoutly, “the little ones are playing below us.”

Catelyn looked out the window, softening at the sight. “Rickon won’t be pleased tonight when it’s time for all that mud to come off.”

“I shall tell him he must endure his trial like a good Stark man,” said Robb.

“You may try,” chuckled Catelyn, “I passed Theon on the way here. Did you speak with him?”

“Yes,” said Robb, turning to her, “I instructed him to join Jory in the training yard tomorrow. I want him working with the boys.”

Catelyn nodded. “Did Sansa tell you, what happened with Theon… before?” she asked quietly, a crease appearing between her eyes.

Robb shook his head. “She only said to be careful with Theon,” he said heavily, “she would not tell me the whole story. Only that we must be cautious of his father’s influence, and that we must try to keep him close.”

“Why not send him away now,” Catelyn pressed, “if he is a danger to us?”

“Sansa said Theon betrayed us,” Robb said quietly, “but she also said that he saved her when she needed him most. She seems to have faith in him. So I will as well.”

“I do not like it,” said Catelyn, “what could he have done?”

“I cannot guess,” admitted Robb, “and Sansa made it clear that I would not want to know. I can only hope that his hand was forced by his father. It is the only reason I can imagine for which he would forsake us.”

“Do not be so sure,” Catelyn murmured, moving forward and stroking Robb’s curls, “men do terrible things for pride. Theon is still an Ironborn no matter how many times he has eaten at our table. Loyalties to one’s house run deep.”

“I will keep an eye on him,” Robb assured his mother, “do not worry about Theon.”

“Can I help it?” His mother sighed. “There are too many worries for me to keep straight.”

“I’m proud of you for tackling the Broken Tower,” Robb told her, “we must all keep busy. It will keep us steady.”

His mother smiled and him, and bent to kiss his head.

“I’m proud of you too, Robb,” Catelyn said softly, gazing at her son, “you are so much like your father. The North is in good hands.”

Is it? Robb felt fear creep up his throat. There were so many things that he could do wrong, so many mistakes to be made. He pushed it down uneasily.

“I will not fail our family,” he told his mother boldly, “I’m going to make them proud.”
Stannis Baratheon held the glassy, black rock in his hands. He ran his fingers thoughtfully over the curved lines visible on the surface.

“I did not realize the mines in those caves were so extensive,” said Stannis, laying the chunk of dragonglass on his desk.

“Neither did the men, my lord,” Davos said gruffly, “it wasn’t until they ventured in deeper that the extent of the tunnels was realized."

“And Ned Stark wants me to send it all North,” said Stannis glancing at the letter on his desk that bore the sigil of the direwolf, “to arm the men of the Night’s Watch.”

“It’s what the Hand has asked,” said Davos, “and it is what your brother commands.”

Stannis picked up dagger carved from dragonglass. “The Targaryens loved dragonglass,” said Stannis, “this castle is full of it. The whole damn throne is made of it. I always thought it was useless.”

“Did the Starks say why they needed the dragonglass, my lord?” Davos asked.

“For the continued safety and protection of the realms of men,” read Stannis, picking up the letter, “Lord Eddard Stark, Warden of the North and Hand to the King, requests that the mines of Dragonstone be employed once again under the supervision of House Baratheon. The dragonglass taken from the mine should be sent at once to White Harbor in the care of House Manderly. House Manderly will transport the material to Winterfell, where House Stark will ensure its delivery to the men of the Night’s Watch. Signed Robert of the House Baratheon, the first of his Name, King of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm. I’ll be damned if I know what that means. What use will dragonglass be to the men of the Night’s Watch? If little else, they have plenty of steel in the North.”

“Will you deny them, my lord?” asked Davos, toying with the glove on his right hand.

“No,” said Stannis, “I will not deny a direct order from my King. Arrange for a team of men to begin mining the dragonglass. We shall send the first shipment North within a turn of the moon. I shall see what the Starks say then.”

“There is something more, my lord,” Davos said.

“What is it?” asked Stannis, sharply.

“The walls of the mine are covered in what seems to be devotions to the old gods, “ said Davos uneasily, “and drawings of monsters. it unnerved the men.”

Stannis sat back, considering this. “I shall have the Lady Melisandre examine these drawings,” he said finally, “she may be able to make something of them. Until then, give the men more torches by which to work, and press onward.”

“Are sure it is wise, my lord,” Davos asked softly, “to allow the Red Woman to remain here? Your wife has an alarming devotion to her. And she is filling the men's’ heads with fears of her god, this Lord of Light.”

“I didn’t believe at first, either, Ser Davos,” murmured Stannis, his eyes drawn to the fire, “but she sees things in the flames. She’s shown me things, great and terrible. She calls me the true King of
the Seven Kingdoms.”

“The throne would pass to Robert’s trueborn sons first, my lord,” Davos pointed out, eyeing Stannis warily, “of which your brother has two. Young, healthy lads, I hear.”

Stannis stared at Davos. The fire danced on his cheeks, highlighting the circles beneath his dark eyes. “My brother has no trueborn children,” said Stannis, his jaw tight, “only bastards.”

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Samwell Tarly walked slowly through the halls of Horn Hall, trailing his fingers along the tapestries that lined the walls. He had loved to sit and trace the embroidery as a child, fascinated by the stories in the stitches. This was before his father caught him of course. Sam still remembered the beating. As he approached the entrance to the Great Hall, he hesitated. You have faced far worse monsters than Randyll Tarly, he told himself, you will not flinch from an enemy made of flesh and bone.

“You’re late for dinner, boy,” Randyll Tarly snapped at his son, as Sam entered, “I had half a mind to tell the servants to take your plate, the gods know you don’t need it.”

Melessa fluttered her hands anxiously, looking sympathetically at Sam.

Sam ignored his father. “You look lovely tonight, mother,” he said instead, bending to kiss the crown of her head. “You too, Talla,” he said, chucking her under her chin. His little sister beamed at him.

“Did you hear me, boy?” Randyll demanded, “or have you lost the use of your ears?”

“Oh, I heard you, Father,” said Sam turning to meet Randyll’s incredulous eyes, ”but I thought it proper to greet Mother and Talla, first.”

Sam took his seat beside Randyll. He smiled at the servant who handed him his plate, and began to eat enthusiastically.

“Is this the catch from last week, Dickon?” he asked his brother, who was looking open-mouthed between his brother and his father. His brother nodded slowly.

“It’s wonderful,” Sam told his brother.

“Dickon contributes to this household,” his father said coolly from the head of the table, “apparently the gods saw it fit to give me one useful son.”

“Dickon is a great hunter,” said Sam smiling widely, “he’ll be a great soldier one day, I have every faith in him.”

“What’s gotten into you, boy?” Randyll asked softly, dangerously.

Sam looked thoughtful. He shrugged. “Do I seem different,” he asked guilelessly, “oh my, I hadn’t noticed. Well, no matter, you won’t have to deal with me for long. I’m leaving at first daylight.”

“Leaving?” his mother whimpered, “Darling, what do you mean?” She reached over to put her hand on his arm. Sam covered her hand with his own.

“Do not fear, Mother,” Sam assured her, “I must forge my own path. And this is how I choose to do that.”
“And where do you intend to go?” snarled Randyll, gripping his knife.

“Away,” said Sam simply, “you must forgive me for being late to dinner, Mother. I was packing. The North will be cold, I must have the proper attire.”

“Are you going to join the Night’s Watch?” Dickon blurted out.

“I am,” said Sam. His mother and sister gasped. “I intend to take the black. It is a great honor to guard the realms of men.”

“And what use would they make of a lout like you,” asked Randyll, narrowing his eyes at Sam.

Sam frowned, nonplussed. “Well I’m sure quite a lot, Father, thank you for asking,” he said lightly, “I do have some skills. Not ones that you value of course. But no matter, I am no longer required to serve you, so it really doesn’t matter what you think of me.”

“You dare,” Randyll seethed, standing to his feet, “you ungrateful swine.”

Sam kept his face unfazed. He smiled gently at his father’s red-faced fury. “Does it pain you, Father?” he asked pleasantly, “that you will be unable to torment me anymore? Did you feel a twinge of regret when you realized I stole your threat out from under your feet? Did you imagine cornering me, speaking such terrible words to make your first-born son tremble in fear. You will renounce your title, boy, and take the black. Or I will arrange a hunt. You will fall from your horse, suffering grievous, fatal injuries. Or at least that is what I will tell your tender-hearted mother. Does it grieve you to know that I have taken that from you?”

Dickon looked horrified. There were tears of anguish running down his mother and sister’s cheeks. His mother cried out at his words.

Randyll Tarly was breathing heavily through gritted teeth. He was still standing, his fist gripped tightly around a knife that he had driven deep into the wood of the table.

“That was what you were thinking, wasn’t it?” Sam said softly, “it’s what you’ve always been thinking. You’ve dreamt of my death since the first time I cried at the sight of blood. You’ve never loved me as a father should his son”

“You are no son of mine,” growled his father.

“But I am,” said Sam, shaking his head, his voice tinged with sadness, “I have always been your son. I am a son of House Tarly, and Tarly men do not wait patiently for death. So I will go, make my life elsewhere.”

Sam stood, the effort it took to compose himself was overwhelming. “Perhaps I will leave tonight,” he said, fighting to keep his voice steady, “I had thought to enjoy one last night with my family, but Father, you are making it terribly difficult.”

Randyll sat back in his chair, trembling with rage. “You will not sleep one more night under my roof,” he snarled.

“Don’t leave, Sam!” Talla sobbed, getting up and throwing herself at Sam. Sam held her tightly, kissing her head. “You be a good girl,” he told her gently, “you hear? Take care of Mother.”

His mother was sobbing openly, making no move to remove herself from the table. His father looked at her with disgust.
“It’s alright,” Sam murmured, patting Talla’s shaking back. He looked up at Dickon. “I need you to take care of our House, brother,” he told Dickon, “you’ll be a fine man someday. You will carry our name, lead our armies, and be the head of our House. Do not always listen to Father. You’re old enough to make your own decisions.”

“Out of my house!” bellowed Randyll Tarly, drawing his sword, “I’ll kill you if you stay here!”

“Father, please,” shrieked Talla.

“Shut up, girl,” thundered Randyll, “I mean it, boy! You’d better start running!”

“I won’t run from you,” said Sam, standing tall and looking his father in the eyes, “I’ll never run from you again.”

He pried Talla out of his arms, pushing her gently towards their mother. He kissed his mother’s tears. Sam pushed his chair in, watching his father all the while.

“Ready the horses,” Sam called to the stunned steward, “I’ll be leaving a bit earlier than expected. It’s a long journey, I’d like to get started on it.”
Monsters

Jon pulled off his gloves, and wrapped his hands around his steaming mug of stew. Hobb’s finest. The heat rolling off it soothed his freezing hands. As he sipped it, he could feel it run down his throat, and into his belly. A sharp contrast to his frigid surroundings.

Beside him, Ghost sat silent and alert. His coat was muddy from hunting earlier. His muzzle was still tinged with red.

He and Tyrion sat apart from the brothers and recruits. They were regarded warily by the men. Their looks were tinged with fear upon spotting Ghost.

Jon craned his neck to see the High Table. Uncle Benjen was eating with Maester Aemon and Lord Commander Mormont. They were discussing something quietly.

“I need air,” he muttered to Tyrion, “walk with me, Lannister.”

“I haven’t yet finished my delightful bowl of sludge,” Tyrion said irritably, “it’s warm, I’ll give that credit to the cook.”

“Eat it,” said Jon sternly, “and meet me by the gate.” He dropped his bowl onto the table with a clatter.

He stalked out of the hall, Ghost on his heels. Tyrion glanced around at the brothers devouring their meals. His thought of dumping the stew evaporated quickly in shame, and he drained the bowl with a grimace. Hopping off the bench, he pulled his cloak tightly around him in anticipation of the wind.

“It’s been days,” Jon groused, the moment he spotted Tyrion, “days of waiting, and doing nothing.”

“Be grateful you have been promised a meeting,” said Tyrion, falling into step beside Jon. Ghost ran beside them, weaving in and out of the trees.

“I am grateful,” snapped Jon, “it’s just maddening. Every second - ”

“ - the Night King’s army grows stronger,” Tyrion interrupted, “I’m quite aware. You are a man of action. Most fighting men are. I understand, that it is difficult for you to be patient.”

“I cannot fail,” said Jon horsely, “I cannot fail again. I have to try harder this time, be better. And I cannot do better if I’m forced to do nothing. I will lose everything I have in this world, again.”

“You’re failing already.”

Jon swung around to face Tyrion, with a choking noise, too shocked to respond.

“You’re failing already,” Tyrion ground on, “don’t look at me that way, Jon Snow. There’s only so many times I can counsel a man who has decided to be deaf to my words.”

Jon took a deep breath. The anger that was threatening to spill out at Tyrion suddenly evaporated, visibly dissipating into the frigid breeze. The tension in his shoulders seeped out, and Jon seemed to sag. He sat down heavily on a log, and regarded Tyrion.

“You think I’m failing already?” asked Jon. His graveness seemed to create lines his face. Lines that didn’t seem possible a moment ago on his young features.
“Should I waste my breath?” asked Tyrion icily, “or have you finally decided to take counsel?”

Jon’s eyes were distant as he considered.

“I feel like there are walls closing in on me,” Jon said finally, “like there is too much time, and not enough all at once. It was so much easier to say the things I would do once I reached the Wall. I had no doubt I would accomplish them. Now, I feel doubt creeping up on me. It is unsettling.”

“You’re panicking,” Tyrion surmised, “there’s no shame in that.”

Jon glanced at him. “In the past,” he said, “whenever I felt like this, I didn’t sit around. I did something. It wasn’t always the right thing, I’ll admit that, but it was something. And now, I know everything that I am supposed to do, but I cannot act. And you say I have failed already.”

“Failing,” clarified Tyrion, “failing is something you can come back from, where as ‘failed’ has a far more sinister permanence. As you and I well know.”

“And how would you advise me?” asked Jon, “to come back?”

Tyrion considered him, tilting his head slightly. “Sansa and I spoke before I left Winterfell,” he said, simply.

“Aye,” said Jon, perplexed at the turn in the conversation, “she mentioned it.

“Did she tell you what we talked about?” asked Tyrion.

“Some,” said Jon, shifting, “of the glass gardens she said.”

“That was one of her requests of me,” agreed Tyrion, “however, another was that I keep an eye on you.”

Jon faded slightly, his eyes dimming. “She doesn’t trust me to do this,” he said flatly.

“I don’t believe that at all,” Tyrion said truthfully, “if Sansa thought even for a moment that you would be unable to accomplish what you have set out to do, she wouldn’t have let you go. No, the very fact of you being here is proof enough of her faith in you.”

“I would have gone regardless,” said Jon frowning.

“Are you sure about that?” asked Tyrion, “If you are, you underestimate Sansa. A mistake that others have made before you. She does not let her loved ones go so easily.”

“Then why did she ask you to watch me?” demanded Jon.

“Because she knows your weaknesses,” answered Tyrion, “better than you know them yourself. She asked me to watch you for the very things I see in you now. Fear turns to impulsiveness quickly in you, Jon Snow. That is a surmountable issue, but only if you can take responsibility for it. Charging forward and ignoring it is a sure path to failure.”

Ghost padded over and laid his shaggy head in Jon’s lap. Jon stroked his fur, pulling out the knots in his coat.

“Sansa and Arya look at me and see my mistakes,” Jon said slowly, “I cannot stand it. I do not blame them. But I have to fix it. I cannot feel this way anymore. I thought I could redeem myself by striking hard and fast.”
“And therein lies your problem,” said Tyrion wearily, “forgive for speaking frankly, your grace, but do you think the gods send us back for your personal redemption? No? Neither do I. A good king is not always a hero. He is so much more than that. When your nursemaid told you tall tales, did she tell you of the fifty-five years of stability and prosperity under Jaehaerys the First? Or did she thrill you with the fearless feats of Knights who sacrificed themselves to save their true loves? A just ruler desires to bring glory to his kingdom, not to himself.”

“I did not mean to - ” muttered Jon, “I did not mean to let my regrets cloud my judgement.”

“Men seldom intend to cloud their own judgement,” said Tyrion reasonably, “You say that your path forward is clear. Is it? Do not simplify the task you have set yourself. You are setting out to save the world, Jon Snow. This is an endeavor that requires quite a bit of skill and finesse. Far more difficult than driving a dagger into the belly of a wight. Yet, I think you are taking a simple approach to a complex problem, not recognizing the pressure that you have put yourself under. This is not something that you should be able to do easily, stop telling yourself it should be easy. It’s not an easy undertaking.”

Tyrion’s words seemed to wash over Jon, slowly. “Can I do it?” Jon asked, half to himself.

Tyrion stared at Jon. He saw a bastard boy sitting in the snow. He didn’t resemble a king. He wasn’t the image of a prince. But, if he looked closely, he could almost glimpse the face of the King in the North, hidden beneath Jon’s young features.

“Do you think I would be standing in the snow losing fingers and toes as we speak if I did not believe you capable of success?” asked Tyrion, “you are no King yet, Jon Snow, but I do not doubt that you will wear a crown again one day. To accomplish that, you must look beyond your own personal redemption. Do not let your past failures drive you, they will only lead you back to defeat.”

“Do you follow your own advice?” Jon asked with a bitter smile, “do your failures not eat at you, Lord Tyrion?”

“They do,” admitted Tyrion, “but I am trying my best to keep perspective. I would rather have my niece and nephew alive and well than have revenge on those who harmed them. As much as her death would please me, Ellaria Sand will sleep safely in her bed for as long as she does not threaten Myrcella. I realize that it would be foolish to create chaos in the name of revenge.”

“Redemption is not the most important thing to me,” said Jon slowly, “I want the people I love to be safe. I want the seven kingdoms to be at peace.”

“Then let that be your drive,” Tyrion advised, “ground yourself in the future, not the past. You need to be playing the long game. What does your future look like, Jon Snow?”

_When you’re running off, fighting monsters, imagine me beside you._

_I always imagine you beside me._

Jon looked resolute. He looked steadier than he had earlier. Calmer. Tyrion didn’t know what Jon Snow saw in his future, but he hoped it was enough to ground him.

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“Jon.”

Jon turned at the hand on his shoulder. Uncle Benjen gave him a slight smile.
“Lord Commander Mormont and Maester Aemon have requested your presence in the Lord Commander’s Tower.”

Jon’s breath caught. He turned back the scene he had been watching. Below him, Pyp and Grenn sparred nervously while Thorne bellowed abuse.

“Of course,” said Jon, “I’m ready.”

Benjen kept a hand on Jon’s back as they walked.

“Are you ready?” Benjen murmured.

*What does your future look like, Jon Snow?*

“Aye,” said Jon. “There is nothing more important that this.”

They climbed the steps of the tower silently. Jon didn’t hesitate as he reached out and knocked firmly on the heavy door.

“Enter.”

They stepped through the door.

Lord Commander Mormont, sat at his desk. His hard eyes roved Jon with interest. Beside him, Maester Aemon reclined in a chair, his hands folded over his stomach.

“Lord Commander, Maester,” Benjen said nodding, “this is my nephew, Jon Snow. He’s come on behalf of his father, Lord Eddard Stark.”

Jon felt his purpose flood him with strength as he stepped forward.

“I thank you, my lords, for honoring me with this meeting,” he said, his voice steady, “there are things that my lord father felt were worth discussing in person.”

“You may speak,” said Mormont, “I would hear why Lord Stark has sent you here to treat with us.”

“As you have surely been told,” Jon began carefully, “our guards caught a deserter running south, he was executed him soon after.”

“Aye,” said Mormont, “as was Lord Stark’s sworn duty as Warden of the North.”

“It was strange he ran,” interjected Maester Aemon, “the boy should not have been on his own. He was sent with more experienced men, both of whom have not returned.”

“He asked for forgiveness for it,” said Jon, meeting Mormont’s stare, “for deserting, for not coming back to warn the Watch. He knew he had behaved cravenly.”

“Warn us?” Mormont said leaning forward, “what did he think to warn us of?”

Jon glanced at Benjen, who nodded. Mormont watched them, his heavy brow creased.

“He was going on about the White Walkers,” said Jon quietly, “he said he saw them in the haunted forest. He said that everyone must be warned, that they’re coming for us.”

“And Lord Stark believed him?” Mormont asked, his eyes penetrating.
“He was concerned,” said Jon, after a pause, “my father is not a fearful man, but what this boy told him left an impression. House Stark carries the blood of the First Men. They keep to the old gods. The North does not forget our past as easily as the South does. The North remembers.”

“And you boy,” said Maester Aemon, turning his head towards Jon’s voice, “you have traveled far to be here. What do you think?”

Jon hesitated, suppressing his instincts. “My nursemaid at Winterfell would tell me stories,” he said slowly, “about the Others, and how if I wasn’t well-behaved they would snatch me from my bed. Those were just stories. The fear in your man’s eyes was real. Forgive me, Maester, but this wall wasn’t built just to keep out Wildlings. I know that, Lord Stark knows that. I don’t know what lies beyond the Wall, but I intend to find out. Winter is coming, and if it’s anything like our last summer, it will last.”

“And what do you know of Winter, boy?” Mormont asked gruffly, “you look like a summer child to me.”

“I may be a summer bastard, but the blood of House Stark runs in my veins,” said Jon, “and I can feel the trembles of the earth as Winter approaches.”

“Benjen,” Mormont said, turning to his First Ranger, “You’ve never lied to me before, don’t start now. Why have you brought your nephew here?”

Benjen’s solemn face lengthened in the firelight, “I’ve seen no Others,” he admitted, “but something’s changing beyond the Wall. Every wildling village between here and the Fist has been abandoned. There’s a new chill in the air, like there never was before. I told this to Lord Stark. Whatever is coming for us, we will need the support of the Seven Kingdoms.”

“And I have come here to offer the support of the Warden of the North and Hand to the King. The Seven Kingdoms stand behind the Night’s Watch, my lord,” said Jon, reaching inside his cloak to retrieve two of Ned’s letters. He handed them to Mormont.

Mormont broke open the first, his eyes drawn to the seals at the bottom. “These bear the sigils of the Crown and of the Starks,” he murmured to Maester Aemon. He scanned the letter quickly.

Jon’s breath suddenly seemed to fast, too loud. He sat still, watching Mormont read.

“How’s said Mormont speaking suddenly, “Lord Stark is sending materials for gardens?”

“Aye,” said Jon, “Winterfell produces food even in winter due to the glass gardens that were built centuries ago. Lord Stark has decided that the construction of more would be a worthy endeavor. There is to be one built at White Harbor, under the care of House Manderly. The other, will be built here, under the care of the Watch.”

“Lord Stark is trying to make the North self-sufficient,” Mormont said softly, “a curious move by the Hand of the King, but a fitting one my the Warden of the North. The Crown derives some control over the North from food supplies.”

“My father’s efforts are a question of survival,” said Jon firmly, “not of politics. If this Winter is as long as it is predicted to be, then no amount of preserved food will see us through. The North needs more ways of producing sustenance.”

“More food will be welcomed by the brothers,” said Maester Aemon, “it would reduce the strain that we put upon the smallfolk as well. Their numbers dwindle as it is.”
“Lord Stark is also hoping that a steady supply of food will assist in your recruitment efforts,” said Jon, “the Watch has been sorely neglected by those south of the Wall for far too long. We are hoping to change that.”

“We cannot afford these materials,” said Mormont looking at Jon, “we have no gold to pay the wages of glassblowers.”

“The Crown has promised to fund the project,” said Jon, “my father departed Winterfell with the King the same day that we left. Once in King’s Landing, he will secure the necessary gold and send it north.”

“King’s Landing spares little thought for the brothers of the Night’s Watch,” said Maester Aemon, “they’ve forgotten us at the edge of the world. Too enraptured by silks and sun.”

“My father will not be swayed by the soft wills of Southerners,” said Jon, “and I have not come alone. Lord Tyrion Lannister, brother to the Queen has accompanied me. When he returns to King’s Landing, he has promised to speak on behalf of the Watch.”

“Is he trustworthy?” asked Mormont, “will he speak frankly before the King?”

“I trust him,” said Jon, “the Lannisters are a poisonous rot, but Tyrion is the exception. He will be direct with the King, in fact he prides himself on his blunt approach.”

Mormont nodded, turning back to the letter. “In addition to the gardens, we are to receive Dragonglass,” he muttered, frowning and staring hard at Ned’s print, “newly mined dragonglass from Dragonstone.”

“The castle at Dragonstone is full of dragonglass,” said Maester Aemon, “I can still see it now. The throne of Targaryen princes was carved from the heart of the volcano.”

Mormont turned to Jon, “and what purpose will dragonglass serve us?”

“It is a gamble, my lord,” said Jon slowly, “after executing the deserter, my father instructed our Maester to search our library for mentions of the Others. We found little that wasn’t fairytale, but what we did find, mentioned dragonglass as a potential weapon. Dragonglass makes sturdy daggers and fine arrowheads. If nothing, arming your men with such a weapon will make them feel more secure. If anything, it may be the only way we have of fighting the Others.”

“It’s true,” said Maester Aemon, “the Targaryens mined dragonglass for centuries. When I was boy, we would go exploring the old tunnels. It was a strange world in those deep, dark places. Devotions to the old gods had been etched into the stone, long before the Invasion of the Andals.”

“We have found dragonglass on Wildlings,” said Benjen shaking his head, “it was strange, we thought, for them to be armed with such a material.”

Jon watched Mormont carefully. His white head was bent in contemplation

“There have been reports,” Mormont said, lifting his head, “of White Walkers, from Eastwatch. The fishermen claimed to have seen them.” He turned to Jon. “I do not know exactly why Lord Stark has suddenly taken such an interest in our state of affairs, but I am a pragmatic man. We will gladly accept the help that your father has offered us, we would be fools not to. I will write to House Stark, and the Crown, to thank them for their assistance. Thank you for delivering this information to us on behalf of Lord Stark.”

Jon inclined his head slightly. “There is something more, my lord,” said Jon, indicating the second
letter, “in return for these assistances, Lord Stark requests that I be given permission to accompany a ranging mission beyond the Wall.”

Mormont looked at him sharply, before ripping open the letter and reading it. “You’re no brother of the Night’s Watch,” said Mormont, “and a green boy who hasn’t yet seen Winter. Why should the rangers bring you along? You will only be a burden to them.”

“I’m a good fighter,” said Jon, “and I’ll keep up. I won’t be a burden to the brothers. If I fall, it will not be their responsibility. But I need to see what’s out there. If we do find evidence of the Others, then I will have seen it with my own eyes. I will be able to bring the truth to the other Houses of Westeros.”

“Men earn their place on the Wall,” said Maester Aemon seriously, “our names mean nothing here. They grant us no special privileges, boy.”

“Lord Stark is my father,” said Jon, “but I have no name but Snow. If you allow me to accompany this expedition, I will either prove myself, or die. Both are of little consequence to the Watch.”

“And if you die?” asked Mormont, “what shall Lord Stark say to me?”

“He has three other trueborn sons,” said Jon, “no slight will be taken at the death of a bastard.”

“Benjen,” said Mormont, “you are First Ranger. It will be your men on the line if you choose to take this boy. What do you say?”

“He is my brother’s son,” said Benjen stoically, “and I love him as my nephew. But if he chooses to range North with us, he will choose to do so as his own man. I will not take responsibility for him, or choose his life over the lives of my brothers. If Jon accepts this, then he will be permitted to join the ranging party.”

“I accept these terms,” said Jon, as the other men regarded him intently.

Mormont sighed. “Write to your father, boy. Tell him the choice you have made. I will send a letter as well, accepting the hand we have been offered. Benjen, I need you to stay. We must discuss the ranging party. Lord Snow, you are dismissed.”

Jon stood, and bowed slightly. “Thank you Lord Commander Mormont, Maester Aemon,” he said firmly, “I am at your service. And at the service of the Watch.”
Arya walked in shadow, her footsteps less than a whisper on the stone. Light as a feather. Smooth as silk. She descended into the dungeons. There was no hesitation as she was enveloped in darkness.

She moved fluidly, her eyes unseeing. Every sense prickled, heightened. No one took over in the dark.

Before long, jagged teeth and bone that was blacker than the darkness loomed before her. There was no fear in her, as she reached out to run her hand over the cold, smooth skull of the dragon. Only a kind of bitter-tinged relief. *It’s always dragons.*

Behind the largest skull, Arya found the heavy door and pushed it open. She pricked her ears for whispers, but there was only silence.

The stone under her feet turned to earth and wood, as she climbed down and down. The fetid smell of sewage washed over her long before it seeped into her boots. Knee-deep in the foul liquid, Arya waded through the tunnel until she met the Blackwater Rush.

She clambered out of the sewer, and dunked herself in the running river to remove the worst of the smell. What lingered was perfectly appropriate for Lana, an orphan living on the streets of King’s Landing.

The boats bobbed gently on black waters that reflected the starlight. Lana made herself inconspicuous amongst the nightlife that swirled around her. She was nothing, just another orphan, one of thousands who struggled for survival at the feet of royalty.

She scampered through the crowds of drunken soldiers, dirty children, haggard women. The brothels shone the brightest amongst the dull and dirty streets, promising to relieve one of their woes for a night.

Lana eyed a bag of silver hanging low from a drunken man’s belt, thinking of the bread that could buy for her and the other orphans. A flash of a sword startled her, and she remembered the task at hand.

She walked until the scent of stale urine was overwhelming. The hands of the people she passed were red and raw, stained with a variety of colors.

Lana crouched in the doorways of shops, peeking into rooms full of drying cloth and huge iron pots above flames. She had been instructed to look for a boy with greenhands.

She found him, leaning over a vat of dark liquid. He wrung out the cloth, squeezing until it was only just damp. His hands and forearms shone in the firelight, wet with the dye. The green settled darkest into the scars and sores on his skin.

Lana crawled closer, across the doorway. A man shouted at her, throwing a heavy bolt. It clattered next to her, and the boy looked up. Lana ran before he saw, weaving in between the people that thronged the streets.

She was hungry, she realized. Lana was always hungry. She walked slowly, eyes tracking the ground, hopeful for a lost copper. Up ahead, she saw a group of tattered children shouting. She
hurried over, pushing her way through them.

A baker leaned out of his window overtop of them. He pounded a mallet against a mat, and flour drifted over the children. They screamed and raised their hands, trying to catch the powdery white that drifted on the night’s breeze.

Beside Lana, a small boy of four licked the flour from his hands and arms. She did the same, but it didn’t take the edge off her hunger.

She shoved aside the children, and knelt in the doorway of the bakery. Head down and hands extended. She was slapped and pushed away, the voices of the angry men frightened her and she ran.

She nursed her bruises in an alley, rubbing her fingers over the reddening hurts. A boy stepped into the alley with a pan of burned crumbs.

“Get!” he said waving his hand at Lana, “the baker doesn’t like beggars here!”

Lana stared up at him. This was the boy she had been sent to find. She held out her hands with pitiful moan.

The boy looked quickly behind him, and groaned. Quickly, he scraped the burnt pieces into Lana’s open hands.

“You can’t tell anyone, and you can’t come back. Understand?” the boy whispered.

Lana nodded, stuffing the pieces into her mouth. The boy vanished back inside with the tray. She leaned back against the wall savoring the burnt, bitterness of good bread.

*What is it?*

*It’s a wolf.*

*Hey, Hot Pie! It’s really good!*

Lana pushed down the girl who threatened to claw her way back into Lana’s body. Lana didn’t know the baker’s apprentice. She was only here to look. Lana had another task.

She crawled out of the alley, and started running. A soldier shouted at her, and Lana flung her hands out behind her to show they were empty, and ran faster.

The Sept of Baelor rose up before her eyes, as she sprinted down the Street of Steel. The forges were still hot, the smiths working late into the night to prepare for the upcoming tourney. Sparks flew, and the smell of burning metal seared the inside of Lana’s nose.

The closer she got to the Sept, the finer the soldiers’ armor became. She stopped at the very top of the hill. Knights congregated around the opening of the shop at the very base of the Sept.

“Wretch!”

Lana whipped around, and saw a gold cloak approaching her fist raised. She darted between the legs of the knights, and dove into a small alcove beside the shop. She folded herself as small as possible, and waited until she felt it was safe.

She peeked out, and gasped as ash was thrown out the window. She coughed, enveloped in the black cloud that rose up around her. She rubbed her smarting eyes, struggling to breath.
“What are you doing out here?”

Lana blinked up at the boy who stood over her. He was dressed drably, skin streaked with grease and soot. She met his bright blue eyes, partially obscured by the heavy black hair that hung down over his face.

“You’re filthy,” the boy said bending down. He took a cloth from his apron, and wiped her face briskly. “Run along,” he scolded, “you shouldn’t be playing in the ash. It’s not good for your lungs.”

Lana slipped through Arya’s fingers in an instant.

“You’re going with them?” Arya scowled looking up at Gendry’s impassive face, “how does it feel to be on your knees for the Dragon Queen?”

“I’m not following her,” Gendry said stubbornly, “I’m following your brother. Jon’s a good commander. I’m going to follow him into battle, no matter the odds.”

Arya smiled sharply, without any humor. “Haven’t you heard?” she asked, teeth bared, “Jon’s found a new family.”

“You know it’s not like that,” Gendry said softly, “Jon loves you. I know he does. He bent the knee to Daenerys to save you.”

“Aye,” said Arya, eyes flashing, “Jon’s very selfless like that.”

Gendry sighed. “Are you really not coming? It’s not like you to run from a battle.”

“Running?” laughed Arya, “you’re the one running off to meet death before he catches you. No, I’ll wait right here. I’ll die in the home of my ancestors, protecting my family until my last breath. I’ll follow no Targaryens, riding their dragons like thrones.”

Gendry looked down. “I’m going,” he said gruffly, “I’ll do what I can.”

“I thought you were your own man,” challenged Arya, ‘I thought you were done serving lords.”

“I made this choice,” said Gendry, studying her, “it’s my choice, and I’ve made it. I’ve beaten death before. I might do it again.”

"You won't" said Arya bitterly. His face fell, as he turned away from her.

He hadn’t.

“What about your lungs?” demanded Arya, coming back to herself.

Gendry looked surprised when she spoke. He stuffed the cloth back in his apron.

“I didn’t realize you were a girl,” he said apologetically, examining her, “you best get back home, it’s not safe around here. Men’s blood runs hot when a tourney is close.”

“I can take care of myself,” Arya told him, defiantly, “what about you?”

Gendry grinned, “I’ll be fine. No one messes with me. You? You I’m not so sure about. Now scram before the smithy catches me. I’ve got a lot of work to do.” He walked back into the smoking shop, leaving Arya sitting in the ash.
She stood up, suppressing the desire to melt back into Lana. She slipped through the crowd and turned in the direction of the Blackwater.

It was a struggle to keep her head down. Arya Stark bowed before no man, and she aggressively met the eyes of men she passed.

She turned down a street lined with brothels.

“Shoo child!” a woman in red silk admonished her, “this is no place for dirty paupers.”

Arya ignored her, and continued walking. The crowd parted in front of her. Arya strained to see what caused it.

She caught sight of a white cloak, and her heart rose up hard in her throat. It was Meryn Trant, flanked by two Lannister soldiers. Arya watched as they entered the most lavish brothel, with fluttering silk curtains, and a mockingbird sigil engraved over the doorway.

A hedge knight tripped over her, as she stood staring at the entrance to the brothel. He roared in anger and kicked at her. Arya hissed at him, and reached for her dagger.

*Are they worth your anger?* Brienne’s voice whispered in her ear.

Arya’s hand trembled, and she spat at the Hedge Knight. “Nasty little shit,” she snarled, before turning on her heel and running off.

As she ran, she looked back at Littlefinger’s brothel. There were people who deserved her wrath far more.

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Arya snuck into her room, closing the door firmly behind her. She sighed, and collapsed to the floor.

She stunk, covered in sewage, ash, and sweat. There was a soft scratching behind her. Arya scrambled up and opened the door.

Her sister stood there, arms folded, Nymeria at her side. Sansa’s mouth dropped open in shock when she saw her sister.

“What have you been doing?” whispered Sansa in disbelief, “you’re filthy!”

“How did you know I was gone?” croaked Arya softly. She opened her arms to Nymeria, and her wolf approached her, sniffing.

“Nymeria was restless,” Sansa said, “she cried when you came back.” Sansa eyed her stinking clothes, “what are you planning to do about those?”

Arya pulled gingerly at her jerkin, and shrugged.

“Give them to me,” commanded Sansa, “I’ll hide them, and take care of them tomorrow. We can’t have the maids finding them.”

Arya undressed quickly, and Sansa gathered up her clothes, wincing at the smell. Arya pulled on a sleeping shift.

“Are you going to ask me where I was?” Arya asked.
Sansa paused. “Will you tell me?”

“Yes,” said Arya, after thinking for a moment, “I went to check on my friends.”

“The Baratheon boy?” Sansa asked.

Arya nodded. “Two others as well. They rode for the Night’s Watch with me and Gendry. I wanted to see them.”

“What do you plan to do?” Sansa asked her, quietly.

“Help them,” said Arya, “they won’t be safe.” She looked up at Sansa. “I don’t know how,” she admitted.

Sansa nodded, thinking. “We will do something,” she agreed, “I’m not sure what, but something will be done.”

“Something else happened,” said Arya, worrying her lip with her teeth, “I saw Ser Meryn, in Littlefinger’s brothel.”

Sansa took a sharp breath. “What did you do?”

“Nothing,” said Arya, darkly, “yet. There were too many people around.”

Sansa was silent for a moment. “You will be careful, when you act,” she told Arya.

Arya smiled dangerously. “Do not worry,” she assured Sansa, “I will take care with Ser Meryn. I have great plans for him.”

Arya saw a glimmer of pleasure steal across Sansa’s face. “Good,” Sansa said, turning to leave, Arya’s clothes bundled in her arms, “I look forward to it. Get some rest.”

She left, and Arya crawled into bed with Nymeria. She buried her face in Nymeria’s thick fur. Her wolf’s gentle breathing made her feel calm and safe.

Tomorrow, Brienne and Ned would ask her how she slept. And Arya would smile, and lie.
“My lord.”

Ned turned around. “Lord Varys,” he greeted, “what can I do for you?”

“I serve you, my lord,” said Varys, smiling, “I merely wished to inquire of your well being. How have you been finding the capital?”

“It’s been an adjustment,” said Ned, “I do not care to be away from my household for this long.”

“I was surprised that you traveled without a retinue,” said Varys, “very unusual for a man of your status.”

“My men were willing to join me,” Ned said gruffly, “but I did not see the need. Why uproot them from their families when Robert has plenty of men at his command? My eldest takes the seat of Lord of Winterfell in my absence, counseled by my wife and my most trusted men.”

“Very generous of you, my lord,” said Varys smiling, “your men must be very appreciative to have such a thoughtful master.”

“I judge men by their treatment of those under their care,” said Ned, “I hold myself to these same standards.”

“An honorable aspiration,” said Varys stroking his chin, “you’re an interesting man, Lord Stark. The second most powerful man in the seven kingdoms, and yet we see so little of you. I’m told you visit no brothels, abstain from drink. You spend your time praying or counseling the king. Such a rarity in King’s Landing, what are your vices, my lord?”

“I’d thank you not to spy on me, Lord Varys,” said Ned eyeing him uncomfortably, “and I’d be a fool to think myself as powerful as you suggest. I am only here to advise an old friend in his time of need. I hope to do some good for the realm along the way.”

“Don’t we all,” murmured Varys, “but I am the Master of Whispers, Lord Stark. It is my job to know things. Just as it is your job to ensure the health and safety of our King, in these uncertain times.”

Ned felt a shiver run down his spine, as Varys looked at him with calm, pale eyes.

“To what do you refer to?” asked Ned, coolly.

“I confess,” said Lord Varys, “you surprised me when you asked naught of Jon Arryn’s fate. He acted as a father to you and our King, did he not? The King was most distressed by his passing, but Robert is so easily distracted from his difficulties. I thought you would be more concerned with our late Hand’s cause of death.”

Ned swallowed. “Robert told me he passed quickly, a terrible illness took him. Sickness is not an unusual death for someone Jon’s age.”

“Jon Arryn was a fit and healthy man. Just before he passed, he had been riding heavily quite often with the King’s brother, Stannis Baratheon,” said Varys, his eyes glinting, “his death came as quite a shock to us all.”
Spit it out, Ned’s frustration swelled. It was on the tip of his tongue to say so. Redirect, he thought suddenly, don’t let them see you.

“As it did to me too,” said Ned delicately, “may the gods rest his soul. I must take my leave Lord Varys, I feel weary.”

Varys stared at him, the twinkle in his eye had become flat. He tilted his head, examining Ned. “Of course, my lord,” he said, “your children must be missing you.”

“Aye,” said Ned. Varys’ mention of the girls struck fear in his heart. “My children are still young enough to need their father.”

“Go Lord Stark, play games with your children,” Varys bowed. “Until we meet again. It is always a pleasure.”

He glided away, his silk robes whispering as they brushed the floor. Ned turned, and forced himself to walk at a regular pace. His mouth felt dry, as his eyes darted to the walls and ceilings of the Red Keep. He longed for the simpleness of Winterfell. Northern spiders whispered no secrets.

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The path to the godswood was recently tread, worn into the ground by the frequent passage of their feet. Brienne had never seen a godswood before going north. Tarth’s had been burned so long ago, there was some debate as to where it had once stood.

The godswood at King’s Landing held the same sort of peace, that Winterfell’s exuded. It seemed the furthest one could get from King’s Landing, while still inside the city walls. The surrounding trees seemed to curve towards the heart treet, building a barrier between them and the outside.

Nymeria and Lady ran circles around the great oak in the center of the godswood, and then disappeared between the trees.

“If anyone comes near here,” said Arya with a satisfied smile, “they’ll meet our wolves.”


Ned Stark had remained strong, during their time in the city. Now, however, he looked the most rattled Brienne had seen him look since leaving Winterfell.

“Varys stopped me, to speak of Jon Arryn,” said Ned heavily, “he attempted to goad me into an investigation of his death.”

“What purpose would that serve the Spider?” Arya asked, “that doesn’t make any sense.”

“No,” said Sansa thinking, “it does. Father is adhering to our goal, which is stability. Varys wants a Targaryen on the throne, and that scenario is most likely to come about if Robert’s reign is unstable. He’s testing you, to see whether or not you can be useful to his endeavor.”

Ned looked at his daughter soberly. “Perhaps he remembers,” said Ned, “I felt as if his eyes saw straight through me.”

A shiver ran through Brienne. “If a man like that remembered,” she said uneasily, “he would be difficult to find out. He has practice at keeping secrets.”

“But he would recognize us,” said Sansa, “we have not adhered to our timeline. Varys has.” She
grimaced. “This would give him the upper hand.”

“What would he do?” asked Ned, “if he remembered?”

“I do not know exactly,” said Sansa slowly, “I only know what Tyrion has told me of Varys, and what I gleaned from my time in King’s Landing. From what I understand, Varys was quite personally successful before. He ended up serving a queen that he had conspired for many years to put on the throne. I imagine it was only the arrival of the Others that interfered with his end goals.”

“He’s watching us closely,” warned Ned.

Sansa nodded. “He will watch even more closely, now that his interest has been piqued. He, Cersei, and Littlefinger have informants everywhere. We must be even more guarded. What else did he say, Father? Specifically about Jon Arryn?”

“He said he was healthy until his death,” Ned said, after thinking for a moment, “and that he had been riding frequently with Stannis Baratheon just before his death.”

“Stannis Baratheon isn’t here,” said Arya, frowning “he’s on Dragonstone.”

“Stannis hides there,” scoffed Brienne, “presumably already plotting with that red witch.”

Sansa inhaled sharply. “But why is Stannis on Dragonstone?” she asked, “his duty as Master of Ships commands him to be in King’s Landing. He has no loyalty to the Lannisters, but he is still loyal to Robert. He must have had a reason to leave.”

“If Stannis was riding with Jon,” murmured Ned, staring at Sansa, “then Jon must have confided in him.”

“Stannis already knows about the Lannisters,” said Sansa with dawning horror, “I did not consider it. He will not rest easy with this knowledge, and we need him to remain steady until the dragonglass is procured.”

“Stannis isn’t like Robert or Renly,” said Ned slowly, “his duty is what compels him above all else. His duty as of now is still to his King. As long as Robert lives, I do not think he will act.”

“Have you received word from Stannis?” asked Brienne.

“I have,” confirmed Ned, “he wrote a short note, affirming that he would carry out the Crown’s orders.”

“Write to him again,” said Sansa, “thank him for his service to his country. We must keep an eye on him.”

“What about Renly?” Arya asked, “does he know?”

Brienne shook her head. “I know that Stannis would not confide in Renly,” she said, “Renly was aware of Joffrey’s status when I was in his service, but that was after Stannis had spread word of it across the seven kingdoms, after the war had begun. I don’t know if he knew of it beforehand.”

“Have you spoken to Renly?” asked Sansa.

“No, my lady,” Brienne said, shame creeping into her voice, “I have seen him alive and well, which gladdens my heart, but I have not spoken to him. I was unable to protect him before, I have not wanted to face him.”
“If you can,” said Sansa gently, “speak to Renly. Try to ascertain what he knows, if he’s planning something. We can accompany you if you like.”

“I will try,” said Brienne, “I should have spoken to him before this.”

“Will you try to save him?” asked Arya.

Brienne hesitated. “I do not know how,” she said finally, “for all I am, I cannot fight a shadow. I will not kill Stannis, not while he mines what will be our salvation. What can I do except watch as he is killed a second time?” Her words were bitter with the taste of failure.

“We will not stop you, if you wish to leave,” said Sansa softly, “if you feel that Renly needs your protection more.”

Brienne looked startled. “No, my lady,” she said shaking her head, “never think that I would abandon you. I will try to save Renly, if I am able, but I stand by you and your family. I am your sworn shield.”

“Thank you, Brienne,” said Ned, “I cannot thank you enough for what you have done for my family.”

“It is a duty I am proud to hold,” said Brienne, “I cannot ask for anything more than that.”

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“Don’t speak to anyone, and don’t do anything rash,” Sansa warned Arya, “we are supposed to be inconspicuous.”

“I know how to be inconspicuous,” Arya whispered back defiantly, “I just choose not to be most of the time.”

“I don’t want you getting into trouble,” said Sansa, exasperated, “it’s not safe here.”

“Your sister is right,” said Brienne, a hand at Arya’s back as they walked, “we do not doubt that you could take down any of these men. But it will be better for all of us if you lay low, and do not reveal this particular talent.”

Arya nodded, her eyes narrowed and tracking the knights and squires that swarmed around them.

They walked through across the muddy field. Everywhere, tents and stands were being erected. Tables were carried out, soon to be filled with an array of food for the noble and smallfolk alike.

Sansa spotted the royal dais being built. Joffrey would expect her to be with him, during the tourney. She would join him alone. Her father, Brienne, and Arya would sit elsewhere. It was safer that way.

“There,” Arya whispered, “I see Renly.”

They looked. Renly’s green armor shimmered in the sun. His great helm, adorn with golden antlers was tucked under his arm. Beside him stood a young knight, his armor was covered in jeweled roses.

“Ser Loras,” Sansa said softly, “the Knight of Flowers.”

“Come girls,” said Brienne speaking loudly, and urging them forward, “you wanted to see where the tourney would take place.”
“It’s terribly grand,” Sansa agreed prettily, as they walked, “these men are so brave to fight.”

They walked the grounds casually, heading towards Renly and Loras. Before they could approach them, Jaime Lannister stepped in their path.

“Ah,” he said smiling widely at them, “what do we have here?”

“Ser Jaime,” said Brienne briskly, “Lord Stark instructed me to escort his daughters to the field. The girls wanted to see where the tourney would take place.”

“Is that so,” said Jaime, flicking his gaze over Sansa and Arya. He bowed slightly to them. “Ladies.”

“Ser Jaime,” said Sansa graciously, “my sister and I are most excited for our father’s tourney. We do not have such events of such caliber in the North.”

“No I suppose not, my lady,” said Jaime looking down at Sansa, “the North does not have time for such frivolities, I’m told.”

“Such things aren’t always practical in the North,” Sansa agreed, “but we are no longer in the North. We might as well partake.”

“You might give your father the same advice, my lady,” said Jaime smirking, “your father is as grey and solemn as he was north of the Neck.”

“Lord Stark is not here to enjoy the capital,” Brienne cut in, “he is here to serve the King.”

“Aren’t we all,” said Jaime lightly, “but in between our duties, there is no harm in some amusement. Will you be participating in the tourney, Brienne of Tarth? I’m sure it would be quite the sight.”

“Brienne would knock you into the dirt,” said Arya fiercely.

“Arya,” scolded Sansa.

Jaime laughed. “Is that so?” he asked of Arya, “what do you know of tourneys child?”

“I know Brienne is the finest knight here,” said Arya smiling sharply, “far finer than the likes of you.”

“Arya,” Brienne hissed, putting a hand on her shoulder and squeezing tightly.

“I beg your forgiveness for my sister, Ser Jaime,” said Sansa with an apologetic smile, “she is not trained in the ways of court.”

“That much is evident,” said Jaime eyeing Arya’s dirty breeches, “I will not take offense from an ill-mannered child. But you should learn to hold your tongue, girl.”

Arya opened her mouth, and Sansa seized her sister’s hand. “I do not think that Brienne will be participating in the tourney, Ser,” Sansa said with forced pleasantness, “will you Brienne?”

“No,” said Brienne gruffly, “I don’t think it wise to play at war.”

“Spoken like a northerner,” said Jaime, “you make Lord Stark proud.”

“I endeavor to do so. Good day, Ser Jaime.”
Sansa looked back as they walked away. The other members of the Kingsguard littered the field. Their white cloaks never failed to make her feel a seize of fear.

She caught sight of Meryn Trant, and held Arya’s hand all the tighter. She would not mourn his death, it would please her greatly. But at what expense? She worried about Arya investing herself in this role of assassin. It would be that much harder for her to find herself again at the end of all of this.

Ahead of them, Ser Loras laughed. He had taken off his cloak, and filled it full of roses. Renly smiled at him, reaching out to steal one of the flowers.

“Ah,” Renly said spotting Sansa, “here is a young beauty. Tell me, my lady, what would you think of a knight who rode in draped in a cloak of real roses? Would you think him bold or frivolous?”

“It would not matter to me, my lord,” said Sansa, “for he would soon be asked to prove his mettle. His victory would speak far louder than his roses.”

“Hear that Loras,” said Renly merrily, “I do believe you’ve been given permission by this young lady. Drape yourself in roses, so long as you come out victorious.”

“Not a single petal will touch the ground,” said Loras confidently. He bowed deeply before Sansa, and handed her a rose, smiling beautifully. Sansa took it delicately, with a short curtsey, mindful of the thorns.

Renly looked up, examining the three of them. “Brienne of Tarth,” he said, surprised and delighted, “you’re Selwyn Tarth’s daughter, are you not?”

“You are too kind to remember me, my Lord,” said Brienne, dropping to her knee, “I thank you.”

“Her father’s house is our vassal,” Renly said, turning to Loras who looked at Brienne with interest, “I went to a ball on Tarth, once. Beautiful place. Waters that glitter like the finest sapphires. Lady Brienne and I danced the night away, did we not, my lady?”

“I suppose we did, my lord,” said Brienne smiling at him, “you were quite gracious to me that night.”

“No grace was needed to enjoy a ball with you, my lady,” said Renly, “tell me, what brings you to King’s Landing?”

“I have come to accompany, Lord Stark and his children,” said Brienne nodding at Sansa and Arya. “As the sworn shield of Lady Catelyn Stark, I was entrusted with her family’s care and well being.”

“You are Ned’s children,” said Renly looking down at them. He reached out his hand towards Arya, and she flinched away automatically.

“I’m sorry, child,” Renly said withdrawing his hand immediately, “I did not mean to frighten you. I only wanted to see your face. You have your father’s look about you.”

His words made Arya smile. “I know,” she said proudly.

“And you, dear,” said Renly turning to Sansa, “you must resemble your mother. Robert has told me she was a great beauty, and so you shall be too.”

“Thank you, my lord,” said Sansa, “I’ve been told I have the Tully look.”
“A pleasure to meet you both,” said Renly bowing, “I am Lord Renly Baratheon, at your service.” He placed a hand on Lora’s shoulder. “This is Ser Loras Tyrell,” said Renly.

Loras bowed again before them, the bundle of roses spilling from his arms. He laughed, and more roses fell to the ground.

“House Tyrell is at your service as well,” said Loras smiling, “any friends of Lord Renly are friends of mine.”

“You are too kind, my lords,” said Sansa looking, “if you ever have need of us, House Stark is behind you.”

“Thank you, my lady,” Renly said, “I confess, I haven’t seen much of your father since he arrived. I had anticipated the company of another noble lord. This city is full of spineless men.”

“Father is not used to this sort of life,” Sansa admitted, “but he came for the King’s sake. Jon Arryn’s death was a terrible blow.”

“It was to all of us,” said Renly becoming more serious, “Jon was a good man. The realm needs more good men. I’ve tried to stay close to Robert, to support him in this time of need. And now that our dear brother has run off to his island, I fear that Robert may need me more than ever.”

“I was surprised to not see Stannis,” said Brienne, “he is Master of Ships, is he not?”

“He is,” said Renly, “though he has not been present at many meetings as of late. If I did not know him so well, I might suggest that he has forgotten his duty.”

Renly clapped his hands together as he finished speaking. “But his is no time for the discussion of dull affairs! There is a tourney coming! Ned Starks’ name is to be honored throughout the city! It may not be an honor he asked for, but he’s going to get it anyway!”

“He will be there, my lord,” Sansa assured Renly, “we all will.”

“And I look forward to that,” said Renly, smiling at her, “tell your father I look forward to sharing a drink with him. And Brienne of Tarth! It was lovely to see you.”

“My lord, you honor me too much,” said Brienne.

“No, my dear Brienne,” said Renly laughing as he turned away with Ser Loras, “just the right amount I think.”
“Lord Tyrion, I hear you have grown tired of the Wall.” Tyrion paused, as Mormont called out to him.

“I won’t deny it,” Tyrion grunted, taking a seat across from him and Maester Aemon, “I’m finding the routine here to be more than a little monotonous. I’ve already settled it with your man Yoren, we’ll travel together to the capital. No use going alone, when there’s fine company to be had.”

“Jon Snow has told us that you intend to plead on behalf of the Wall, once you reach the capital,” said Mormont, fixing Tyrion with a strong look, "is that so?"

“The boy speaks truly,” said Tyrion easily, “although I don’t know about ‘pleading’. I will certainly bring your case before the King. Any man with eyes could see the disrepair that the Watch has fallen into. I see it now, and I will bring the Crown’s attention to it.”

“Why did you come here, Lord Tyrion?” inquired Maester Aemon.

“I’ve always wanted to see the Wall,” said Tyrion resolutely, “it seemed as good an opportunity as any. I’ve always had a taste for stories of heroes and monsters. What better place to satisfy myself, than the Wall that stands between us and the Others? The oldest and greatest story in Westeros.”

Mormont looked at Tyrion sharply. “What have you been told?”

“Fanciful stories,” said Tyrion, tilting his head, “impossible tales of what lies beyond the Wall. Things I would tell children to frighten them in the safety and comfort of their warm castles.”

“Is that what you intend to tell the King?” said Mormont coldly, “that we fight the fears of children? You are mistaken.”

“No,” said Tyrion, shaking his head soberly, “forgive me, Lord Mormont, I jest out of fear. I have every faith in the terrors that lie North of the Wall, and I intend to convince the King of this as best as I am able.”

Mormont sat back, his features guarded. “You’re a southern man, Lord Tyrion. The blood of Andals run through your veins. What do you know of the Others?”

Tyrion smiled grimly. “Not much,” he said. The lie slid off his tongue like silk. “It’s true, I am a southerner. We’re too comfortable down there, I’ll be the first to admit it. We’ve not even forgotten, like much of the North. We merely never knew what lurked beyond the Wall. The fear doesn’t live in our blood.”

Wight's blood runs black, dry like dust. Their touch is so cold it burns. Tyrion is going die, he's going to die, and he's going to be one of them. It terrifies him, more than anything ever has.

“Yet here you stand,” said Mormont gruffly, “tell me, Lord Tyrion, What has changed?”

Everything.

Tyrion hesitated, then smiled thinly. “I’m a survivor, Lord Mormont. I was never supposed to be, yet, here I stand. If I didn’t have my name, I would have never made it past my first nameday. I doubt I would have lived long enough to be named. Not only a disappointment, but a disappointment that killed my beautiful mother. So I’ve had to survive, and to do that I’ve had to be
pragmatic. So when Ned Stark, looked at me, and told me that he felt fear. I listened. Men like Ned Stark, like Benjen, like you Mormont. They don’t scare easily. I’d be a fool to run from something, just because I wished it was otherwise. And I’ve always strived to be more than just the fool.”

“I didn’t take you for a fool,” said Mormont, “I’m glad to be proven right. You’re a cunning man, Lord Tyrion. We need more of your sort on our side. We have become an army of sullen boys and tired old men. Our strength is less than a thousand now. A scant third of those are fighting men.”

“And Winter is coming,” finished Tyrion.

“And Winter is coming,” agreed Mormont, “and when the Long Night falls, only the Night’s Watch will stand between the realm and the darkness that sweeps from the North. The gods help us all if we are not ready.”

“Not the gods, Lord Mormont,” said Tyrion, “men beat back the dead once. Men will do it again.”

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Jon rose early. The crisp morning air invigorated him. He dressed warmly. The clothes that Sansa had made him were simple. For now, he needed to be unassuming.

He walked briskly from the tower. Ghost trotted swiftly beside him. Jon bent down and rubbed his ears.

“Go hunt,” Jon murmured against his fur. The men were scared of Ghost. And Jon didn’t want them scared today.

Ghost loped off, scattering a group of birds.

Jon watched him go, before turning towards the training yard. The brothers would just be waking, stumbling groggily into the hall to break their fast.

He grabbed a training breastplate, and slipped it over his head. It settled clunkily around his chest.

Jon picked up a blunted sworded, weighing it in his hand. It was heavier than Sigligon, heavier than Longclaw. More like castle-forged swords. How easy it was to get used to Valyrian steel.

He hefted the blade, and attacked a practice dummy, adjusting his swings to accommodate the new weight.

Jon was breathing heavily, sweat standing out on his brow, when he heard shuffling behind him. He turned to see the new recruits, watching him. They looked wary, yet begrudgingly impressed.

Jon nodded at them, wiping the sweat from his face.

His eyes flickered to Pyp and Grenn’s faces. He had forgotten the feeling, of those hard looks directed towards him.

“Early morning, Lord Snow?” sneered Rast, pushing to the front of the men, “we were beginning to think you never meant to grace us with your noble face.”

Jon smiled grimly. “I’m no lord. My father may be noble, but I’ll always be just a bastard.”

“A lord in all but title,” Toad scoffed, “will you remember us, Lord Snow, when you ride back to your warm castle, to sleep under your fine furs in front of your roaring fire?”

“I don’t think I’ll be going home anytime soon,” said Jon neutrally, “I thought I might like to get
some practice in while I’m here. It’s good to keep sharp. Spar?”

He looked out over the recruits, his sword gripped lightly at his side. No one stepped forward.

Rast shoved Pyp hard, and he stumbled forward. Pyp looked furious, but he drew himself up, and held his hand out for a sword. Grenn handed him one, and the other boys threw a breastplate over his head.

Pyp held the sword awkwardly, his fingers stiff and tight. Too tight, Jon noted. He held the sword like it was a dagger.

“Like this,” Jon said stepping forward, his voice dispassionate. He demonstrated his grip on the sword to the other boy, who glared severely at him. “Your grip needs to be firm, but malleable,” Jon continued, “a longsword is different than a dagger. It requires a different sort of motion.”

Pyp hesitated, turning to look at the men behind him. Swallowing, he adjusted his grip. Jon kept his face unaffected, but was pleased to see that Pyp had better control of the blade already.

“Always have a wide stance,” Jon said shifting his legs apart, and planting his feet, “and keep your legs bent. You need to be able to move quickly, no matter whether you’re winning or losing.”

Pyp copied him, the tips of his ears turning red with concentration.

“Now swing at me,” said Jon, knocking his empty fist against his breastplate, “right here.”

Pyp only hesitated for a moment, before taking the sword, and jabbing hard and ungainly in the direction of Jon’s stomach.

Jon deflected him easily, and stepped back.

“Your grip is good,” said Jon, “but a longsword benefits from a slicing motion, not a jabbing one. The sides are the sharpest. Swing, like this.”

He swung, slowly, tapping the edge of the sword against Pyp’s stomach, making him flinch.

“You can do more damage this way,” Jon explained, pulling his sword back and feigning the strike against his own chest, “it increases the surface area of the wounds in quick combat.”

He moved back into position, and Pyp did the same. Jon guided him through the motions, instructing Pyp on how to disarm him. Pyp’s sword landed with a crack on Jon’s wrist, and he dropped his sword immediately.

“Good,” Jon grunted, rubbing his wrist, “Pyp’s just forced me to demonstrate the most important rule. Always keep hold of your weapon. You can’t win without it.”

Pyp stepped back, pleased.

“Here,” Pyp thrust his sword at Grenn, “bet you can’t disarm, Lord Snow.”

Grenn came forward, unsmiling. He grabbed Pyp’s blade.

“No,” Pyp scolded him, “like this.” He showed Grenn how to hold the sword properly. Grenn’s brow furrowed as he focused.

“Now attack!” Pyp said, pointing at Jon. Jon readied himself, and Grenn charged.
“Use the side of the blade,” Pyp yelled, as the other recruits circled up around Jon and Grenn, hooting and cheering.

Grenn was unbalanced, but his strikes were aggressive. Jon focused on defense, dodging and blocking Grenn’s sword.

“Hit the bastard!” yelled Rast.

“What in the seven hells are you fools doing?” Alliser Thorne bellowed suddenly.

Grenn lost his grip on his sword in surprise, and Jon dropped his weapon immediately to avoid striking him.

“You,” snarled Thorne pointing at Jon, “the bastard lordling. You have no right to be interfering here.”

“Apologies,” Jon said, the word slipping out from between gritted teeth, “I was only looking for a bit of sparring practice.”

“Against this lot?” Thorne snorted, “scum, the lot of them. Farmer’s sons and stable boys. Criminals. What use are they to a castle-trained fighter. Most of these men have never held a sword. But you, you were holding a sword fresh out of your swaddling clothes, weren’t you, bastard?”

“Aye,” said Jon, steadily, “I’ve been wielding a sword for most of my life. I trained under Ser Rodrik Cassel, Winterfell’s Master-At-Arms.”

“And that makes you better than this lot,” Thorne asked, smirking, “doesn’t it, Lord Snow?”

“No,” said Jon, meeting Thorne’s eyes evenly, “it doesn’t. Fighting’s practice, not skill. These men just need more practice.”

“And you think you should be the one to give it to them, do you?” Thorne’s voice was dangerous, “a child, thinking he knows more than grown men.

“I presume nothing,” said Jon sharply, “except that the Watch needs trained fighters.”

“Which I will do my best to provide,” Thorne said silkily, “despite what I am forced to work with. Without your assistance, bastard.”

Don’t. Jon stopped himself from responding with difficulty. He nodded, shortly. He pulled off the training breastplate, and threw it down. His sword clattered to the ground.

He stalked away, but noted with satisfaction, that the eyes of the recruits followed him.

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“Jon.”

Benjen reached out, and caught him.

“Uncle Benjen,” Jon said, relieved to see his face. He saw his uncle so rarely now. Bejen spent his days and nights, planning with Aemon and Mormont for the ranging.

“You’d do well not to get on Thorne’s bad side,” his uncle chided him.
Jon smiled wanly, and shook his head. “Won’t happen,” he said, “he’s a brute and a bully. All that time I’ve seen him yelling abuse at the new recruits. Not one of them knew the proper grip on a sword. He’s hurting the Watch, hurting the men.”

“Yet he commands respect here,” Benjen reminded him, “remember that.”

“I will,” said Jon, looking down bitterly, “I won’t ever forget the weight of his influence.”

Benjen considered him. “We’re waiting, to send out the ranging party,” he said quietly, “Mormont has decided to wait until the dragonglass arrives. He wants every man in the party equipped with a dagger.”

Jon nodded, his hand curling up into a fist. “It will be a while yet.”

Benjen nodded. “Worth the wait,” he said, looking at Jon, “I think you would agree.”

“I do,” Jon said gruffly, “it is the best course of action.”

“It will be a long expedition,” said Benjen, “we’ll spend time preparing for the journey. We need food, clothes, horses. I hope to bring some of the new men along with us. The more eyes that see what’s beyond the Wall, the better.”

“Pyp and Grenn,” said Jon, “they’re good, loyal men of the Watch.” He hesitated. “And Sam,” said Jon quietly, “Sam will be here soon. He’s the best of us.”

Benjen smiled. “I look forward to it,” he said, “I’ll take every good man who comes our way.”
Mothers and Daughters

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains descriptions of violence and child abuse. To skip it, stop reading at “Arya stepped out” and control F to “Arya silently handed”. There will be a recap in the end notes. Enjoy!

EDIT: Conversation between Cersei and Jaime has also been edited for my misremembering.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Joffrey seems quite taken with the Stark girl,” said Cersei, gazing over Jaime’s shoulder as he kissed her fingers, “what do you think of her?”

She yanked her hand away when he failed to respond. He sat back, looking belligerent.

“The girl,” Cersei repeated, “what do you think of the girl? She may be Joffrey’s wife someday.”

“And a fine wife she’ll make,” said Jaime irritably, “pretty and dutiful. The houses of Westeros produce them by the dozen.”

“Sansa Stark is much more than a daughter of a paltry house,” said Cersei curtly, “all the gold in Westeros couldn’t buy the strength of the North. A marriage between the Starks and the Crown will secure what gold cannot.”

“What does the North give us then?” asked Jaime, “there’s nothing up there but dull men and barren soil.”

“Do not underestimate the North,” said Cersei tersely, “it is too vast and wild to ever be truly conquered. It must be continuously ensnared to remain loyal to the Crown. My husband may have a hold on Ned Stark’s sensibilities, but what of his eldest? Will that boy bend the knee to Joffrey, uncompromisingly? He would be much more willing to serve his good brother.”

“You worry too much,” Jaime said dismissively, “we hold the entirety of the South under our thumb. No one can touch us.”

Cersei pursed her lips.

“What do you think of the girl?” asked Jaime, raising an eyebrow at her.

“She’s demure,” said Cersei in disgust, “flat. Easily shattered.”

“Be happy then,” said Jaime, “you can manipulate her to your heart’s content, Make her serve you, teach her to look to you.” He drummed his fingers on the desk. “It’s her father that irritates me. The sooner Lord Stark returns to his frozen wasteland, the better.”

“You don’t find Lord Stark’s company invigorating?” Cersei asked dryly.

“He moves through the halls like a ghost,” Jaime grunted, “watching us, judging us.”
“Taking him as Hand was the smartest thing Robert’s done in years,” said Cersei.

“I would not have us speak of the King now,” said Jaime, annoyed.

“Robert will not occupy us for much longer,” Cersei murmured under her breath, impossibly softly.

“It will not be soon enough,” muttered Jaime sourly.

“It must be,” said Cersei tersely, “Jon Arryn came so close to the truth. There is already suspicion in the air.”

“Jon Arryn is dead,” said Jaime, “a blessing.”

“The man is dead,” Cersei snapped, “but we have no way of knowing who he confided in. Stannis has fled to Dragonstone. That horrible woman has run off with her son to the safety of the Vale. They are loose ends.”

“Would you have me ride out tonight?” asked Jaime, “kill the King’s brother in his sleep? Pull a recent widow and her sickly son from their beds?”

“You will do whatever it is I ask of you,” said Cersei, rubbing her thumb over Jaime’s cheek, “as you always do. For me. For our children.”

Jaime sighed, leaning forward to kiss her. “The things I do for love,” he said darkly.

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Sansa inclined her head towards her father, as they knelt in prayer in the Godswood. “Good,” she said softly, “he must be contained. If he claims himself heir, it will bring both Renly and the Lannisters to the brink of war.”

“Robert’s lack of trueborn children does make Stannis his heir,” said Ned looking troubled, “why did Renly rise up to challenge him?”

“Renly wants to be king,” said Sansa, “Stannis has the claim. Renly has the army, the support, the love of the people. They will bring each other down in flames, and the Lannisters will draw their triumph from the ashes.”

“Does Renly know?” asked Ned.

Sansa hesitated. “I could not tell,” she admitted, “I do not know him well enough.”

“Brienne knows him,” said Ned thoughtfully, “she thinks quite highly of him.”

“She does,” Sansa agreed, “Renly might have made a good king, I do not know. Margaery would certainly have made him a good queen. He was killed by Stannis, very early in the war.”

“I cannot believe it,” said Ned shaking his head, “Stannis and Renly were never close, but for Stannis to forsake his brother like that. Kinslaying goes against all laws of gods and men.”

“Stannis serves the Lord of Light now,” said Sansa, “his sensibilities are altered.”

“He must have some sense left,” said Ned, “we must pray that he keeps it in the coming months, for the sake of the kingdoms.”
“We need to ensure that Jon receives as much dragonglass as possible,” said Sansa, twisting her fingers in her lap, “he needs to be able to arm himself and his men. I will feel better when Tyrion returns, and brings word of him.”

“Aye,” said Ned, wrapping a comforting arm around his daughter, “I find myself awaiting the Imp as well. He will stop at Winterfell on his way back as well, of that I have no doubt.”

“I cannot wait to hear word from Mother and Robb,” said Sansa, “words that are not wrapped in the courtesies of letters.”

“We cannot risk speaking truthfully in our letters,” Ned sighed heavily, “I would give anything to hear your mother’s voice.”

Sansa allowed herself to lean into her father. “I would as well,” she said closing her eyes, “I hear their voices in my dreams, but it is never the same.”

“Soon,” Ned assured her, “it will be soon.”

He was lying though, even if he didn’t know it. Going home would never come soon enough.

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Arya stepped out of the Blackwater Rush, shaking the water from her hair. Dressed in only a shift, she opened the sack she had carried carefully through the sewer. She pulled out a blue wool dress, finely embroidered with silver thread.

She slipped the dress over her head, and ran her her hands down her sides smoothing the wrinkles out. Her mother would have to forgive her, her lovely work would be sullied before the night was through.

It was comforting though, to imagine her mother bent over her sewing, thinking of Arya all the while. Perhaps Sansa would be able to wash out the blood.

She tucked her dirty clothes into the bag, and hid it under one of the many rocks that dotted the shores.

The stars shone brightly above her. Watch me, Arya thought in satisfaction. The stones under her bare feet were sharp, but her footing was sure and steady.

Arya slithered through the crowds, through the twisting and turning streets until Rhaeny’s Hill loomed above her. It was quieter here, the torches flickering in and out.

Several drunk knights strolled by. They bellowed at her, reaching to pull at her dress. She hissed at them, and they laughed. One threw a rock at her, and Arya jumped as it shattered beside her.

She melted into the shadows, still as the stone. She would be patient.

Her heart rate picked up as she spotted her prey.

He lumbered through the streets, his spotless white cloak fluttering behind him. Lannister soliders walked beside them, roaring with drunken laughter.

She angled her body so that her dress was illuminated by the flames, and bent her head so her hair obscured her face.

“Mama,” Arya cried, her voice broken and forlorn, “Mama.”
Warm, deadly satisfaction sliced through her gut as she saw Trant’s steps slow. She crushed the beginnings of a smile.

“Dirty rat!” one of the guards sneered.

“Urchin,” grunted another, his hand drifting over his sword, “filth like that should be put down.”

“Mama!” Arya bleated pitifully, crouching down, and holding out her hands in supplication.

“Your mother was a dirty whore!”

One of the men spit in her hands, guffawing. They started to move away, bored with her.

Trant lingered.

“Go on,” he growled, “I’ll attend to this.”

Caught.

Arya heard the talk and laughter of the men become more distant. Trant approached her, grabbing for her roughly. She evaded him, still crying softly.

“Do you know who I am, girl?” He snarled, reaching for her again, and missing, “you’ll do well to do as I say.”

She ran slowly, stumbling as she did. Like a limping lamb. He followed her at an easy pace, a look of grim amusement painted on his ugly features.

Arya clung to the walls of the dragonpit, whimpering. She staggered towards a part of the wall that had caved in. The crumbling stone revealed a dark entrance.

She lost her footing, as Trant seized the back of her dress, and yanked sharply. He kicked her hard.

She made no sound, only struggled soundlessly back to her feet.

“I’ve got my work cut out for me,” he said softly. He pulled a copper from his pocket, and waved it in front of Arya’s eyes. He flicked the coin through the hole in the wall. “Get it.”

Arya crawled through the hole in the wall. The pit was darker than the streets. No torches were lit here, but the stars glittered in the open sky.

She picked up the copper, gripping it tightly in her fist. He approached her huddled form.

“Get up.”

Arya didn’t move. He took a whip off his belt, weighed it in his hand, and then cracked it hard across her back.

She didn’t flinch.

Trant grunted. He took off his white cloak, dropping into the dirt. His sword and heavy belt fell to the ground.

She stood as he approached, head hung low.

He punched her hard in the stomach. Arya fell back, crouched tightly on her hands and knees. She opened her fist, and allowed the copper to fall.
Trant reached for her, and she lunged at him.

Her momentum toppled him, and he slammed into the ground.

Swift as a viper, she plunged a dagger into his eye. He roared, grabbing for her. She stabbed again, sinking her blade into his other eye, until the hilt of her dagger hit his eye socket. She yanked it back out, and jammed her fist into his mouth, gagging him with a dirty rag.

She leapt back before he could seize her. He writhed on the ground, clutching his face, and choking. He clambered to his knees, and she drove the dagger deep into his knee, and twisted.

His scream was muffled, and blood ran down his face in thick lines.

She got to her feet, and watched him impassively. She noted a spot of dirt on her dress, and flicked it off.

“Do you know who I am?” Arya circled him calmly. Her toes curled into the dirt with every step.

Trant moaned.

“Of course you don’t,” she said dismissively, “you have no idea who I am. I’m just a little girl. And you like little girls, don’t you Ser Meryn?”

He tried to crawl away. She let him, watching him struggle. After he had moved several paces, she walked over and jammed the dagger through the top of his hand, pressing it in slowly before ripping it out.

“I didn’t get a chance to ask,” Arya continued smoothly, “if you liked my dress. It’s quite pretty, don’t you think? My mother made it for me. My mother loves me very much, Ser Meryn. As all mothers love their daughters.”

He shook in the dirt. There was a scrabbling noise coming from his throat. She didn’t have much time left. She seized his hair, and yanked hard.

“I need you to listen to me,” Arya said, soft and deadly, “this isn’t just for me. This is for all of them. All of the little girls. All of their mothers. They couldn’t hurt you, like you hurt them. So I’m going to do it for them.”

She bent down. He was fading. Blood and spittle dripped from the edges of the gag.

“My name is Arya Stark,” she told him. Her eyes were dark. “And death has come for you today.”

Her hand twitched on her bloody dagger, but she stilled her fingers, watching as life left him. His blood continued to puddle in the dirt, even after he stopped moving.

Arya smiled.

She wiped her dagger on his breeches, cleaning the blade thoroughly. She replaced it in the hidden sheath on her leg. Carefully, she extracted another knife, sharper and more slender than the first.

Dragging the body to a patch of moonlight, Arya examined his illuminated features, and bent to her task.

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Arya silently handed Sansa the folded white cloak.
“No blood,” noted Sansa, turning it over in her hands.

“He removed it himself,” Arya said, “saved us the trouble of getting the stains out.”

She watched Sansa’s face closely, searching her sister’s features for an indication of her thoughts. A smile pulled at her sister’s lips. Her eyes were hard and bright, like sapphires.

“He suffered?”

“I made sure of it.”

“How are you?” Sansa placed the cloak on her bed, and turned to Arya. She reached out to wipe away a splash of mud over her sister’s cheek. Arya closed her eyes at Sansa’s touch.

“Fine.”

Sansa looked at her. Arya opened her eyes.

“Bruised,” she admitted, “nothing serious.”

‘Where?

Arya reached around, hiking her undershirt up around her underarms. Sansa silently took in the welts that marked her ribs and back. She turned, and fetched a pot of salve.

Arya hissed as Sansa’s cool touch met her back, but then relaxed as it soothed her bruises.

“I used to use this after the beatings,” Sansa said, spreading the salve gently over Arya’s back, “it numbs and heals.”

“Are you happy?” asked Arya after a quiet moment, “He’ll never hurt you again. He’ll never hurt anyone again.”

Sansa hesitated. She moved to Arya’s ribs. “Yes,” she said, “I’m happy he’s dead. He deserved it. He deserved a thousand deaths. I only wish it didn’t have to be you who did it.”

Arya frowned, squirming away from her sister’s hands.

“I’m good at this,” she said, “this is what I do.”

“I know you are,” said Sansa quietly.

“But you’re disappointed,” Arya said flatly, “I won’t be ashamed of what makes me strong.”

“I’m not disappointed,” snapped Sansa, “and I’m not trying to shame you. Do you think it’s easy for me to watch you put yourself in danger? I feel as though my happiness at his death must come at your expense. In no circumstance is Meryn Trant’s life ever worth endangering yours.”

“This was not the last,” murmured Arya, “there are many names left on my list.”

"I know," said Sansa softly.

Arya looked at her sister. “When you killed Ramsey,” she asked Sansa, “how did it feel?”

Sansa froze. Even her breathing stopped
Arya cautiously took her hand. Sansa’s fingers were limp in hers.

Arya was about to apologize when Sansa spoke.

“It felt right.”

Sansa’s voice was frosty. “It felt right. He deserved it. I wouldn’t hesitate to do it again.”

Arya nodded. Sansa’s hand tightened around hers.

“That’s how it is for me,” Arya said quietly, “and I feel sometimes, like I should feel badly about it. But I don’t. They deserve it. And yet, I would never wish that task on you.”

Sansa stared at the floor. “I didn’t tell Jon right away, what I’d done to Ramsey,” she said slowly, “I wasn’t ashamed, but I was. I felt like killing him left a stain on me. I lied, when I told him he’d vanish from my memory. He won’t. Hasn’t”

“He’ll fade,” said Arya, “death helps. Cut the roots, and the leaves will start to wither. But fading takes time. It’ll happen, I promise.”

“Promise me something else,” said Sansa, “that you’ll come to me, if you ever start to lose sight of yourself. Don’t hide away.”

_I won’t._ Arya wanted to say the words, but they were stuck in her throat. She thought, suddenly, of Lana. Of how good it had felt to slip into in her skin. Of how Arya felt like she had pinned herself to this body like a butterfly. One slip, and she would flutter away.

“I promise,” she said instead. She realized all at once how tired she was. Exhaustion had burrowed deep into her bones.

She lifted her arms, as Sansa helped her into her nightshirt. She laid back on her sister’s bed. Nymeria and Lady padded over, their wet noses bumping her hands.

She watched bleary-eyed as Sansa hid the white cloak, and Arya’s bag. Sansa wouldn’t see the contents of her bag yet. She would save that for another day.

Sansa blew out the candles. In the dark, Arya could imagine that it was the walls of Winterfell that surrounded them. It helped her fall asleep.

Chapter End Notes

In the third section, Arya lures Meryn Trant to the dragonpit by pretending to be an orphan girl on the street. She RIGHTEOUSLY EXECUTES him with a dagger.
“That’s the last of it,” said Davos, hammering down the final nail on the crate, “see that it gets to where it’s going quickly. Don’t let the men linger in White Harbor either. Lord Stannis’ orders are to return as soon as the cargo is seen into safe hands.”

“Aye, m’lord,” said the captain with a short nod, “it’ll be done.”

Davos clasped the other man’s arm briefly, before stepping back.

Several sailors lifted the final crate between them, staggering up the gangplank under its heavy weight.

Davos watched from shore as they set sail.

The wall of ships sitting in the bay parted briefly to let the one through, and then closed tightly, throwing their anchors down once again.

“What shall I tell the miners, m’lord?” asked the steward beside him.

“Let them rest,” said Davos, “they’ve worked long hours. We’ll begin preparing another shipment soon.”

The man hesitated, shifting his weight uncomfortably. “She’s down there in the tunnels, m’lord,” the steward whispered, “she’s been down there for some time.”

“Alone?” asked Davos.

“She was heard talking to the torches,” confided the man, sweat beading on his forehead, “but other than that, no one’s gone near her.”

“Very well,” said Davos, looking across the beach to the entrance of the mine. A dark, gaping maw in the side of the mountain, “go inform Lord Stannis the ship has departed. I will see to the woman.”

“Aye, m’lord.”

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It was not the darkness or the cramped quarters that bothered Davos as he descended into the mine. It was her.

He almost lost his footing on the slick stone as he turned the corner into a small chamber at the back. She was there, facing away from him, dressed in yards of red silk that brushed the floor. Her long hair was unbound, and shining in the light of the fire. Her beauty could not be doubted, but it was such a sharp beauty.

“Ser Davos,” her voice was soft with a lovely timbre. She did not turn to face him.

“My lady,” Davos said reluctantly, “I was told you had been down here for a long while.”

“Has it been so long?” she mused, running her fingers over the carvings in the stone, “I hear my lord’s voice so clearly down here. All of this was once aflame once. The mountain remembers its true form.”
“The mountain is dormant,” said Davos, stiffly, “it has been for thousands of years.”

“Its power lingers,” said Melisandre, turning to face him, “a match is dull and lifeless until it bursts into flame, is it not? It simply needs to be properly struck.”

“I would caution you against saying such things in range of the miners,” Davos warned her, “they are unnerved enough by this place. The men do not need to be worried about an eruption.”

“Nevertheless, it comes for us all,” said Melisandre, her eyes gleaming in the light, “the world is changing, Ser Davos. We must be there to meet the tide when it crashes on our shores. Our king understands this.”

“Stannis is no king, not yet,” Davos insisted, his mouth going dry, “his brother still sits upon the Iron Throne.”

Melisandre shrugged delicately. “A small matter,” she said, “my Lord shows me the truth in the flames. Stannis is the one who is promised. Why do you think I have traveled so far to this strange country?”

“Aye, you are a long way from your home,” said Davos gruffly, “in the company of men who distrust you and call you witch.”

“And yet I stay,” she said turning to peer into Davos’ eyes, “does that not sway you, Ser?”

“I do not know you, my lady,” said Davos in discomfort, “I could not say if your resolution is built on steady ground.”

“And what does a sailor and a smuggler know of steady ground?” Melisandre asked with a strange smile.

“I’ve been an honest man for seventeen years now,” Davos said reaching up to toy with the bag around his neck, “the seas I sail now are steady enough now.”

“For now,” said Melisandre, “but the night grows darker, Ser Davos. And the night is full of terrors.”

The torches seemed to flare brighter at her words. Davos suddenly felt as if the gleaming black walls were closing in on them. He could not be trapped here, with her.

“My lady,” he choked out before turning, and stumbling through the tunnels. It was not until he stepped out onto the sand of the beach that he was able to breath again.

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“I see,” whispered Selyse, inches from the fire, “I see things in the flames. Dark shapes, Shadows. What is the Lord trying to tell me?”

She pulled back, blinking, and looked at Melisandre who gazed back with a placid smile.

“I could not tell you, my queen,” Melisandre said, “you must listen the voice of R’hllor yourself. He will speak to you when you are ready to receive him.”

“I am ready,” said Selyse, turning back to the fire, “I am ready to serve the Lord of Light. I believe, I do.”

“Then you shall be rewarded with his vision,” promised Melisandre.
Selyse nodded, once again enraptured by the flames. Her eyes grew unfocused, and the heat from the fire reddened her pale skin.

She made no movement of recognition as the door opened, and Stannis entered. He hesitated, looking at his wife, and then at Melisandre who greeted him with a slow smile.

“Your grace,” she said inclining her head.

Stannis grunted in response.

“Your queen looks upon R’hllor,” said Melisandre.

“I see him,” said Selyse suddenly, in a reverent tone, “my Lord Stannis. He stands in the flames.” She lifted her sweating face to look upon her husband. “R’hllor shows me your face, my king. He lifts you up above all others.”

Stannis stared back at her, his eyes dark under his heavy brow.

Melisandre crossed to her, helping her to her feet. “Your belief is strong, my queen. You have been reborn and cleansed in the flames of faith.”

“I feel faint,” murmured Selyse, putting a hand to her head, “his presence overwhelms me. I am not strong enough to bear such greatness.”

“I will call for a maid,” said Stannis gruffly, going to the door. A maid came quickly, leading away the trembling Selyse.

Stannis watched her go, before shutting the door and turning to Melisandre.

“You wanted to speak with me, your grace,” she reminded him.

“I did,” said Stannis, pulling out a letter, and placing it on the desk, “I received another letter from the capital. Ned Stark writes to thank me for my service in protection of the the seven kingdoms.”

“As he should,” said Melisandre, “he recognizes you as a true protector of the realm.”

Stannis nodded, thoughtfully. “Ned Stark is a good man,” he said, “I’ve fought beside him. He is not safe in King’s Landing, in that nest of snakes.”

“May the Lord of Light shine upon him,” said Melisandre, “and lead him out of the darkness.”

Stannis chuckled darkly. “Ned is a northerner,” he said, “they follow the old gods there. The blood of the first men runs through their veins. They will not bend easily to your Lord.”

“The Lord of Light calls to all of us,” said Melisandre, “regardless of our blood. He will spare Ned Stark if he can be of service to your quest, my king.”

“Does your Lord speak to you of the North, my lady?” Stannis asked her, “I would like to know against what the North requires protection. And dragonglass of all things.”

“The carvings in the mountain,” murmured Melisandre, “I see them repeated in the flames, but my Lord tells me little else. There is something great coming, my king. I feel it in my bones. Under you, the seven kingdoms will rise to meet it.”

“When?” demanded Stannis, “when will these things come to pass? Or do they live only in your flames?”
“Soon, my king,” she said, looking back at the fire, “you must be patient.”

“I’ve been patient,” said Stannis harshly. When Melisandre offered no response, he seemed to deflate slightly. He joined her, staring deep into the flames.

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It was a clear night. If Tyrion squinted, he could see the outline of the mountains that lay far beyond the Haunted Forest. A sharp wind forced him to close his eyes, and he sunk down into his furs so that his nose was covered.

He heard the crank of the winch, and turned to see a bundled figure, carrying a lantern.

“Cold?” asked Jon, as he came to Tyrion’s side.

“Better without the wind,” said Tyrion, “unbearable with.”

“You get used to it,” said Jon, looking down over the Wall, “I didn’t expect to find you up here. It’s your last night, I thought you might be celebrating.”

“Are the brothers really throwing a celebration for my departure?” asked Tyrion wryly, “I did not realize. How rude of me not to join them.”

Jon chuckled. “You can try to convince Bowen Marsh to open another barrel of ale, but I doubt you’ll manage it.”

“It would be a dismal affair then,” said Tyrion, “and I cannot say there is much to be celebrating. We both have bitter work ahead of us, Jon Snow.”

Jon nodded solemnly. “Lord Commander Mormont has decided to wait until we receive the dragonglass to begin the ranging. Once we leave, it will be a long time before we return.”

“It will be a long time before we see each other again as well,” said Tyrion looking up at Jon, “if we do.”

“I hope we do.” said Jon, with a half smile. He cleared his throat. “When you leave tomorrow, I need you to carry letters with you. Letters that cannot reach anyone but their intendeds.”

“I will do my best,” agreed Tyrion, “to whom are they destined?”

“This one is meant for Robb and Lady Stark’s eyes only,” said Jon, handing the letter to Tyrion, “I’ve written Robb’s name on it. This one is for Bran and Rickon. Tell them I’m doing fine, and I miss them terribly. This one is for my father, Brienne, Sansa, and Arya. Be careful with them, I’ve concealed nothing.”

“Is that all?” asked Tyrion, tucking the letters into his cloak.

Jon hesitated. He removed a final letter, sealed with a red wax instead of black, and handed it carefully to Tyrion.

Tyrion raised an eyebrow. “This one is nameless.”

“It’s for Sansa, only for Sansa,” said Jon softly. He tapped the wax seal. “I’ve made it easy to remember. Red, like her hair.”

Tyrion frowned slightly, as he ran Jon’s statement through his head. He shook his head lightly, as
if trying to dislodge something.

“You can’t give it to her in front of anyone else,” Jon said firmly, “it’s for her eyes only.”

After a lengthy period, Tyrion managed put together a response. “Will she be… expecting this letter?”

“Yes,” said Jon hastily, “she’ll understand when you give it to her. You don’t have to explain. But the others cannot see it.”

Feeling as if he was moving underwater, Tyrion put the letter with the red wax seal with the others.

“After we leave, I won’t be able to receive ravens,” said Jon, “we’ll be cut off from the world south of the Wall. I don’t expect we’ll be back before…”

Tyrion only heard half of what Jon said, his words seemed muffled and distant. His mind was spinning too quickly.

He realized suddenly that Jon had stopped speaking. Silence hung heavy in the air. Tyrion turned finally to look at him, expecting to see the sullen face of a boy.

Instead, Jon stared back at him, resolutely, with the face of a man. His eyes were clear and bright, as he unabashedly met Tyrion’s gaze.

“Well,” said Tyrion trying to recover himself, “that is an unexpected piece of information you have gifted me, Jon Snow. And before such a long journey. My head shall be spinning all the way to King’s Landing.”

“Is it so unexpected?” asked Jon.

At his words, Tyrion was drawn back into memories.

“She’s much smarter than she lets on.”

There’s a loving smile playing around the edges of Jon’s mouth when he responds. “She’s starting to let on…”

“Who holds your kingdom while you treat with us?”

“The North is in good hands,” said Jon, his eyes softer than any warrior’s ought to be, “I have every faith in that…”

“The captain says we’re close. We should reach White Harbor in a day or so. You must send a raven to Winterfell when we land. Tell them we’re close.” Tyrion advised him.

A storm cloud had visibly descended over the King in the North ever since his night with their Queen. Tyrion watched as Jon gripped the flask so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

“What will she think of me?” Jon had asked him.

“Sansa is a pragmatic woman,” Tyrion assured him, “she will understand your choice to swear fealty and bend the knee. You did your duty, Jon Snow.”

Jon shook his head, despairingly, but said no more...

Sansa stood tall in the courtyard, her sister by her side. Gone was the frightened child, his fleeting
little wife. Sansa held herself with all the grace the gods bestow upon a queen.

Tyrion cannot read this mask of hers. It seems that Jon can though. He looks shattered when Sansa looks coldly at his proffered hand, and refuses him....

They’re preparing to leave, preparing to fight against a stacked deck, a loaded dice. There is no triumph in this departure, only bitter determination and resignation. Tyrion watches as Sansa’s icy veneer shatters under the weight of understanding.

He sees Jon bend to kiss her hand. She pulls him closer, handing over something, and whispering in his ear. They stand together for a moment before parting. He walks to Daenerys, but his eyes aren’t on their queen...

“Hopefully he will think of me before attempting something foolish,” Sansa said. She speaks in the steadfast, efficient tone Tyrion has come to expect from her, but underneath it, something is trembling and fragile, “otherwise, I’ll be no help to him, a thousand miles away in King’s Landing...”

Tyrion asks Jon what he sees in his future. Whatever he thinks of makes his shoulders pull back, steadies his hands, quiets his panic. Tyrion wonders what he sees at the end of the game, what can make a man that sure....

“Perhaps not,” said Tyrion considering, “perhaps not. I will see that these letters find their recipients. On my word.”

Jon nodded sharply. “You have my thanks.”

“What do you wish me to say when I deliver the last letter?” asked Tyrion quietly.

Jon’s fingers curled around the lantern. He smiles slightly. “Tell her I’m counting the days. Every single one.”

Years, thought Tyrion feeling strangely sentimental. Not days, years.

But instead, he only said, “of course.”

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“I’ve left the designs with Yarwyck,” said Tyrion, patting his pockets in an effort to remember everything, “if you can, have someone send word of the gardens. I would like be updated on their progress.”

“It will be done,” said Bejen stoically. His steadiness reassured Tyrion, and he sat back on his saddle.

“Well it’s been a pleasure, gentlemen,” said Tyrion with a grin, looking at the small crowd that gathered to see him off, “the company of course, I can’t say the same for the setting.”

“You’ll remember us in the capital,” said Lord Mormont. There was no question in his statement.

“I will,” said Tyrion, “I will not forget what I have seen here.”

“Give my love to everyone,” said Jon staring up at Tyrion. His hand rested on Ghost’s head, stilling the anxious beast.

Tyrion inclined his head towards Jon, his hand drifting to his breast where the letters lay hidden
between the folds in the cloth.

“Ready Lannister?” Yoren called pulling at the reins of his horse. Three brothers sat astride their horses beside him, waiting, “it’s a long ride to King’s Landing.”

There were shouts and cheers as Yoren and the men rode through the gate. Tyrion followed behind them, turning once more to lift his hand.

He took a last look at the Wall, and then turned his attention to the road ahead.
**Ivory Silks**

A gift for you, little dove. A noble beauty such as yours destines you for the finest things money can buy.

Thank you, your grace. I am honored.

You can repay me by donning it while you stand on my son’s arm. You reflect Joffrey now, don’t ever forget that.

Yes, your grace. I won’t forget.

Cersei’s words whispered in her ear as Sansa ran her fingers lightly over the ivory silk gown laid out on her bed. Such a southern fancy, to make something so insubstantial and fleeting.

Silk tells you I shall never feel cold. I shall never break a sweat, and ruin the delicate fabric. I shall never tread on uneven ground that could leave my train in tatters.

Ivory tells you I have more dresses waiting if a drop of wine was to spill in my lap. If the hem of my dress ever brushes the dirt, it is of no concern to me. My dresses will never grow dingy. I have far too many.

She held her tongue, standing with her arms held aloft as her lady’s maids moved around her, dressing her with the same attention to perfection that Sansa was sure Cersei and Myrcella were receiving somewhere in Maegor’s Holdfast.

“So pretty!” giggled one of the maids, straightening the silk flowers that trailed down her bodice, “the prince will be so pleased when he sees you.”

“He will won’t he?” asked Sansa lightly, “I’m so glad.”

Her words dripped like jewels falling from her lips. These women would tear her to pieces if only to catch a ruby or a sapphire.

“What of your hair, my lady? Perhaps you can wear it like the Queen.”

“No,” said Sansa firmly, brushing the maids’ hands away from her hair, “leave it in the braid. It is how I like to wear it.”

They tutted, looking dismissively at the simple style, but did not push her. She was pronounced ready, and led down the spiraling stairs to meet the waiting litters.

She had asked to ride ahead to the tourney grounds with her father, Arya, and Brienne, but had been told that the Queen requested that she join them for the day.

She resisted the urge to cover herself, as she stepped forward to greet Joffrey. His beady eyes ran over her dress, and he smiled.

Cersei smiled approvingly at her as well. Her long hair was intricately piled on top of her head, with two long golden ropes framing her face. Her dress was a thick red brocade that flared out at her hips. She looked every inch a queen.

*You almost sound as if you admire her.*
I learned a great deal from her.

“You look lovely, my lady,” Joffrey told her, reaching out to take her arm.

“Thank you, my prince,” said Sansa, “your mother gifted this gown to me. The silk is so beautiful.”

“My mother’s family is very wealthy,” said Joffrey waving a hand carelessly, “my queen shall have whatever her heart desires.”

His face is turning purple. He can’t breath, he’s choking. There’s blood dripping from his nose and Cersei is screaming his name.

Sansa smiled up at him, knowing that he could not read her eyes.

Joffrey clambered onto the palanquin, took his seat, and turned to look at her expectantly. Sansa hesitated, gathering up the folds of her dress in her hand.

Before she attempted to step up, the Hound was there, silently holding out a hand.

She took it with a grateful smile, and allowed him to help her in.

“Thank you, Ser Clegane,” she said, smoothing her dress down as she sat.

He said nothing, merely turned to stand at Joffrey’s side.

“Yes, yes, that’s a good dog,” said Joffrey, impatiently, “look, my lady, my breastplate is plated with real gold…”

He chattered endlessly through the ride, necessitating only smiles and nods from Sansa when he glanced at her.

Her eyes drifted from him, looking through the fluttering golden curtains as they marched through the city. The streets were as empty as she had ever seen them. Everyone in King’s Landing waited for them at the tourney ground.

It was all he had ever seen, she thought in disgust, the world through shades of gold.

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There was trumpeting and cheering as they rode through the King’s Gate.

Her father was there to help her down this time. He looked down at her, cupping the back of her head. She reassured him with a smile. He stepped back, joining the crowd of highborn lords and ladies that decorated the stands closest to the King.

She spotted Arya and Brienne, standing with the wolves. The crowd around them gave them a wide berth.

Arya had a strange, distant on her face as Sansa stepped down from the palanquin with Joffrey beside her.

Sansa lifted her hand, waving to them, and Arya’s face seemed to settle. She and Brienne waved back.

Joffrey took her arm, leading her to the royal dais. Cersei sat down primly in her seat beside Robert, Tommen next to her. The King was laughing loudly, a drink in his hand. Joffrey took his
seat, and Sansa joined Myrcella.

Myrcella looked so pretty in a pink, satin gown with matching ribbons in her blond curls. She glowed with happiness when she saw Sansa. Sansa smiled gently back at her.

If she craned her neck, she could see the tops of her family’s heads. She was scanning the faces around him, when her breath caught.

He was looking at her with his green-grey eyes, and smiling in that way she knew so well. The same smile that haunted her dreams.

She couldn’t look away. A coldness swept through her, and she couldn’t breath. She was frozen.

“Sansa?” Myrcella’s voice cut through the rushing in her ears. Sansa looked sharply at the girl, but softened at the alarmed look in Myrcella's wide eyes.

“Are you alright?” Myrcella whispered, “you’ve gone so pale.”

“I’m quite well,” Sansa responded softly, “a little nervous perhaps. I’ve never seen a tourney before.”

“I love seeing the knights in their shining armor,” gushed Myrcella, “it’s so terribly exciting. But I hate when they fall down and get hurt. It seems so pointless then.”

“Can I tell you a secret, Princess?” asked Sansa.

Myrcella nodded, her eyes bright.

Sansa bent close to her so that no one else could hear. “Men love pointless things,” she whispered, “that’s why we must be so reasonable.”

Myrcella giggled in delight, and Sansa couldn’t help but join her.

Her giggle died in her throat as the Knights took the field, led by the Kingsguard. Six white cloaks fluttered in the breeze, not seven.

“Did you hear?” Myrcella said so softly that Joffrey could not hear, “one of the Kingsguard is missing. Ser Meryn. Father was in a terrible rage when he did not show up for duty.”

“I did not,” murmured Sansa, staring fixedly at the knights thundering past, “how terrible.”

Myrcella swallowed, toyng with the end of her hair. “I hope he stays away,” she breathed, “I don’t like when he watches us. He scares me.”

Sansa turned at her words. Myrcella stared at the ground, kicking her feet, clad in tiny pink satin slippers. A wave of tenderness rolled over her, and the knowledge of Meryn’s suffering simmered under Sansa’s skin.

Reaching over, Sansa took Myrcella’s hand in her own, and squeezed it. “A blessing he is gone then,” Sansa told her intently, “you no longer have to be frightened.”

She was rewarded with Myrcella’s lovely smile.

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The day was hot, dusty, and long. Men and horses clashed over and over before their eyes. Sansa’s
ears rung with the constant sound of lances striking armor.

She watched Renly and Loras keenly as they rode. They were adored by the crowd. The Hound knocked Renly so hard from his horse, that the golden antlers on his helm snapped, flying off into the dirt. Laughing, Renly handed the broken piece to the Hound who looked at it with derision, and threw it into the crowd of smallfolk.

Loras rode as well as she remembered. He was true to his word, not one rose touched the dirt as he took down knight after knight.

Myrcella screamed when Beric Dondarrion’s horse was killed by an inept hedge knight directly in front of the dais. Sansa didn’t flinch, even when the blood splattered at her feet.

“You have a strong constitution, my lady,” Joffrey told her, looking at her in fascination.

Sansa attempted a smile that turned into a grimace. She could feel Cersei’s eyes on her.

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Finally, there were four still standing. Loras, Jaime, the Hound, and the Mountain.

Every time the Mountain had rode, Sansa held her breath, but there was no death that day.

Robert stood, announcing that the last three matches would happen on the morrow. The squires rushed down to lead away the horses so that the field could be cleared.

Joffrey offered his arm, and Sansa took it, looking around for her family as the lords and ladies began walking towards the feast. Myrcella skipped to Sansa’s side, and grabbed her other hand.

“Do not bother Lady Sansa,” Joffrey snapped at his sister, “run off and find mother.”

Myrcella’s face fell. Sansa pulled away from Joffrey, and reached out to straighten the bow in Myrcella’s hair. “Why don’t you check on Tommen,” Sansa told her gently, “I’ll see you later at the feast.”

Myrcella peeked up at her, and nodded before running off to where Cersei and Tommen stood. Sansa stood up, and retook Joffrey’s arm.

Joffrey scowled. “You needn’t be nice to her,” he informed Sansa, “she needs to learn manners.”

“Of course, my prince,” said Sansa, “I know how sisters can be.”

Joffrey made a face at her statement. “I don’t know how you stand your sister, my lady.”

“We’re very different,” said Sansa with a tight smile, “my sister and I. But we will always love one another.”

“When I’m king, I shan’t put up with people who bother me,” Joffrey told her. His mouth was cruel. “I’ll get rid of them.”

“As is your right, my prince,” murmured Sansa.

He released her arm, distracted by a motley fool’s performance.

“I shall find my own way then,” she said out loud. Joffrey didn’t notice when she left.
Sansa weaved through the crowd looking for familiar faces. She crouched down, hoping to catch a glimpse of Lady’s tail or Nymeria’s paws.

She stood up, defeated, and jerked away when she felt hands on arms, steadying her. Littlefinger pulled away from her immediately when she caught sight of his face and flinched. Looking at him made her feel dizzy. In shock, she realized that he was taller than she. His shining mockingbird pin gleamed at her eye level.

“Forgive me, sweet child,” Littlefinger said to her with his sly smile, “I did not mean to frighten you.”

“Startled,” Sansa forced out, “you startled me, my lord. I’m not frightened.”

“Of course, my lady,” he said looking at her intently, “you must be one of her daughters. You have the Tully look.”

“I’ve not had the pleasure, my lord,” Sansa said stiffly.

“Lord Petyr Baelish,” he said bowing before her, “at your service.”

“Sansa Stark.”

“Sansa,” said Littlefinger slowly, “a lovely name.”

Sansa longed to snatch her name back, to go back and pluck it from the air so that it never reached his ears.

“I knew your mother when I was a boy,” he continued, “Catelyn Tully is an amazing woman.”

“Stark,” said Sansa, “my mother has not been Catelyn Tully in many years.”

“Oh yes,” he rasped, “how presumptuous of me, my lady. It is easy to forget, how many years it has been.”

With a deep breath, Sansa steadied herself. She looked up at him. “Did you enjoy the tourney, Lord Baelish?”

“I did,” said Littlefinger, stroking his chin, “a good clean day of sport does wonders to invigorate a city. Pity it costs so much.”

“You’re King Robert’s Master of Coin,” said Sansa.

“You’re a smart girl, Lady Sansa,” said Littlefinger, “one should always make a point of knowing those around them. Did your father mention me to you?”

“In passing,” said Sansa, “I’ve tried to acclimate myself to court life, Lord Baelish. The capital is so different from Winterfell.”

“And it may be your court one day,” said Littlefinger softly, “I hear the prince is quite fond of you.”

“If the gods will it,” said Sansa demurely, “than so it shall be.”
Sansa recognized the pleased smile he gave her then. It was the one that meant she had said something that impressed him, something clever.

Pushing down the hard knot in her throat, Sansa returned his smile with one of her own. A smile that would do Alayne Stone proud. A smile that spoke of supplication and subordination.

“You shouldn’t be wandering around here alone,” Littlefinger said, offering his arm, “it would be my honor to escort you.”

She took it, clenching her teeth together momentarily so hard she thought they might crack. But she kept her hand on his arm soft and relaxed.

“If you would be so kind to help me find my family,” said Sansa, “then I would not trouble you any longer.”

“No trouble at all, my lady,” said Littlefinger, “it is my pleasure to serve a daughter of House Tully. How does your mother fare? She never did like the cold…”

Sansa responded politely to him as they walked. The place where his hand lay over hers sent shivers up her arm.

Finally, she spotted her father's dark hair.

“There,” said Sansa, pointing in relief, “I see my father.”

Barely had she spoken, when Lady came racing through the crowd, teeth bared.

Littlefinger released her arm in surprise, and stumbled back. Lady wrapped herself around Sansa’s legs, her chest rumbling.

Sansa felt strong at once. She bent down and kissed Lady’s ear, before looking up at Littlefinger who watched her and the wolf warily.

“Forgive me, my lord,” said Sansa sweetly, “Lady is nervous to see me with a stranger.”

“I see,” said Littlefinger recovering himself. He smiled crookedly, “I hope that you and I will not stay strangers for long, Lady Sansa.”

Sansa smiled, but did not respond.

“Lord Baelish.” Ned’s loud voice parted the crowd, and he stepped forward. Sansa went to him immediately, and her father pulled her against his chest.

“Lord Stark,” said Littlefinger easily, “I had the pleasure of meeting your daughter. She is a lovely girl.”

Ned looked down at Sansa. “Lord Baelish was kind enough to escort me through the crowd,” Sansa explained, digging her fingers into her father’s arm.

Ned nodded. “Thank you, Lord Baelish,” he said gruffly, “nothing is more important to me than the safety of my daughters.”

Littlefinger bowed slightly. “I’m glad to have found you, Lord Stark,” he said, “there is a matter I’ve been meaning to discuss with you.”

Ned hesitated, looking down at Sansa.
“Do not worry,” Littlefinger assured him, “what I have to say will not burn your daughter’s ears. I bear good news, in fact. I have secured the gold you asked for, Lord Stark.”

“For the gardens,” breathed Sansa in fierce delight.

“Yes, my lady,” said Littlefinger, arching an eyebrow, “for your gardens.”

Sansa smiled at him. “I do love lemons, my lord. It will be so lovely to have more lemon trees growing in the North.”

“And you shall have them, my lady,” said Littlefinger, staring at her.

“Thank you for your work on this matter, Lord Baelish,” said Ned, drawing the man’s attention from Sansa, “the North is indebted to you.”

“The North is indebted to the Lannisters,” said Littlefinger chuckling, “it is Tywin’s gold that shall be sent North. Not that he knows it, of course. It was easy enough to give him a higher figure for the tourney than strictly necessary.”


Littlefinger waved away his concern. “Tywin has more money than the gods,” said Littlefinger, his voice slick, “he will not miss it, and even if he did, it would not concern him. I am the Master of Coin, Lord Stark. As is per my position, I have found you your gold.”

Sansa felt her father inhale to speak, and jumped in. “Thank you, Lord Baelish,” she said, “it will be a great help to us.”

“Yes,” Ned agreed reluctantly, “it will.”

“I am, as always, in your service,” said Littlefinger, bowing once more to them. His eyes lingered for a moment on Sansa’s face, before he turned and walked away.

Sansa watched him vanish into the festivities. The same feeling that had crawled up her throat this morning when Myrcella mentioned Meryn Trant rose to the surface.

And after we have the money? What use will Littlefinger be to us then?

Not very much at all.
The tourney grounds were empty yet, as Ned crossed over the bridge, and walked between the tents. The games would resume later, but Robert was already here somewhere. Ned wondered if he’d slept at all, or just passed out on the table.

He and Brienne had taken the girls back long after the moon had risen, but Robert had stayed, feasting and drinking into the night.

Ned spotted Barristan Selmy standing guard outside a lavish golden tent, and hurried over.

“Lord Stark,” Ser Barristan greeted him, “are you looking for the King?”

“I am,” said Ned with a weak smile, “how is he?”

“The King is in fine spirits today,” Ser Barristan responded, inclining his head towards the tent, “He’s decided to join the fighting.”

Ned sighed, shaking his head. “That is why I have come, Ser Barristan. I heard the Queen forbade him from participating in the melee last night. I don’t care about his pride, it cannot happen.”

“Robert tends to do what he wants,” said Ser Barristan grimly.

“I am all too aware,” said Ned, “has anyone tried to dissuade him yet?”

“You are the only one here he might listen to,” said Ser Barristan, “I have given up on trying.”

And although Ned had watched Ser Barristan unhorse two younger opponents the day before, the commander suddenly looked more than his age, frail and tired.

“Thank you, Ser Barristan,” said Ned putting a hand on his shoulder, “I will see what I can do.”

Inside the tent, a young squire was trying and failing to dress Robert in his armor. Robert looked terrible, his eyes bloodshot in his red face. The boy seemed on the verge of panic, a fact that only served to make Robert angrier.

“It’s made too small, your grace,” the boy whimpered. Robert swore loudly, and his gleaming breastplate slipped through the squire’s hands, and crashed to the ground.

“Seven hells!” Robert bellowed at him, “Do I have to do it myself? Pick it up! Don’t just stand there, Lancel!”

Lancel scrambled on the ground to fetch the armor.

“Do you see this?” Robb grunted to Ned, “I’m surrounded by fools. This one can’t even put a man’s armor on properly! You’re the son of a whore with a fat arse, boy! Did you know that?”
Ned stared at him, sweating and shaking from fury. *Petty doesn’t suit you, Robert.*

*Or does it?* For half a second Ned could have sworn he heard Lyanna whispering in his ear. A chill raised the hair on his arms, and he smelled winter roses.

*“Robert is a good man, and he’ll make you a fine husband.”*

Lyanna bristled with defiance. *“I’ve heard all about Robert Baratheon,” she told Ned, “I know exactly what kind of man he is.”*

*“He’s not -”* Ned began awkwardly, *“he’s my friend. When you meet him, you’ll see. He’ll love you with all his heart.”*

*His sister looked at him, disappointed and angry. “Love is sweet, dearest Ned,” she said bitterly, “but it cannot change a man’s nature.”*

*“Worthless boy,”* Robert snarled, *“I ought to -”*

*“The boy’s not at fault,”* Ned interrupted him, *“you’re too fat for your armor.”*

Robert gaped at him. Ned felt an uneasy fear that only broke when Robert tossed his head back and laughed.

*“Fat?”* chortled Robert, *“Fat is it? Is that how you speak to your king?”*

Ned forced himself to chuckle.

*“That was funny was it?”* snapped Robert, shedding his humor immediately upon catching Lancel grinning.

*“No, your grace,”* murmured Lancel. The smile on his face dropped like it had been shot.

*“No,”* asked Robert dangerously, *“you don’t like the Hand’s joke?”*

Lancel mumbled something, looking at the dirt.

*“You’re torturing the poor boy,”* Ned said lightly.

Robert grinned at him, before turning back to Lancel. *“You heard the Hand,”* he said, *“the King’s too fat for his armor. Go find the breastplate stretcher, now!”*

Lancel fled, tripping over his feet in his effort to leave quickly.

*“Breastplate stretcher?”* asked Ned.

*“How long before he figures it out?”* snorted Robert.

*“Perhaps you should have one invented,”* suggested Ned.

Robert scowled at him. *“All right, all right. But you watch me out there, Ned. I still know how to point a sword.”*

*“I do not doubt it,”* said Ned pragmatically, *“but you have no business fighting. Leave that for the younger men.”*

*“Because I’m king?”* growled Robert, *“Piss on that. I want to hit somebody!”*
“And who’s going to hit you back, your grace?” Ned ground back, “there’s not a man in the Seven Kingdoms that would risk hurting you.”

Robert stopped in surprise. “Are you telling me those cowards would let me win?”

“I am,” Ned confirmed.

Robert sat down heavily, clutching his drink, and looked despairingly at his breastplate still lying on the ground.

“Drink, Ned,” the King said thrusting his beer at him.

“I’m not thirsty,” said Ned quietly.


“Your squire, he is a Lannister boy?” Ned asked delicately.

“Cersei insisted,” grunted Robert, “and how can I refuse her? I have Jon Arryn to thank for her. He convinced me what a good match she’d make, how essential it was to bind Tywin to my reign. I thought being king meant I could do whatever I wanted! How wrong I was.”

“We were just boys,” said Ned quietly, “how could we have known?”

“Ah damn you, Ned,” the King sighed, getting unsteadily to his feet, “enough of this. Let’s go watch them ride. At least I can smell someone else’s blood.”

He made to exit the tent, but Ned stopped him. “Robert?”

“What?” The King followed Ned’s eyes to where his shirt hung open, exposing his stomach. He roared in amusement, “Oh, an inspiring sight for the people, eh? Come! Bow before your King! Bow you shits!”

Ned helped him into a tunic, and picked up the breastplate, laying it on the table. It glinted back at Ned, taunting him with memories.

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Arya’s fingers twitched at her empty hip. There were too many people around her, too many people to track. She squirmed between Ned and Brienne, pillars on either side of her. If she leaned back, she could just see the red of Sansa’s hair fluttering in the breeze.

The jousts didn’t interest her. She closed her eyes, and visualized the layout of the stands. Ned and Brienne beside her. Sansa, farther to the right and up.

Renly, Loras, Robert, and the Hound hung on the periphery of her senses. They were a dull flicker, not bright enough to capture her full attention.

Directly behind her was Littlefinger, whose nearness made the hairs on the back of her neck prickle. She was keenly aware of his movements, her attention to him was matched only by her awareness of Joffrey up on the dais.

“A hundred gold dragons on the Kingslayer!” She adjusted Littlefinger’s position in her head.

“Done! The Hound has a hungry look about him this morning!” Renly was slightly behind and to
“Even hungry dogs know better than to bite the hand that feeds them.” Up and over. Arya knew the exact angle it would to take his life. She would not even have to turn around.

She blinked in time to see the Hound send Jaime Lannister flying into the dirt. Arya watched Brienne’s eyes follow the Kingslayer as he stumbled across the field pulling at his dented golden helmet. Brienne’s mouth became thinner and tighter whenever she saw him.

When the dust had settled, the Mountain appeared atop his great black stallion. He was heavily armored from head to toe, a weight that would have surely crushed a smaller man. *He just needs to fall,* thought Arya, examining him. *If he falls, it would all be over.*

At the other end of the track came Loras Tyrell, riding a grey mare with a lightly dappled coat. The gems in his silver armor gleamed in complement to cape of flowers that trailed down his back.

He looked over into the crowd, grinning. His eyes fell above Arya. *Renly,* she noted absently.

As Loras rode his mare past the King’s dais, the Mountain’s steed went wild, bucking and pawing at the ground. The Mountain yanked the reins hard, choking the animal. With difficulty, he made his way to the starting line, kicking the animal in the side viciously.

Loras waved to the crowd, and squeezed his mare so that she tripped lightly sideways, and back again like a dancer.

Arya felt the excitement and tension sizzle through the crowded stands, and it made her sit up straighter.

The trumpet sounded, and both horses surged forward. Arya could see at once, that the Mountain was going to lose. He could not hold his horse, his shield, his lance, and his balance all at once. Meanwhile, Loras’ mare glided along the ground almost like she was flying. The Knight of Flowers gripped his shield loosely, his weapon sure and steady.

They collided. The Mountain had aimed so wildly at the young knight, that the point of his lance had slid harmlessly across Loras’ armor, and knocked Lora’s shield from his hand. But Loras’ lance held true, and the Mountain fell, taking his great stallion with him. Arya swore she could feel the impact of his fall in the ground under her feet.

Loras’ lance had not even splintered. He waved it joyously to the adoring crowd. They screamed, ecstatic for his victory. He danced his mare back and forth in front of the stands.

Arya felt Brienne and her father stiffen beside her. They paid no attention to Loras who was busy basking in his triumph. They only had eyes for the Mountain.

The Mountain stumbled to his feet, untangling himself from his horse with his fists, drawing screams from the animal. He ripped the helm from his head, throwing it to the ground with a roar. His words were so garbled, they were unintelligible to Arya’s ears, but his squire understood, running to give him his sword.

With one swift strike, the terrified stallion’s head was split from its neck. Thick, black blood gushed out over the field. The cheers of the crowd turned to screams of terror.

Loras seemed to have forgotten about his fallen foe. He was only beginning to turn around, still laughing, as the Mountain charged towards him, bloody sword in hand.
And then, Arya’s carefully constructed grasp of her surroundings shattered into chaos.

Brienne leapt from her place by Arya, pulling her sword from its sheath as she did. She was over the barrier in an instant, running towards Loras.

The Mountain reached him first, swinging wildly at the mare and nicking her neck with his steel. She panicked, bucking and dumping Loras into the dirt, his legs caught in the reins.

Loras fought to free himself, but the Mountain was already there. He brought down his blade, just as Brienne intercepted him. His sword slammed into Brienne’s with such a force, Arya thought it would shatter.

Arya flew to her feet. Ned shouted and lunged for her, but her sleeve slipped his grasp. She was off, slipping under the rope that separated the stands from the field, and heading towards the fight.

Brienne’s sudden appearance seemed to have stunned the Mountain, but not for long. Loras was shouting, trying to separate himself from frightened mare. He untangled himself, and clambered through the dirt.

Arya kept Brienne in her sights. The Maid of Tarth blocked every blow the Mountain dealt her, but she was fighting defensively, falling back step after step, keeping herself between him and Loras.

Sansa’s scream pierced the roar of the crowd. “Save them!” Distantly, Arya realized that Sansa’s words weren’t intended for her.

The Mountain, distracted by Loras, was off-balance with rage. He kept aiming for the Knight of Flowers, but Brienne parried his every strike.

Arya was reaching down to seize the dagger she had hidden against her thigh, when suddenly she was caught by the back of her tunic, and thrown backwards so hard it forced the breath from her lungs. Her head smacked the ground, and her vision swam.

Blearily, she saw the Hound striding towards his brother, sword in hand. Her fury propelled her upwards, to her feet, but she was dragged back.

Sansa was there, wrapping her arms tightly around Arya, and pulling them both down into the mud. Arya thrashed and cursed, but Sansa pinned her with her knees.

Then their father was behind them, wrapping his arms around both of them, and holding them securely. Arya gasped, her breaths coming short and fast.

Brienne shoved the Mountain aside, bellowing at him. Her face was twisted with anger and exertion. He swung his sword wildly, aiming for her unprotected face.

“Leave them be,” roared the Hound surging forward to meet his brother’s sword. He stepped in front of Brienne and Loras, forcing his brother back.

They fought fiercely, surrounded by screaming chaos of panicking smallfolk and nobles alike. Brienne was dragging Loras to his feet, and off the field, her sword held tightly in her other hand.

It wasn’t until Brienne and Loras were under the rope, away from the field, that Arya relaxed. She went boneless against her father’s chest, still gasping for air.

Sansa was sobbing above her. Time seemed to slow around them, as Arya stared, stunned by her sister’s tears. She could not remember the last time she had seen Sansa cry like that.
“Stop this madness in the name of your King,” the King’s voice thundered through turmoil. His words seemed to shake the very ground they stood on.

The Hound dropped to his knee immediately upon hearing Robert. His sword sank deep into the earth. The Mountain’s sword cut the air above him, a strike that just seconds before would have cleaved the Hound’s head from his body.

Jaime Lannister and Barristan Selmy spilled out onto the field, swords in hand. They were followed by the rest of the Kingsguard and several gold cloaks. They surrounded the Mountain, who still stood clutching his sword, defiantly.

For one breathless second, Arya was sure he’d fight. But he was outmatched. Cursing, the Mountain stomped over to the carcass of his stallion, and plunged the sword deep into its belly before raging off the field.

“Let him go!” bellowed Robert.

The Hound was still bowed over his sword, but Arya could see he was breathing heavily.

Brienne appeared beside them, and helped Ned pull them to their feet. Sansa seized Brienne’s arm, the tears still running thick and fast down her pale face. Her beautiful silk dress was covered in dirt. Arya stared at them, hanging limply in Ned’s arms.

Ser Loras strode back on the field, his fine silver armor, and blond curls caked with dirt. “I owe you both my life,” he said looking between Brienne and the Hound, “my lady. Ser.”

Brienne nodded, but the Hound only glowered and spit, “I’m no Ser.”

Loras shook his head, laughing at the Hound’s insolence. He stepped forward, and grabbed the Hound’s left hand raising it up.

“The day is yours!” Loras shouted, and the crowd roared their approval.

“It’s alright, it’s alright, loves.” Her father’s voice was soft against the commotion, but Arya heard him nonetheless.

“Brienne are you hurt?” Sansa demanded, gripping the knight’s arm tightly.

“No, my lady,” Brienne assured them. She was still tense from battle, sweat dripping from her temples. Sansa dug a handkerchief from her dress with trembling fingers and handed it to her.

“Thank you,” said Brienne gently, “but I think you might need it more.”

Sansa shook her head, scrubbing at her tears with her fists. Brienne relented, and wiped her face gratefully.

“I’m taking you back to the tower,” said Ned his voice rough with emotion, “both of you.”

“What of the King?” whispered Sansa, “and Joffrey?”

Ned glanced over to where the King was clapping the Hound on the back, and shouting something. “I’ll give him my apologies later,” Ned said gruffly.

He set Arya down on her trembling legs, and took her hand. His grip was tight, but she didn’t complain. Arya wondered if he was trying to comfort her, or if he was trying to prevent her from leaving his side.
“Brienne of Tarth.”

Brienne stiffened, turning only slightly to acknowledge Jaime Lannister.

“Ser,” she greeted.

“Ser Arys,” said Jaime, still looking at Brienne, but speaking to the Kingsguard stationed beside her, “why don’t you take a walk?”

Ser Arys frowned. “I’m meant to be guarding the Princess Myrcella,” he objected, “she’s inside taking lessons from her Septa.”

“Do you think me a fool, Ser Arys?” asked Jaime pleasantly with an edge of iron, “clearly, I mean to take your post. Or I am incapable of protecting my own niece?”

The affronted man didn’t respond, but stormed away, white cloak flapping around his ankles. Jaime took the vacated spot next to Brienne, and settled in staring straight ahead.

Brienne glanced at him. He was smiling slightly.

“Your charges are inside, I assume?” Jaime asked her suddenly.

“One of them,” said Brienne tightly, “Arya is with her father. Sansa has been taking lessons with the Princess quite regularly.”

“Ah,” said Jaime, nodding, “how lovely.”

He fell silent again.

“Did you want something, Ser Jaime?” Brienne demanded after the silence became unbearable, “Or have you come just to be a nuisance to me?”

“Do I bother you that much?” asked Jaime wryly, “I did not think you were so affected.”

He sounded so familiar, that she turned fully to look at him. It was his eyes that stopped her. They were blank. He was only amused by her, nothing more.

He seemed startled by whatever look she gave him, raising both of his eyebrows high in question.

“You are mistaken,” she told him severely, “you merely remind me of someone I used to know.”

He seemed intrigued, leaning forward. “What of this man?” he asked, “I’ve always believed I was incomparable to other men.”

“You do not compare to him,” she said flatly.

“Did you love him?”

Brienne paused, resentment simmering under her skin.

“Well?”

“I did,” she said shortly, “in a way.”

“In a way?” Jaime laughed. “It does not sound as if you were very good to this man.”
“We were good for each other,” said Brienne slowly, “we respected each other, as warriors. I like to think we helped each other become better people.”

“Clearly a romance that will be sung about for eons,” said Jaime dryly.

“And what do you know of romance, Kingslayer?” Brienne spit venomously.

Jaime parted his lips slightly, showing his teeth. “Not very much, I’m afraid,” he said, green eyes gleaming.

“Then you have no right to judge mine,” said Brienne, turning back to face the other side of the corridor.

It was quiet for minutes. She listened to his steady breathing. It seemed to echo in the hall.

“What possessed you?” He asked softly, “to fight the Mountain?”

“As a knight,” she replied, “it is my duty to protect those who cannot fight for themselves. Ser Loras was unarmed, and without a shield. He would have surely been killed.”

“How noble of you,” murmured Jaime, looking at her slyly, “but surely something more than honor compelled you to move that fast.”

Brienne hesitated. “I know Ser Loras,” she said, “he is Lord Renly’s squire.”

“He is,” agreed Jaime, “and so I must assume you know Lord Renly as well.”

“He came visiting when I was a girl,” said Brienne lowering her eyes, “he was very kind to me. I will try to repay that kindness in anyway I can.”

Jaime seemed to consider this. “Lord Renly - was he the one you spoke of?”

“No,” growled Brienne, becoming stoic again, “he is not.”

“A relief for the both of us then,” japed Jaime. He chuckled when she looked at him darkly.

“Why did you not come to Ser Loras’ defense, Ser Jaime?” Brienne asked irritably.

“My job is to protect the King and his family,” said Jaime shrugging, “Ser Loras is neither of those things. And I do try to stay on Ser Gregor’s good side. Advice I would offer you if it wasn’t already too late.”

“That man is a menace,” said Brienne angrily.

“And yet a useful one to have on your side,” said Jaime, “which is why I imagine the King will not punish him for that little display. Ser Gregor is a nearly unstoppable opponent.”

“No man is immune to a sword, Ser Jaime,” said Brienne coolly, “a fact you should know well.”

“Oh, I do,” murmured Jaime, “I know it all too well. You might have taken Ser Gregor down, but you would have killed yourself in the process.”

“It was rash,” said Brienne, “but necessary. A man’s life was spared because of my actions.”

“Are you sure you were born on Tarth?” Jaime asked, “you speak as if Northern blood runs through your veins.”
“The Starks have been very good to me,” said Brienne, softening, “I admire them very much.”

“They seem to have a fondness for you as well,” agreed Jaime, “I am quite sure the little one would have taken on the Mountain herself if the Hound hadn’t caught her in time. And the eldest was in tears over your condition.”

“I love those girls,” said Brienne with a touch of pride, “I will guard them with my life for as long as I live.”

“May the gods grant you quite a long time, Brienne of Tarth,” said Jaime looking over at her. He settled back against the wall, and went silent.

Brienne was careful to avoid his eyes.

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Sansa paused in her embroidering, smoothed out the handkerchief in her lap, and examined her careful stitches.

In the corner, Myrcella’s septa was fast asleep in her chair, snoring loudly.

Her moon was just the tiniest bit crooked, Sansa realized with a frown. It made the whole thing look off-balance.

“I think it’s beautiful,” said Myrcella, peeking over, “what is it?”

“Two yellow suns on a rose field,” Sansa said tapping the cloth, “and two crescent moons on a blue field. It’s the sigil of House Tarth.”

“For your sworn shield?” asked Myrcella.

Sansa nodded with a smile. “I realized all her handkerchiefs were plain. That simply won’t do.”

“She fought the Mountain,” Myrcella whispered, as if it was a secret, “I’ve never seen a woman fight any man. And she fought him.”

“She is very a capable warrior,” Sansa agreed, “and very brave.”

“You’re very brave too,” said Myrcella looking up at Sansa admiringly, “you ran out on the field to save your sister.”

“She is my sister,” said Sansa firmly, “I will always protect her.”

Myrcella glanced over at her sleeping septa. “I always wanted a sister,” she said wistfully, “It’s so lonely here. I have Tommen of course, but he doesn’t like to embroider or garden or play dolls.”

“Arya never liked to do those things either,” Sansa told her, “but I played with the steward’s daughter and the Master-at-Arms’ daughter.”

“Mother says Princesses don’t associate with servants,” said Myrcella twisting her fingers in her lap. She hesitated for a moment. “Sansa,” she said, looking down, “Mother says you’re going to marry Joffrey.”

“The King has asked for our betrothal, yes,” said Sansa slowly, “my father has not given him an answer yet.”
“You would be queen, and we could be true sisters,” said Myrcella her eyes lighting up.

“We could be,” said Sansa softly.

“But you would have to marry Joffrey,” Myrcella said, a troubled expression coming over her sweet face.

“I would,” said Sansa studying her closely.

Myrcella tugged at the ends of her ribbons, unraveling them one by one.

“You can’t - ” she said quickly, words tumbling out, “you can’t let Joffrey hurt you.”

Sansa had to bend close to hear her terrified mumble. She put quickly put a hand on Myrcella’s trembling back, and checked to make sure the Septa slept soundly.

“Myrcella,” she said, her voice low and grieved, “has Joffrey hurt you?”

Myrcella shook her head violently. “Don’t tell him,” she cried, “I didn’t mean to say it.”

“Shh, shh,” Sansa murmured, taking Myrcella’s hands in hers, “I would never tell Joffrey, Myrcella, I promise you that.”

Myrcella’s lower lip trembled. “Mother doesn’t leave us with Joffrey anymore,” she explained tearfully.

Sansa nodded, dabbing Myrcella’s tears gently. “So you don’t see him very often,” asked Sansa quietly.

Myrcella nodded, “I don’t want to see him.” She shuddered, tears dripping down her face.

“Myrcella, listen to me,” said Sansa firmly, “it was a very brave thing you did, telling me this. You trusted me, and you can keep trusting me. I don’t want you to worry about your Mother or about Joffrey finding out. I will not tell them.”

“But Joffrey will know,” Myrcella whimpered, “he’ll know because you won’t want to marry him anymore. All because I told you.”

Sansa felt Myrcella’s fear reflected in her, rooted deep in her belly. It was an old fear, but under the weight of Myrcella’s tears it reared its lion’s head.

She’s terrified, Grandmother. Just look at her.

Speak freely, child. We would never betray your confidence, I swear it.

He’s a monster.

Ah. That’s a pity.

Please, please don’t stop the wedding.

Have no fear, The Lord Oaf of Highgarden is determined that Margaery shall be queen.

Even so, we thank you for the truth.

“Leave Joffrey to me,” Sansa told her, fighting the tide of memories that threatened to swap her
senses, “I know how to handle him. All I need you to do is keep yourself and Tommen away from him. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes,” said Myrcella in a small voice, holding Sansa’s hand tightly.

But you won’t always be here, Sansa reminded herself, you’re going to leave her.

She needed to be taken away from this place, but Tyrion had been unshakable on the notion of Myrcella going to Dorne. It was too far away, and far too dangerous.

Cersei would never send her daughter away unless her hand was forced. There needed to be a reason for Myrcella to leave.

And then she was struck suddenly by a thought.

She’s on Joffrey’s arm as he escorts her into Winterfell’s Great Hall. Behind them, Arya and Tommen walk side by side. Tommen seems puzzled by Arya’s manner of dress, but he is a good-natured boy and he smiles as they walk in. In front of them, Robb leads Myrcella. He is dressed in Stark colors, a fine woolen outfit of white and grey. Myrcella looks like a fairy princess beside him, a fine net of jewels in her golden curls. As they walk, Myrcella smiles up at Robb, looking up at him shyly from under her lashes and blushing pink.

“Myrcella,” Sansa whispers suddenly, catching the girl’s attention, “how would you like to be sisters another way?”

Myrcella looked puzzled, her tears drying on her cheeks. “Another way?” she hiccuped.

“You remember my brother, right?” Sansa prompted her, “Robb?”

Myrcella’s mouth dropped open slightly, and her cheeks flushed.

“If you were to marry Robb,” said Sansa, the players and pieces in her head slotting together in a new arrangement, “you would be Lady of Winterfell. It would be a good idea for you to spend time in the North, getting to know Winterfell. Would you like that?”

“I could go stay there?” whispered Myrcella.

“Yes,” Sansa told her, “with my mother, Robb, Bran, Rickon.”

“Tommen could come?” asked Myrcella with desperate hope.

“Perhaps,” said Sansa thinking quickly, “he could foster there with you.”

Myrcella’s happiness dimmed slightly, and she hesitated. “I don’t think Mother would like it very much if we left.”

“Do you want to leave?” asked Sansa.

Myrcella lifted her head up. Her tears had dried, though her eyes were still red. “Yes,” she said, her voice stronger than before, “yes, I want to go.”

“Then I will speak to my father,” Sansa said, brushing Myrcella’s curls back, “and my father will speak to your father. Myrcella, you must not speak a word of this to anyone, even Tommen, do you understand?”

Myrcella nodded, her green eyes bright with hope, “I promise.”
Sansa smiled.
Brothers

Chapter Notes

Contains dialogue from “Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things,” and A Game of Thrones. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The barrack fell quiet as Jon entered with Ghost at his side.

“The Lord Commander says you’ll be in here from now on,” said Bowen Marsh with a scowl, “no use in keeping you in the King’s Tower now that the Lannister is gone.” He gestured towards an empty bed.

“Thank you,” said Jon stiffly, crossing over to the bed and dropping his bag. Ghost padded silently beside him, and leapt up onto the bed. Beside him, Grenn blanched, and jerked back.

“This lordling will be sharing your quarters, brothers,” Marsh called out, “show him hospitality.” He turned and left.

Activity slowly resumed, but Jon caught the other brothers giving him suspicious looks.

“Craven,” Pyp hissed at Grenn, crawling closer to get a look at Ghost. “You’re a fine and proper wolf aren’t you?” Pyp asked softly.

“A direwolf,” said Jon, sitting down and rubbing Ghost’s back. “He’ll grow much bigger. He wasn’t a pup so long ago. You can pet him if you like.”

He showed Pyp how to hold his hand out for Ghost to sniff, then if he allowed it, Pyp could tentatively stroke his neck. Grenn cautiously did the same.

“You’re all mad,” snorted Rast, eyeing Ghost warily, “fool thing to do, trying to tame a wolf. He’ll rip your throat out as you sleep.”

“Ghost does what I say,” Jon told him, keeping his voice light, “my throat is safe. But I thank you for your concern.”

Rast glared.

“A direwolf is the sigil of my father’s house,” Jon told Pyp and Grenn, “we found six pups south of the Wall. One for each of my father’s children.”

“You won’t find me anxious to go beyond the Wall if these things lurk about,” said Pyp, scratching Ghost’s chin, “not all of them are as tame as yours, I reckon.”

“You’re a bastard,” said Grenn frowning, “why did you get one?”

“My father always treated me very kindly,” said Jon, keeping his voice steady, “I grew up at Winterfell beside his other children.”
“But he’s sent you here,” said Pyp with a derisive snort, “to freeze alongside the rest of us.”

“My father sent me as an envoy,” Jon said evenly, “House Stark understands the importance of the Night’s Watch. It cannot be allowed to fall into disrepair.”

“Too late,” said Pyp gloomily, “this place is the seventh hell. I might have been starving before I came here, but at least I was warm.”

“I remember being warm,” Grenn said shuddering, “now it’s snowing even in my dreams. I’m cold and covered in bruises.”

“If you can sleep next to us,” said Pyp eyeing Jon, “you can fight beside us. I’d pay something to see Rast sniveling under your blade, Lord Snow.”

“I can’t cross Ser Alliser - ” Jon said stoically.

Pyp grimaced in disappointment.

“- much,” Jon finished.

Grenn and Pyp grinned.

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“Lord Snow,” drawled Alliser Thorne, “to what do we owe the pleasure of your presence?”

“Lord Commander Mormont said I should start sleeping in the barracks,” Jon said thinking quickly, “and that I should train with the rest of the recruits.”

Thorne grunted, but allowed it. Jon grabbed a training breastplate and a blunted sword along with the rest of the recruits.

“All right you lot,” Thorne said when they were equipped, “the Lord Commander has decided to send out a long-range mission to do reconnaissance on the Wildlings. Some of you may make the cut. You want to die fighting a Wildling? If not, then get your bloody swords up.”

They split off, sparring in groups.

“Leg, shoulder, leg,” Jon demonstrated for Grenn, “left foot forward. Good. Now, pivot as you deliver the stroke. Put all your weight behind it.”

“Seven hells,” said Grenn distractedly, looking past Thorne at the figure entering the courtyard, “what is that?”

Jon looked, and felt his heart jump into his throat. Sam.

“They’ll need an eight hell to fit him in,” muttered Pyp.

Samwell Tarly stood in front of them. Young as he had been when Jon had first met him, so many years ago.

“I’m here for training,” he said, looking up at them. His eyes met Jon’s, and then skittered away. But he wasn’t entirely as Jon remembered.

Jon remembered a boy who had cried and whimpered, who had readily admitted his craveness.
He was nervous, yes. Jon knew his face well enough to see that. But it wasn’t the crippling fear that had made him seem so broken before.

Was his head held the tiniest bit higher? Did he stand like a man who’d fought a war?

Sam was dressed all in black, with a fine breastplate. The pommel of a greatsword peeked out from behind his head.

Jon recognized the blade instantly.

“You took your family’s sword?”

“I wanted to study it,” Sam had admitted, “I thought it could be of use in my research.”

“You wanted to study it,” Jon said, the corners of his mouth twitching up in a smile.

“Yes,” said Sam, a bit of nervous pride creeping into his voice, “it wasn’t the only reason. My father sat there, insulting me, insulting Gilly. And I did nothing, I was frozen, Jon. I had to redeem myself.”

“I don’t blame you,” said Jon, “for staying silent. It's always the first fears, that are the hardest to overcome.”

“I know it well,” said Sam quietly, “I could not leave my father’s house again, a craven boy. I’m a man. I have a family. I faced things that he’s never seen in his darkest dreams. I wanted to make an impression.”

“By the gods you did,” said Jon staring at the gleaming Valyrian steel, “what a sight Randyll Tarly’s face must have been when he realized what you’d done.”

Sam smiled. “I wish I could have seen it.”

“Where’d you get that sword, boy?” said Thorne, staring at Sam’s back.

Sam reached back a hand protectively. “It’s my family sword, my lord,” he said.

“Toss it off,” said Thorne gruffly, “you won’t need it for the practice yard. The gods know I don’t want to be out there in the lichyard with a shovel because you brought a greatsword down on blunted steel.”

Sam removed it gingerly, placing sword and sheath to the side. His eyes darted back to it, as he picked up a practice sword.

“Tell them your name,” Thorne commanded.

“Samwell Tarly,” Sam said, his eyes flickering to Jon again, “of Horn Hill. I’ve come to take the black.”

“Come to take the black pudding,” sniggered Rast.

“Well you can’t be any worse than you look,” sighed Thorne, “see what he can do, Rast.”

Rast grinned, hitching his sword up, and starting towards Sam.

Jon’s first instinct was to step between them, but he held himself back. He waited, tense, his eyes tracking Sam’s every move. He had to be sure of what he was seeing.
Sam readied his sword, his eyes trained on the approaching threat. Rast swung hard and ungainly, aiming for Sam’s shoulder.

Sam wasn’t born to hold a sword. His true strength didn’t lay in his ability to strike a blow. But that had never stopped him from rising to the occasion.

“I’m coming with you,” Sam had told him, in the halls of Winterfell, “you’re the one to lead this fight, and I’ll be by your side when you do.”

“What of Gilly?” Jon asked, his eyes somber, “little Sam?”

“This is the best way I can protect them,” Sam told him, “they’ll stay here at Winterfell. Lady Sansa’s taking in everyone who cannot go North.”

“I know,” said Jon, closing his eyes briefly, “I know she is.”

“Sam’s so little,” Sam puffed softly, his breath visible in the chilly air, “he didn't understand when I told him I was leaving. I’d give... anything. Anything to see him grow up.”

“I swear by all the gods,” said Jon fiercely, “I will see you returned to your family.”

“I know you will,” said Sam softly, looking down. He smiled, a fragile thing.

Jon couldn’t speak.

“He called me Papa, you know,” Sam said, “I don’t even think he realized. It just slipped out. I know he didn’t mean to make Gilly cry, but she couldn’t help it. He’s my son.”

“He is,” said Jon quietly.

“I can’t ride a dragon,” said Sam, giving Jon a weak, brave smile, “but I can ride a horse. I have two good hands, and a sword. I’ll follow your command, my lord.”

Jon shook his head. “I’m no longer your Lord Commander, Sam.”

“No,” Sam agreed, “but you’re still my brother.”

“Brothers,” Jon echoed.

Sam deflected the blow, catching Rast by surprise. He stumbled back, and cursed at Sam.

*Attack while you have the advantage,* thought Jon desperately. Sam glanced at him for just a moment. Almost like he had heard Jon’s thoughts.

Rast recovered and charged, swinging wildly. The flat of his blade smacked Sam’s arm. Sam flinched, but pressed forward despite it, slamming his sword into Rast’s side, knocking him to the ground.

“Do you yield?” Sam asked of the man on the ground.

Jon couldn’t help it. He choked on a laugh, grinning so hard his cheeks hurt, and tears sprung to his eyes. Pyp whistled beside him, whooping.

“Silence,” bellowed Thorne. He looked at Rast in disgust, “get up, Rat.”

Sam panted, looking pleased. Jon willed him to look over. When he did, Jon held his eyes, and
beamed at him. Sam’s brow furrowed the tiniest bit, and he smiled uncertainly back at Jon.

“Good for something then,” Thorne grunted casting his eyes over Sam, “see if you can do it again. Lord Snow, if you can laugh, you can fight. Make Lord Piggy squeal.”

Jon bit his lip to keep from smiling. He stepped up, lifting his blade. Sam stared at him, eyes questioning.

Jon grinned, reassuringly. He raised his sword, swinging it in a slow arc. Plenty of time for Sam to parry his blade. He did, pushing Jon back. Jon pushed harder, and Sam met him blow for blow.

Sam was regarding him with a look of shocked wonder. They moved around the courtyard, the clanging of swords filling the air. The other recruits had all stopped to watch the fight, and surrounded them.

“Stop dancing around,” snarled Thorne, “take him down!”

Jon caught Sam’s eye. He raised his arms high, as if to strike an overhead blow. Right before, he came down, Jon deliberately glanced down at his unprotected chest.

Sam drove a blow at Jon’s breastplate with his full weight behind it. Jon crashed to the ground, catching himself on his hands.

“I yield,” Jon called, dropping his sword, “I yield!”

The crowd of men and boys went wild, laughing and cheering. Pyp and Grenn ran forward, seizing Jon under the arms and dragging him back.

“He yields,” Pyp shouted at Sam, “show him mercy, my lord!”

Grenn was laughing, Jon could feel the tremors of it running through his arms as he was pulled along the ground.

“We’re done for today,” growled Thorne, trying futilely to restore order in the courtyard. He looked at Jon, still lying on the ground. “You want to play at being a brother of the Night’s Watch, bastard? Go clean the armory! That’s all you’re good for.”

Jon clambered to his feet. Even the derision of Alliser Thorne couldn’t dampen the joy that was burning brightly in his chest. “Of course, my lord,” he said, pulling off his breastplate, and rubbing at the good size bruise Sam had surely gifted him.

“Well fought,” said Pyp, clapping Jon on the back, then turning to Sam, “looks like we have a new champion of the yard. What did you say your name was?”

“Samwell Tarly,” said Sam, fetching his greatsword, and slinging it over his back once again, “but you can call me Sam. My mother calls me Sam.”

“Your mother calls you Sam,” said Pyp shaking his head in disbelief, “well then. Sam. What is a southern highborn lord like yourself doing at the end of the world with rabble like us?”

“Same as you,” said Sam, looking at Jon, “I had no other choice but to come.”

“Might as well make the best of it,” Grenn grunted, “it’s what we all have to do.”

“Oh, I intend to,” said Sam.
Pyp patted him on the shoulder. “Have you been shown your bed yet?” he asked, “you’ll sleep next to the rest of us who aren’t full brothers yet. And the hall, that’s where we take meals.”

“I have,” Sam said with a nod. He hesitated, “I haven’t yet seen the armoury though.”

Pyp snorted. “I’ll leave that to Lord Snow. The armory best be clean by the time Thorne comes around.”

“I’ll help you,” Sam said turning to Jon intently.

“Thank you,” said Jon smiling, “I could use your help.”

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“We’ll talk after,” Jon said under his breath as he walked beside Sam, “brother.”

Sam stopped short, staring at Jon in disbelief. Jon reached out, and squeezed Sam’s arm reassuringly.

“Oh,” said Sam, happiness lighting up his features, “oh.”

They half-ran into the armory. They worked quickly, silently, shooting glances at each other as brothers of the Watch moved about them.

When they were done, Jon took off for the gate of Castle Black, Sam following close behind him.

They stepped into the woods, the only sound was their breathing, and the leaves crackling underfoot.

Through the trees, Jon glimpsed a flash of white. Ghost came upon them, tongue lolling out, happily.

“Ghost,” whispered Sam in delight, bending down to pet him. Ghost basked in the attention.

“You know him,” said Jon horsely, “you remember?”

Sam stood, eyes bright. “I do,” he said, “I remember it all. The Others, the Watch, Gilly, Sam, You, the dragons…”

Jon didn’t speak. He stepped forward, and embraced Sam tightly. Sam hugged him back, clapping him on the back.

They both pulled back, grinning.

“How?” said Sam shaking his head, “how did this happen?”

“I do not know,” Jon confessed, “but I will not waste this chance we have been given. I do not know what gods, if any sent us back. I do not care. I will take it, and thank them.”

“I did not even think of this,” whispered Sam, “I thought I was alone.”

Jon shook his head. “There are others,” he said to Sam’s astonishment, “Sansa. Arya. Brienne. Tyrion. I do not know how many others.”

“Amazing,” said Sam softly, “absolutely amazing.”
“We woke up together,” Jon continued, his story spilling out in his haste, “Sansa, Arya, and I. Brienne came to us. Then Tyrion.”

“They remembered until their deaths?” Sam confirmed.

Jon nodded. “Aye,” he said bitterly, “they all died.”

“The girls,” Sam urged him, “what happened to the girls? Do they know what became of Gilly and Sam?”

Jon hesitated, a long shadow falling across his face.

“Please, Jon,” Sam said softly, “I must know.”

“We fell,” Jon said after a long moment, “we fell, and there was no one left to stop them. The dead marched on Winterfell. Sansa… burned the castle. She used... wildfyre. She lit the flame when the Night King was at the door. Everything burned. Everything.”

“Everything,” Sam said hollowly, “everyone.”

“I’m so sorry Sam,” said Jon, his hands in hard fists, “I’m so sorry.”

Sam shook his head. Fat tears dripped down his cheeks. “It wasn’t you,” he croaked, “you did everything you could. We all did. It just wasn’t enough.”

“I mean to make it enough this time,” said Jon in a low tone, “I won’t suffer that fate again. I won’t let our loved ones suffer that fate again. I’m going to change the tide of this war.”

“We are,” Sam told him resolutely, “I’ve come to do the same. It will only be easier together.”

“It will,” Jon affirmed.

“The others,” Sam asked, “where are they?”

“You’ve just missed Tyrion,” Jon said, “he traveled here with us, and now he’s returning to King’s Landing. Robb, Bran, Rickon, and Lady Stark are in Winterfell. My father and Brienne have taken the girls south with King Robert.”

“Gods,” said Sam his face turning pale, “what possessed them to go South again?”

“It wasn’t an easy choice,” Jon said looking down at his hands, “they’ve gone to stall the war. To keep Robert alive as long as possible. My father accepted the position of Hand on two counts. That the Crown would send gold for the creation of more glass gardens around the North, and that Stannis Baratheon would begin mining dragonglass and sending it to the Wall.”

“Stannis is already mining dragonglass?” Sam asked, “we can equip every man in the Watch with a dagger before the Others even glimpse the Wall.”

“Lord Mormont plans to,” said Jon, “I’ve already spoken to him about it.”

“Did you tell him?” asked Sam, his eyes widening, “of what you know?”

“Not exactly,” said Jon, “I’ve told him that I’ve come as an envoy on behalf of House Stark. With Uncle Benjen’s support, he has decided to listen to me. He’s sending out a ranging when the dragonglass arrives. I will accompany them.”
“How soon?” asked Sam in a hushed tone, “I must come with you. Gilly is out there.”

“I do not know,” said Jon, looking troubled, “I cannot say for certain when the shipment will arrive. We have not received word of it’s arrival yet. But Thorne said that Mormont is looking for men among the new recruits.”

“Then I will make myself a valuable choice,” said Sam firmly, “I can fight and cook. I know something of the healing arts after spending time in the Citadel. I’m coming with you, Jon.”

“I will tell Uncle Benjen,” said Jon, “he can advocate on your behalf. There is no one I would rather have at my side.”

“What exactly are we ranging for?” asked Sam softly.

“We’re going to catch a wight,” Jon said dropping his voice, “we’re going to catch on and bring it back to Castle Black. I need the men to see what’s coming for us with their own eyes. When I propose to bring Mance Rayder and his people over the Wall, I need them to understand that there is only one choice.”

Sam shuddered. “It’s not going to be an easy task, Jon,” he said, “remember, the last time.”

“This will not be like last time,” Jon said stoutly, “it cannot be. There’s no dragons waiting to save us. We’re going to take a team of men and horses, all equipped with Valyrian steel and dragonglass. We’ll march through Craster’s Keep towards the Fist of the First Men. We’ll find them there. Their army is still scattered. We must strike now while they are weaker.”

“When we reach Craster’s,” said Sam, looking at Jon, “I’m taking Gilly. She’s coming with us. I won’t leave her there a second time.”

“I know,” said Jon, “we cannot leave them.”

He wondered what Uncle Benjen would think of Gilly. No. What would the First Ranger think of Gilly? He could not imagine the look on Benjen Stark’s face if Jon told him that they must bring one of Craster’s daughters with them.

He is my brother’s son, and I love him as my nephew. But, if he chooses to range North with us, he will choose to do so as his own man. I will not take responsibility for him, or choose his life over the lives of my brothers.

“Stay low,” Jon told Sam, “show them how capable you are. Don’t pick fights.”

Sam chuckled. “Did anyone give you the same advice, Jon?” he asked, “it seems like you’re already on some bad sides.”

“Some things cannot be helped,” groused Jon, but he was smiling, “we’d best get back.”

He threw his arm across Sam’s shoulder as they walked back, Ghost hot on their heels.

“Him?” Uncle Benjen asked, looking down at where Sam was sparring with Grenn.

“Samwell Tarly,” said Jon, “the firstborn son of House Tarly.”

“He… remembers?” Benjen asked in a halting tone.
“He does,” Jon confirmed, “Sam rode by my side in the final battle against the Others. He went
down fighting. Sam was a loyal brother of the Watch, a steward, who joined the Great Ranging
alongside Mormont. He’s killed wights and Walkers alike. He carries the Valyrian steel of House
Tarly with him. The greatsword, Heartsbane.”

Benjen regarded Sam again, his brow crinkled.

“I know he doesn’t look it,” said Jon, “but Sam is one of the bravest men I’ve ever met. It takes a
special kind of courage to admit your fears, and to face them anyway.”

“How would it look if I chose this soft, southern lord to accompany us?” Benjen said, wearily.

“Sam looks soft,” Jon argued, “he’s not. He fights well. He cooks. He knows medicine.”

“Does he?” murmured Benjen, “perhaps it would not be such a strange choice, then. Your friend
must prove himself while he is here.”

“He will,” said Jon, his eyes drifting to the top of the Wall and beyond, “Sam is nothing if not
persistent.”

Chapter End Notes

I had this chapter in my outline as “SAAAAAAAM” with the subheading: Sam and Jon
hug it out like bros. To answer a few questions I’ve been seeing, this story is mostly
based on the show, but I am referencing the books in making my decisions, and to
flesh out some details that the show doesn’t contain. When I write, I usually keep
pictures of the cast up to remind me of their voices and mannerisms, so I am definitely
picturing them as those people. But, feel free to picture their bookselves too!
“He was supposed to die,” Cersei hissed her eyes blazing, “cut down in the melee. Who would have doubted that Robert was fool enough to get himself killed during his own tourney?”

Fire burned in her throat at the injustice, at the shattering of her expectations. Robert’s reappearance, unharmed, in the Keep after the tourney had aroused a fury in her.

“Robert was born to die like that,” said Jaime dryly, “drunk and laughing with a sword in his gut.”

“And yet he lives,” said Cersei coldly.

“Eddard Stark is a sensible man,” said Jaime, cocking his head at her, “you must have known that he never would have allowed Robert to fight in that melee. Far too dangerous for a man of his age and standing.”

“I underestimated the weight of Robert’s pride against Lord Stark’s good advice,” Cersei seethed, “it will not happen again.”

“Lord Stark is proving to be quite a bit of trouble,” murmured Jaime, “he trails Robert constantly. And Robert listens to him, as well as Robert can listen. I swear, we may see the King sober in a small council meeting one of these days.”

“The tourney was a missed opportunity,” said Cersei, “there will be others.”

“Lord Stark is narrowing that window of opportunity,” said Jaime.

“Robert loves his small pleasures too much,” Cersei said pursing her lips, “the novelty of his Hand will wear off after a time. His love for Lord Stark is no contest for his true nature.”

Seventeen years she had suffered, while Robert had gorged on his desires. It was all coming to a head, and she would be there to meet it when it did. Joffrey would sit on the Iron Throne, the simpering Stark girl by his side. Ned Stark would flee back North, to the comforting embrace of ice and snow. And she would hold the golden strings of the whole world in her fist.

“Take heed before engaging Lord Stark,” Jaime warned smirking, “the man hadn’t the good sense to bring a retinue, but the guard he has brought would give quite fight.”

And no one could order Jaime from her side.

“What of that monstrous creature?” asked Cersei with disinterest, “an ugly woman in a breastplate. She is no threat.”

“You did not see her at the tourney, Sister,” said Jaime, “she met the Mountain’s blade in battle, and emerged relatively unharmed. And she is loyal to the Starks above all else.”

A touch of something affected Jaime’s voice as spoke, and Cersei hear it as loud as if he had shouted.

“Have you spent a great deal of time with the Stark’s shield, Brother?” Cersei asked coolly.

“I’ve spoken to her in passing,” said Jaime.

He was deliberately maintaining an artless tone.
“I’ve never seen a woman fight like that before,” he continued, looking up at her, “it made me wonder what you would look like striding out onto a battlefield, dressed in steel instead of silk. An army and banners at your back.”

His eyes, _her eyes_, were guileless, she decided. She had imagined it, too, once upon a time as well. An army of lions at her command. She was her father’s first child, the heir to Casterly Rock and of House Lannister. It was _she_ that had learned at the feet of Tywin Lannister.

“You inflate the weight of steel,” she told Jaime, “the battles I fight, wearing my silks, draw blood all the same.”

“As you say,” Jaime murmured, but he was distracted now.

“You would rather me dress like that woman?” Cersei demanded, “shall I dress Myrcella like that little heathen that Lord Stark drags by scruff of the neck? A wild animal that child is. It was an insult to bring her.”

Jaime laughed then. “Did you hear? He asked, “Ned Stark’s youngest went after the Mountain herself in nothing but a tunic and britches. If the Hound hadn’t caught the child and thrown her back, the silent sisters would be wrapping up her bloody pieces in a shroud.”

“Joffrey informed me that Lady Sansa was in hysterics,” said Cersei frowning, “he said she was down in the mud like a peasant. She must be dissuaded of future unseemly outbursts.”

_Cersei had seen the eyes of the little one, following her, watching. The child hated her, for what particular reason, Cersei could not say. She would be glad to see her gone, returned to the savage North where she belonged._

_Sansa, however. Sansa’s eyes were too clear, too empty, too trusting sometimes. She wondered how Ned Stark could have raised such a simple girl. But it was no matter. Sansa might wear the title of Queen someday, but Cersei would own it._

_She and Joffrey would have beautiful children, little things with the same green eyes and golden curls that her children had possessed. Perhaps Sansa would die in the birthing bed after a few, as so many ladies did. Cersei would weep in her gorgeous black silks, and carry the babes away. She would raise them herself, and they would love her just as her own children did._

“You won’t win the girl without her family,” Jaime warned her, “she loves them. That much is clear.”

“She will have a new family,” said Cersei, “she’s going to marry the crown prince. She adores Myrcella and Tommen. And when she has children, she will love them too. Mothers love their children.”

“They do,” said Jaime, regarding her.

“That is why we cannot falter,” murmured Cersei, “once Joffrey sits atop the Iron Throne, no one would dare raise suspicions. Our children are the jewels that will cement the crown of our empire. They must be protected at all costs.”

“No one will touch them,” Jaime assured her, his hand straying to the hilt of his sword.

“The Kingsguard remains incomplete,” said Cersei tightly, “six sworn shields protect our children, not seven.”
“Trant was a inept coward,” said Jaime, “his throat was probably slit by some whore he beat bloody.”

“Robert was furious,” Cersei muttered, “he wanted the entire city searched, but I persuaded him otherwise. A spectacle like that makes us look weak. If he ran, it looks as if we employ men who are disloyal. If he’s dead, it looks as if our men are incompetent.”

“There are still whispers,” Jaime said, “his absence cannot be concealed.”

“Silence those whispers,” said Cersei, gathering her skirts, and standing up, “and find more men. Loyal men, who will guard us with their lives.”

*Nothing could go wrong, not when victory was just in reach. It was so close, it taunted her. And that was a state that Cersei could not endure. A true Queen took what she wanted, she did not wait for glory.*

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“My lord,” Tobho Mott greeted, as Arya stepped through the door of the shop, “what can I do for you?”

“I’ve come about the boy,” Arya rasped, “Your apprentice. Bring me to him at once.”

Wearing Meryn Trant’s face stretched her as thin as Needle’s blade. Every step seemed to grate a bit of Arya away. But it could be endured. Everything, Arya had learned, could be endured.

Tobho Mott regarded Arya warily. “You’re Kingsguard, my lord,” he said, “but I have not had the pleasure of serving you.”

“I’ve come on the orders of King Robert,” Arya responded, “it is in your interest to comply with those orders as quickly as possible.”

“As you wish, my lord,” Mott said with a short, rigid bow, “right this way.”

He led Arya to a great stone barn behind the shop. Its heavy doors were open wide, smoke billowing out.

Arya stopped Mott in his tracks, with a heavy arm across his chest. “I will speak with the boy alone.”

“My lord,” said Mott, a hard edge coming into his voice, “the boy’s done nothing. He’s a good lad. Strong, hardworking.”

“He will come to no harm,” Arya promised, in a softer tone than had ever passed Meryn Trant’s lips, “I simply need to speak with him.”

She pressed a sack of gold into the blacksmith’s hands.

“I don’t want your gold, my lord,” Mott spit, but his fingers curled around the coin nonetheless.

Arya ignored him. “The rest will come after I see him,” she continued, “alone.”

With reluctance, Mott hurried ahead, and cleared the barn. Several men and a serving girl came out, casting strange looks at Arya.

Tobho Mott stood by the great wooden doors, his face impassive.
“My thanks,” Arya told him, passing by. She stepped into the forge, heat rolling over her. Fires burned brightly everywhere, illuminating the space.

Gendry was standing in the corner, his face sullen and suspicious.

“Boy,” Arya greeted him. She turned, and caught a glimpse of Mott’s steely gaze. She kicked the heavy doors shut, so that they fell with a finality.

“What do you want?” Gendry asked gruffly, his eyes dark under his sooty brow.

Arya didn’t respond. She crossed the floor of the forge, and closed the shutters on the windows, one by one. When she finished, she stood in front of Gendry. He was trembling slightly. His hand crept towards a sword that lay finished on a bench.

“Do you know who I am, boy?” Arya said, gently.

“Kingsguard,” muttered Gendry, eyes darting to Trant’s white cloak.

“And do you think the apprentice of a smithy could defeat a member of the Kingsguard?” Arya inquired of him.

Gendry’s hand fell back to his side.

“Good,” said Arya, “take a seat.”

She sat down, and Gendry slowly followed.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Arya told him, “you don’t believe me, but it’s true. I won’t lay a hand on you.”

Gendry didn’t relax, but he watched her with a hint of interest. “Why have you come?” he asked.

“The Queen wants you dead,” Arya said bluntly.

Gendry reeled back in shock. “The Queen,” he said, “you’re mistaken. I’m nothing, no one. Just a bastard from Fleabottom. What would the Queen want with me?”

“You’re wrong,” Arya told him softly, “you’re a threat to her, to Cersei. She won’t rest while you live.”

“Why?” Gendry asked, rubbing his black hands across his face, “I haven’t done anything - ask Master Mott, he’ll tell you. I work hard, I make an honest living.”

“She wants you because of who your father is,” Arya told him, “you are your father’s son. Anyone with eyes could see that.”

“I don’t have a father,” Gendry said angrily, “I never had one.”

“You’ve never known him,” Arya said, “but he lives. Your father is Robert Baratheon, first of his name, King of the Seven Kingdoms.”

“No - ” Gendry started, his eyes frantic, his voice pained.

“- Yes,” Arya told him, “I speak the truth. I’m sorry, but there is no denying your parentage, Gendry. You have the Baratheon look. Black hair, blue eyes. The Queen has decided that you are a danger to her and her children.”
“I’m a bastard,” Gendry choked out, “I’ll never be anything but a bastard, king’s or not.”

“It does not matter,” Arya said grimly, “Cersei has deemed you a threat, and so she has ordered me to kill you.”

“You lied then,” Gendry whispered, rising to his feet, “you’re here to kill me.”

“No,” said Arya, “I will not follow that command. You are in no danger from me, Gendry. But danger still lurks, waiting for you. You must leave King’s Landing.”

“Leave King’s Landing?” Gendry asked, incredulous, “are you mad? I’ve nothing to my name, this job is all I have in this world.”

“If you stay, you will die,” Arya said severely, “the City Watch will begin combing the streets soon. Anyone within these gates with the Baratheon look will be put to death to soothe the Queen’s paranoia. Janos Slynt and the men of the city watch will do it with pleasure.”

Gendry shook his head, his shoulders slumping.

“Do not despair,” Arya told him, “listen to me, Gendry. I am here to help you.”

“Help me?” Gendry croaked, “why would you help me?”

Arya slipped slightly, sliding between Trant’s face and her own. She regained herself, and spoke.

“I don’t serve the Queen,” Arya said tremulously, “I serve House Stark. Eddard Stark, Hand of the King, heard of the Queen’s plan. He loves Robert, and wants to save you, Gendry. Which is why I’ve been sent here, to offer you safe haven in the North.”

“The North?” asked Gendry, bewildered.

“Yes,” said Arya, drawing another satchel of gold from her cloak, “listen to me carefully. You will take this gold, and travel north to Winterfell. When you get there, you will ask for Robb Stark. He is the eldest of Lord Stark’s children, and the acting warden of the North. Tell him, that Arya Stark has sent you. Tell him this, and you will be given a position in the smithy there. No one will be able to touch you.”

“Winterfell?” Gendry mumbled.


“Good,” Arya said, bowing her head for an instant.

“Thank you,” said Gendry looking up at her, “thank you, m’lord.”

“You will repay me, by doing me a favor,” said Arya softly, “when you leave, you will take two other boys with you. Lommy and Hot Pie. The three of you will travel together. Keep each other safe.”

“Where will I find them?” Gendry asked.

“Three days from now,” Arya told him, “you will take everything you own and head for the Dragon’s Gate, an hour after midnight. The boys will meet you there. You will cross through the gate and begin riding up the Kingsroad.”
“There are… guards at the gate, m’lord,” Gendry said, “what will we say to them?”

“Arrive at the proper time,” Arya said, “and the guards will be no trouble to you.”

“What of Master Mott,” Gendry asked, “what will I tell him? I can’t just leave, he’ll send people looking for me.”

“Do you trust him?” Arya asked sharply, “do you trust him absolutely?”

“I do,” said Gendry stoutly, “Master Mott’s loyal to his people.”

“Then,” Arya said, “tell him what I have told you. Tell no one else. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” said Gendry, looking at her with his bright, blue eyes, “I will do as you say.”

“I wish you safe travels, Gendry,” said Arya gruffly, getting to her feet.

“Wait,” said Gendry, “I do not even know your name.” He held out his hand, offering it to Arya.

Arya hesitated before reaching out, and placing Meryn Trant’s hand in Gendry’s.

“I’m no one,” she told him, gripping his hand tightly for a moment, “no one to concern yourself with.”

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“Lord Stark!”

Ned turned to see Renly Baratheon approaching him, an easy smile on his face.

“Renly,” Ned greeted him. He cast his eyes over the youngest Baratheon man’s face, as if it would reveal Renly’s secrets.

“Where are you headed?” Renly asked him, falling into step beside Ned.


“Ah, you are ever so pious, Ned,” Renly scolded him lightly, “come, join me for a drink. You can leave the gods for one day.”

Ned hesitated.

“Ned,” said Renly with a smile, “join me.”

“I suppose,” said Ned, “the gods can wait.”

“I can’t tell you how shocked I was at the tourney,” said Renly as they walked, “I never expected the Mountain to snap like that. I should have, probably. But I didn’t.”

“He is a knight without honor,” Ned grunted, “he does not deserve to wear his titles.”

“Many men in King’s Landing wear false titles,” Renly said, “they must be weeded out, by true men like you and I.”

“Aye,” Ned agreed, “they must. It is our duty to protect the kingdom from false men.”

“Robert will never strip Ser Gregor of his titles,” said Renly, “the Mountain is a powerful man.”
And Robert has always been impressed by strength.”

“Robert is a warrior,” Ned said, “he will always think as a commander first and foremost.”

“He will, won’t he?” Renly asked softly. They walked in silence, reaching Renly’s solar. The entered, and Renly went to his side table, pouring them both a drink.

“I am also indebted to your sworn shield,” Renly said, sipping his wine, “If Brienne had not intervened, Ser Loras would surely be dead.”

“I am grateful every day that she has been pledged to the protection of my family,” Ned said, “Brienne of Tarth is one of the finest fighters I have ever seen.”

“I have seen it,” said Renly, “she saved Loras’ life, but wounded his pride. We must arrange for them to spar one day, I’m sure it will be a spirited fight.”

“Does Ser Loras fight as well as he jousts?” Ned asked, “forgive me, Lord Renly, but I do not think the Knight of Flowers could stand a chance against the Maid of Tarth.”

“Loras is hardier than he looks, Ned,” Renly said, laughing, “his sigil may be nothing but a flower, but roses do have thorns. Growing Strong their motto is. Silly thing, but the Tyrells do have the wealth and strength to back it up.”

“Perhaps,” said Ned evenly.

“Look,” Renly said, crossing over to a chest that stood against the wall. He removed a gleaming, rose-gold necklace, with a heavy locket. He presented it to Ned, opening it so that its contents were revealed.

Inside the locket, was a beautifully painted miniature of a girl with lovely, doe-like eyes and cascading curls.

“Does she remind you of anyone?” Renly asked, when Ned furrowed his brow.

“No,” said Ned truthfully looking closer at the tiny face, “no one comes to mind.”

“Ah,” said Renly looking disappointed, “this is Ser Loras’ sister, Margaery Tyrell. There are some that say she resembles you sister, Lyanna.”

“No,” Ned told him firmly, “she is pretty, but she looks nothing like Lyanna.”

“I had thought to show it to Robert,” said Renly pocketing the locket.

“Why?” asked Ned feeling anger coil in his belly, “Robert loved my sister, but she is dead and buried nigh twenty years now.”

“Yes, of course” said Renly, backtracking apologetically, “I merely thought it might be of interest to him. Perhaps I was mistaken.”

“There is no reason to feed the King’s grief,” said Ned sharply, “Robert will always carry the sorrow of Lyanna’s death in his heart, just as I do. But he has a wife, a family, a kingdom.”

“And hat do you think of his Queen, Ned?” Renly asked, a incomprehensible look crossing his face.

“I,” Ned faltered, “I do not know much of her. Her and Robert do not often spend time in each
other’s presence.”

“You must know what Robert thinks of her,” Renly pressed him, “my brother was never very good at concealing his true feelings.”

“Robert didn’t marry Cersei for love,” said Ned, “he married her for duty. Most times, a certain fondness develops after a time. Unfortunately this has not been the case with them.”

“It’s not the dislike between them that concerns me,” said Renly, his eyes shifting, “its the power that the Lannisters hold over Robert. You must have noticed.”

“I have,” said Ned cautiously, “it does not seem that Robert has many friendly faces left in court. I was surprised, when I arrived, to see that Stannis has left for Dragonstone.”

At the mention of Stannis, Renly’s mouth twisted slightly.

“Clearly, our brother has more important obligations than his duty to his king,” said Renly, “I’m afraid I’ve had to pick up Stannis’ slack since he’s been gone.”

Ned was disturbed by Renly’s careless tone.

“Stannis,” said Ned, shaking his head, “Stannis is a man of duty and loyalty. You know him as well as I do, even more so. He would not abandon Robert on a whim.”

“Perhaps Stannis grew tired of gritting his teeth,” Renly suggested, “he never lost his resentment over what he perceived to be Robert’s slight regarding Storm’s End.”

“It was no slight,” Ned said, staring at Renly, “Dragonstone is the seat of the Prince. In giving Stannis Dragonstone, Robert confirmed that Stannis was heir to his throne should he never have children.”

“Or perhaps,” Renly said with a boldness that Ned found disconcerting, “Robert hid Stannis away, for fear that his stern and callous manner would not inspire the people of Storm’s End. He gave the Stormlands to a man that could follow in his footsteps.”

Ned looked upon Renly, in his beautiful, satin tunic. He was a man who had never seen war, and he looked it. He might have resembled Robert at that age, but he had none of Robert’s steel.

“I can only guess as to why the King made his choices,” Ned said quietly getting to his feet, “Renly, I thank you for the drink. I must be going.”

“Of course,” said Renly, his face becoming easy and pleasant once more, “Ned, always a pleasure. If there is every anything I can do for you.”

He grasped Ned’s arm, briefly.

“Likewise,” Ned said. It was only when he had turned away from Renly, that he allowed the storm that brewed inside him to sweep across his face.
“There’s been a letter from White Harbor,” Robb said, as his mother entered, “Stannis’ ships have arrived, and they have received the Crown’s shipment of gold.”

His mother looked tired, as she often did these days. Dark circles hung under her eyes, and Robb had not seen her laugh in days. She could not seem to rest, with the others gone.

She’s like me, Robb thought suddenly, to stop and rest is to invite grief and fear to settle in our skin.

“Thank the Seven,” said Catelyn sitting down heavily, “your father would be well pleased to hear of this.”

“Wyman Manderly’s assured me that a dozen of his finest guards will see the shipments to Winterfell,” Robb said looking down at the letter, “and that they will be accompanied by several of the best glassblowers he could find. I must write Jon at once.”

“Will be it enough?” asked Catelyn, her face pale, “perhaps there is no reason for your father, sisters, and Brienne to linger any longer in the South.”

“The King will see it as a slight if they leave now,” said Robb, leveling a look at his mother, “Father cannot be seen as anything but entirely loyal to Robert.”

“I know,” murmured Catelyn, “I just wish they were home.”

“Aye,” said Robert grimly, “I do as well.”

Catelyn crossed to him, laying her cheek against the top of her head. He took her hand and pressed it against his heart, comfortingly.

“I read Arya’s letter,” said Robb suddenly, shifting the papers on the desk to find it, “I don’t know what to make of it.”

“Dear Robb,” Rob read, glancing at Catelyn, “Father says I have to practice my penmanship, and that I cannot leave his desk until I have written a whole letter to you. He said I should write about my life in the capital, but my life is terribly boring. The people here are scared of Nymeria, so I cannot play with her anywhere except the forest, and I’m not allowed to go there by myself. Sansa is always with the Princess Myrcella, playing dolls and sewing. I tried to go with them, but I’m not good at either of those things. So, I have decided to write you a story. An exciting one, better than Old Nan could ever tell. If Bran and Rickon are having trouble sleeping, you could read it to them. I’ve tried to put lots of interesting things in it. And then... it’s just a story. It ends like that.”

He handed the letter to his mother, and she read through it.

“Their letters from the South have been guarded,” said Catelyn, “as they must be. As we must be as well.”
“But what does she mean to tell us with this?” Robb said frowning, “I cannot make sense of it.”

“I do not know,” said Catelyn, her eyes troubled, “I would give anything to be able to speak to them.”

Robb picked up the letter again, holding it a touch too tightly. “Until then,” he said, shaking his head, “we have their letters.”

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“Robb!” Bran hollered as Robb stepped through the door.

“Robb!” Rickon repeated in delight.

Shaggydog and Summer’s ears pricked up at Robb’s entrance. Greywind padded over, and joined them in their heap by the fire.

“Hush,” Old Nan scolded them, “you boys will wake the whole castle.”

“Listen to her, she’s right,” Robb said smiling at his little brothers, “Nan, I’ll see them off to bed.”

“As you wish, my lord,” Old Nan croaked. Rob helped her to her feet, and sent her off down the hall. He closed the door behind him.

“I sparred with some of the older boys today,” said Bran, excitedly, “Jory said I’m improving!”

“Aye,” Robb nodded seriously, “I’ve heard. You’ll be a true knight soon enough.”

“Are you sure that we can’t go visit Father in the capital?” Bran asked, his upturned face hopeful, “there’s plenty of true knights in the capital.”

“No,” said Robb shortly, picking Bran up, and swinging him into place on his bed, “I’m sorry Bran, but we cannot.”

Bran’s face screwed up, unhappiness written plain across his features.

“We can’t go to the capital,” Robb told him softly, “and we can’t see father and the girls, yet.”

“Or Brienne,” Bran reminded him.

“Or Brienne,” Robb agreed, “but I have something special for tonight.”

He unfolded Arya’s letter from his pocket, and Bran peered over at it in interest.

“What is it?” Bran asked.

“Arya’s written us a story,” Robb said, smoothing the parchment on his lap, “she wrote that she wanted me to tell it to you and Rickon.”

He picked up Rickon, and settled him on the bed next to Bran. Bran threw an arm around his little brother, and they looked up at Robb expectantly.

Robb held the letter under the firelight, and began to read.

“Once upon a time - ” he started.

“Like Old Nan’s stories,” Bran interrupted.
“Yes,” agreed Robb, “like Old Nan’s stories. *Once upon a time, there was a blacksmith who lived on a very high hill by the King’s castle. His name was Gendry - ”

“Gendry?” said Bran looking puzzled.

“Yes, Gendry,” said Robb, “it’s a southern boy’s name. Don’t interrupt, Bran.”

Bran sat back, looking chastened.

“*His name was Gendry,*” Robb read, “*He didn’t have a family name or lands or wealth, but he made the most beautiful swords and armor. Knights from all over the land would flock to his smithy to buy his wares. Even the King came to buy from him. Gendry became famous, and everyone knew his name. He was known all over the realm for his finest creation. A bull’s head helm. But the other blacksmiths soon became jealous of his success and skill. They hired a witch to cast a magick spell on Gendry, so that he would die a painful death.*”

“Ooh,” whispered Rickon, and Bran shushed him.

Robb bit his lip to hide a smile and continued. “*So the witch went to Gendry’s smithy, and spied on him. She looked upon the beautiful things he made, and saw the kindness in his face. The witch decided that she could not kill him, he was too good and innocent. The witch approached Gendry, and told him of the plot to take his life. She urged him to run far away, so that his enemies’ jealousy could not touch him. He wept, for he was sad to leave his home. But, he knew the witch’s advice to be sensible, so he packed up everything he could carry, and rode North to seek his fortune.*”

“To Winterfell,” cheered Bran.

“*Perhaps,*” said Robb gently, “*As Gendry was riding along the road, he encountered a boy who had hands that were as green as the grass on a summer’s day. Gendry greeted the boy warmly, but noticed that he looked sad. The boy told Gendry that what he loved best in the whole world was to change cloth into all the colors of the rainbow. But he had run out of cloth to dye. Nobody in his town needed any more clothes, they were all dressed in his lovely work. So Gendry invited the boy, whose name was Lommy, to travel with him.*”

“Is Lommy a southern name too?” asked Bran.

Robb shook his head. “I do not know. It’s not one that I’ve ever heard. *Lommy and Gendry rode for many nights and many days until they came upon a deep woods. They decided to ride through the overgrown path in search of an adventure. In the heart of the woods, they discovered a small town, abandoned save for one house. A fire burned brightly in the window, and Gendry and Lommy longed to sit by the hearth. They knocked on the door, and it was opened by a tall boy in an apron covered in flour. He was a baker named Hot Pie -* “

Bran and Rickon burst into laughter.

“*His name was Hot Pie.*” Robb pressed on, concealing his own twitching mouth, “*he loved to bake all manner of pies and cakes and breads. But he was sad, for there was no one left in the town to bake for. They had all run away from the monster in the forest.*”

Rickon gasped. Shaggydog rose to his feet, stretching, and jumped up on the bed, settling between the boys. Rickon buried one small fist in his fur.

“*Hot Pie asked Lommy and Gendry to help him find the monster and slay it. If they were successful, then all the townspeople could return. Gendry and Lommy admitted that they didn’t*
know much about slaying monsters, but they decided to try. The three of them walked through the trees, until they came to the base of a great mountain. There was a cave leading into the mountain, and Hot Pie said that this must be where the monster lived. So Gendry put on all his fine armor and his gleaming bull’s head helm. He led the way into the cave, and Lommy and Hot Pie crept quietly behind him.

At the very back of the cave, a monstrous dragon lay slumbering. Every time the dragon breathed, grey smoke billowed out. Slowly, Gendry approached the dragon, and poked it with his sword. The dragon awoke with a snort, and the boys scrambled away from it.

‘Ow!’ the dragon exclaimed, blinking her large, yellow eyes, ‘why did you wake me up?’

“The dragon’s a girl?” demanded Bran.

“Of course,” said Robb evenly, “it’s Arya’s story. The dragon has to be a girl. ‘We’ve come to ask you to stop terrorizing the town,’ Gendry said boldly, ‘all the townspeople are so frightened of you that they’ve moved away.’

The dragon looked hurt, and sparks flew from her nose.

‘I didn’t terrorize anyone,’ the dragon said, ‘I was lonely and hungry. No one would listen to me when I tried to talk to them.’

‘You scared us,’ said Hot Pie, ‘we thought you wanted to eat us.’

‘I don’t eat people,” the dragon said indignantly, ‘I’m not a monster.”

“Dragons are monsters” Bran argued, “the Targaryens’ dragons burned people and cities to the ground! Old Nan said so.”

“She also told me the sky is blue because we live inside the eye of a blue-eyed giant named ‘Macumber,’” said Robb, shrugging, “there could be friendly dragons. ‘You look like a monster,’ Lommy said, looking warily at the razor sharp scales that covered the creature’s body.

‘I’m not a monster,” the dragon insisted again, “I’m a princess.’

‘A princess?’ repeated Gendry in surprise.

‘Yes,’ the dragon said, and she lowered her great horned head in grief, ‘on my tenth nameday, wings sprouted from my back, and I flew far, far away from my home. I’ve been here ever since.’

‘That’s terrible,’ said Gendry, ‘you live here all alone, and you look so terribly frightening.’

‘Oh, I don’t mind being a dragon,’ the dragon said, ‘but I miss my family. I can’t go home like this. How will they recognize me?’

‘Maybe you can turn back into a princess,’ Lommy suggested.

‘I don’t know how,’ replied the dragon, ‘I’ve been here so long, I’ve forgotten what it’s like to be a princess.’

‘Maybe you just need to feel like a princess?’ offered Hot Pie.”

“Maybe she’s a Targaryen Princess,” said Bran, “could they turn into dragons?”

“No more than the Starks can turn into wolves,” Robb teased gently, “The dragon agreed to try,
and so they set out to make her feel like a princess. Hot Pie went first. He baked and baked, cooking the dragon all sorts of wonderful things that might be served at a princess’ table. The dragon ate and ate, declaring everything to be absolutely delicious, but she was still a dragon.

Then Lommy tried. He dyed yards and yards of fabric, all sorts of beautiful colors. He sewed the most beautiful gown that had ever been seen in all the kingdoms, and draped it over the dragon, declaring her the most finely dressed dragon there ever was. The dragon twirled and danced, as a princess should, but afterwards, she was still a dragon.

They tried all sorts of things. They bowed and curtsied to the dragon. They called her ‘your grace,’ and ‘my princess.’ They brushed her scales, and shined her claws. But she was still a dragon.”

“Maybe she’s not a princess,” said Bran doubtfully. Rickon shook his head.

Robb put his finger to his lips, then returned to the letter. “‘I know,’ the dragon said, huffing a great breath that smelled like brimstone, ‘I don’t have a crown. Princesses must have crowns.’

The boys agreed, and it was decided that Gendry would forge a crown fit for a Dragon Princess. He labored night and day, crafting the most exquisite piece his hands had ever touched. It outshone even the great bull’s helm. Finally, the dragon’s hot fire licked over the crown, and it was finished.

Nothing happened at first, when the circlet was placed atop her horns. Then, suddenly, the dragon shuddered, and all her shining scales began dropping to the ground. Wave after wave of scales clattered to the ground, and the boys placed their hands over their ears and closed their eyes in fright.

When it was finally quiet, they looked up and saw a girl sitting amongst all the gleaming green scales that littered the floor of the cave. The girl looked down at her small hands, her small feet, She blew out forcefully, but nothing came out of her throat except for a gust of air. She bared her teeth, but they were small and blunted, not terrifying at all.”

Rickon jammed one of his hands in his mouth, feeling his teeth. His other hand crept towards Shaggydog’s muzzle, but the wolf lazily threw back his head, pulling himself out of reach.

“Maybe she wanted to be a dragon,” said Bran, looking somber.

“No,” Robb said uneasily, “she misses her family too much. ‘I can go home now,’ she said, but she looked somewhat sad.

On the day they were to start for the Dragon Princess’ home, Gendry presented her with a gift. Unbeknownst to her, he had secretly gathered up all her scales and saved them for a special purpose.

‘For you, your grace,’ he said.

He had forged a splendid suit of armor, finer even than his own or the king’s. Her fallen scales covered the shining steel, and they shimmered brightly in the sun. The Dragon Princess was overjoyed, and she put the armor on over her clothes, a beaming smile spreading across her face.”

“I wish I had armor like that,” whispered Bran in awe.

“Dragon scales are harder than any steel,” Robb said his eyes twinkling, “no blade could pierce such an armor. The warrior who wears such a piece would be utterly invincible.”
Bran grinned, and hugged Rickon tightly. Rickon squealed.

“And so they rode South for the King’s castle. Everyday, the Dragon Princess grew more excited at the thought of seeing her family. They rode past Gendry’s high hill, and onward towards the gates of the royal castle. When the Dragon Princess rode through the gates, her mother and father and brothers and sisters all came running to greet her, tears of joy running down their cheeks. They hugged and kissed her, and told her how much they had missed her while she was away.

The King and Queen were so grateful to Gendry, Lommy, and Hot Pie for returning their daughter to them. The King was quite surprised to see Gendry. He had been told that Gendry was dead by his jealous rivals. The King ordered them all thrown in the dungeons, and restored Gendry to his smithy on the top of the hill. The King granted the wishes of Lommy and Hot Pie too. The people in the city flocked to buy Hot Pie’s wonderful food, and to wear Lommy’s beautiful clothing.

The King decided that the boys should be knighted, and the Dragon Princess herself conducted the ceremony.

‘You are a true knight, Ser,’ the Dragon Princess told Gendry.

‘No,’ said Gendry, ‘I am only a blacksmith.’

The Dragon Princess laughed at her silly friend. The four went on to have many marvelous adventures, and in every one, the Dragon Princess was remembered, leading the charge in her fantastic armor of scales. The end.”

Robb finished, with a smile.

“That’s it?” Bran cried, “what adventures did they have?”

“I don’t know,” said Robb, “you’ll have to write Arya and ask her. She doesn’t say here. Ask Maester Luwin to help you with your letters. But you must go to sleep now.”

He pulled up the furs, tucking his little brothers in. Two sets of wide eyes stared back at him.

“Dragons?” asked Rickon, his eyes flicking to the window.

“There’s no more dragons,” Robb assured him, with a weak smile.

Are there? Robb couldn’t remember if there were dragons yet across the Narrow Sea. It was difficult to sift through what the others had told him of their past memories. Speaking of it muddled Robb’s thoughts, and he was often left confused and feeling helpless.

Even if there weren’t dragons yet, there soon would be. And worse things than dragons were riding on the winds of winter. Robb was suddenly grateful for the thick stone walls of Winterfell. It was easy to pretend that they were impenetrable against anything that lay waiting in the dark.

But Robb had to be brave. He had to be as sturdy as father. He carried the mantle of House Stark on his shoulders. He was warden to all the North in his father’s absence. He had his mother to think of, his brothers, the household. And he would get along, by placing one stone at a time. Cementing their safety, their future.

“Go to sleep now,” Robb said, taking the candle from their bedside. He bent down, and kissed them both, just as Father had done for him and Jon when they were young.

One stone at a time.
Ned looked up, at the soft knock on the door. Brienne stepped in, her face tight and displeased. Ned felt his stomach clench in apprehension.

“Lord Varys to see you, Lord Stark,” Brienne told him, moving her arm aside to let the man enter.

“Lord Varys,” Ned said, eyeing him uneasily, “what can I do for you?”

“Might I trouble you for a drink, Lord Stark?” Varys asked, taking a seat.

Ned nodded shortly, and filled two cups with wine. He handed one to Varys, and sat back.

“I’m afraid I startled your guard and your children. They looked quite alarmed to see me,” said Varys, sipping his wine, “my apologies.”

“They’ve been anxious,” said Ned carefully, “ever since the tourney. It was quite a trial for them. I imagine that every unfamiliar face at the door turns into the Mountain’s at first glance.”

Varys didn’t respond. He regarded Ned calmly, with pale eyes that tested Ned’s composure. Ned felt sweat begin to gather on his neck as the man watched him.

The Spider stood, walking to the door, and checking the lock. He went from window to window, flipping the latches to ensure privacy. When he was done, he sat back down, and took more wine.

“Drink, Lord Stark,” said Varys, gesturing to Ned’s untouched wine, “you may not trust that it is so, but you are in the company of a concerned friend.”

Ned tried to assemble all the twisting and turning pieces of conversation he could recall from the children about Varys. It did not prepare him to sit before the man now, trying to guess whether or not he remembered a life that Ned had never known.

He drank the wine, after a pause.

“There are certain things we must discuss,” said Varys, his words thin and sharp, so unlike his normal syrupy tones.

“Things, I assume, we cannot discuss in the small council chambers,” Ned confirmed quietly.

“You are correct, Lord Stark,” said Varys, “I took great care to ensure that this conversation will remain private. Many in King’s Landing watch you closely, including the Queen.”

“Have I done something to inspire such distrust?” Ned asked flatly.

“You’ve done so very little since your arrival in the capital, my lord,” Varys said softly, “and yet so much. I will not keep you long, Lord Stark. There are things you must know. You are the King’s
Hand, and the King is a fool. Your friend, I know, but a fool nonetheless, and doomed unless you save him. The tourney was a near thing, they had hoped to kill him during the melee."

Ned could not suppress the shudder that rippled through him. Every step he took in King’s Landing seemed to be on the edge of a knife. One slip, and he would be cut to ribbons.

“Forgive me, my lord,” said Varys watching him closely, “but you do not seemed to be as surprised as I would have expected at such a terrible revelation.”

If all the task at hand required, was a steady hand and sharp sword, Ned would do it. He would run Varys through, cut them all down, all the Lannisters. He would save Robert, and take his children and run. But this was not his battlefield. He had never had to fight on such quicksand as this.

Catelyn would tell him to guard himself. Sansa would tell him to be cautious. Ned closed his eyes, shaking his head.

“You may think Robert a fool,” Ned said quietly, raising his head to meet Varys’ eyes, “you may be right. But I am very much not a fool, Lord Varys. I assure you of that.”

Varys eyes glimmered, and Ned had the faintest notion that he had pleased the Spider.

“The Queen forbade Robert to fight in front of his brother, his children, his knights and half the court,” said Ned coldly, “I saw it with my own eyes. It was a sure way to inspire Robert to take up a sword. The Queen has no love for the King despite these many years.”

“I never took you for a fool, Lord Stark,” Varys said shrewdly, “but I must confess, I did not think you so astute. You don’t seem like a man of secrets, and yet I do believe you have many.”

“I didn’t come here to mince words and whisper secrets,” said Ned angrily, bringing his fist down on the desk, “enough of this Lord Varys. I came here to serve the realm, and to protect my king. If you have wisdom to offer regarding those things, speak now.”

Varys tilted his head. “Nobody desires those things more than me, Lord Stark. Robert may be a fool, but the kingdom is stable yet. If he were to die… the Lannisters would control the throne. That would truly lead to chaos.”

“And you wish to avoid chaos?” Ned asked, bitterly.

“Oh, of course,” said Varys, a touch of virtuousness slipping into his voice, “I serve the realm, my lord, as you do. There are few men of honor in the capital. You, are one of them. I would like to believe I am another, as strange as that might seem.”


“You must trust no one,” Sansa had told him, her face solemn in the candlelight, “King’s Landing is a pit of snakes, each more venomous than the last.”

“I know, my love,” Ned told his daughter, in vain reassurance. It cut at his heart to know that he could not take away the deep pain and sadness in her eyes. Eyes that did not belong in the face of a child. His child.

“No,” Sansa said, her mouth a broken shape, “you cannot know. The South is not like here, and you cannot think it is. They would like nothing more than to see us burn.”

Ned reached for her, cupping her head in the palm of his hand. She leaned into him. He traced the
seashell of her ear. Just as he had done when she was a babe.

“You must guard your speech,” Sansa said quietly, “weigh the result of every word. Listen to what they mean, not what they say.”

“A terrible game to play,” Ned said to her. And she seemed to know it so well.

Sansa’s eyes gleamed in the low light, and she spoke in a low tone that jarred him.

“Sometimes when I try to understand a person’s motives, I play a little game. I assume the worst. What’s the worst reason they could possibly have for saying what they say and doing what they do? And I ask myself - how well does that reason explain what they say and what they do?”

*Her words hung in the air, lingering with a sickly, sweetness.*

“I’m sorry, Father,” Sansa said quietly after a moment, but for what she was apologizing, Ned could not say.

“You wish to protect Robert,” Ned said, deliberately.

*The girl was young yet, Jon had said. Her dragons not even hatched. She and her brother wandered the Free Cities, beginning for handouts from those who still remembered the might of the Targaryen name.*

*If Varys intended to hold the throne for a child with no armies, no land, and no money, it would be long time yet. Better to have a weak usurper upon the throne, than to risk the iron grip of the Lannisters.*

“It has been my aim thus far,” said Varys delicately, “I have been successful, these past seventeen years, but I fear the fate of the King has crept past even my extensive influence. This is why I require your assistance.”

“And yet,” Ned said, “you waited a long time to ask this of me.”

“I’ll admit I wasn’t sure what kind of man you were, *Lord Stark,*” said Varys, smiling thinly, “the Red Keep shelters two sorts of people, you see. Those who are loyal to the realm, and those who are loyal only to themselves. Until the tourney, I doubted as to which you might be, so I waited. And now I know for certainty.”

“You do, don’t you?” Ned asked, tightly.

“Yes, Lord Stark,” Varys said, running the back of his hand over his smooth cheek, “and I believe I am beginning to comprehend why the Queen fears you so much. Oh yes, I do.”

Ned felt a chill run through him. “I’ve done nothing to arise the Queen’s ire.”

“You are an obstacle in the path of her desire,” said Varys, “and the Queen is not one to suffer setbacks lightly. The King will soon be doomed unless we can save him.”

“What kind of doom do you suspect?” murmured Ned, casting his eyes over to the sunlight peeking through the shutters.

“The same sort as Jon Arryn.”

Ned froze. His breath caught.
“The Tears of Lys, they call it. A rare and costly thing, as clear and as tasteless as water. It leaves no trace.”

Varys voice seemed to drift from far away, as if issuing from a tunnel.

“Who gave it to him?” Ned heard himself ask, numbly.

*Littlefinger. Lysa loved him since they were children.*

“Some dear friend, no doubt,” said Varys, “but which one? There were so many. Lord Arryn was a kind and trusting man.”

“He was,” said Ned softly. His head swam, and he knew his grief sat plain on his face.

“They are biding their time, Lord Stark,” said Varys rising to his feet, “but my little birds will be listening, and together we may be able to forestall him, you and I. Thank you for the wine. We will speak again.”

With that, Varys nodded and slipped out the door.

When he had gone, Ned tipped his head back, and closed his eyes. He felt wretched.

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“Send him in!”

Ned stepped past Jaime Lannister, and into the King’s chambers. Robert was lounging in a pile of furs and silks, his fingers toying with the ribbons on a serving girl’s skirts. The girl tittered nervously, a tray balanced precariously in her hands.

“Your grace,” Ned said, bowing before him. He glanced at the blushing girl.

Robert laughed when he caught Ned’s glance.

“My Hand’s come to keep me responsible,” Robert told the girl, grinning, “run along.”

The girl left quickly. Robert gestured to Ned, and Ned obliged, coming to stand beside him.

“Sit, Ned,” Robert commanded, “you’ll make me nervous, standing like that. What kingly business have you come to bother me with today?”

Ned ignored the King’s careless tone, and took a seat.

“I thought you might want to hear of the most recent council meeting,” said Ned, clasping his hands, “Lord Renly reports that crime has fallen since the conclusion of the tourney. The City Watch has a hand over the city once more.”

“Jape it was,” grunted Robert, “making Renly Master of Laws. The boy hardly knows the sharp end of a sword. Of course I had to give him something, otherwise I would surely be staring down another Lannister cousin. They breed like rabbits, not lions.”

“Renly rode well at the tourney,” said Ned mildly.

Robert snorted. “It’s one thing to joust, Ned. Quite another to open a man’s belly in battle. Renly will never be a warrior.” He broke off abruptly. “What of Stannis?” he demanded of Ned, “what has been heard of my blasted brother?”
Ned hesitated, his mouth going dry. “Not much,” he said, “He sent a brief note acquiescing to the Crown’s orders.”


“Lord Baelish also reports that taxes from the Reach have been deposited into the Crown’s vault,” said Ned.

“Good,” said Robert thickly, drinking deeply from a goblet, “the Tyrells can damn well afford them. Mace Tyrell’s boy rode out onto that field covered in sapphires, sapphires, Ned. We didn’t ride out to war with any damn sapphires on our chests, did we?”

“No,” Ned responded softly.

“Renly says the Tyrells have this daughter,” Robert continued, the wine slopping over the sides of the cup, and dripping onto his breeches, “as lovely as the dawn.”

“I’m sure she is,” agreed Ned, thinking of girl in the locket. Her hair and eyes blurred in his memory, but he remembered her pouting, crooked smile.

Robert clapped him on the shoulder, laughing. “Those were the days,” Robert said looking wistful, “but we’re still young yet, and you’re here, by my side once more.”

Ned smiled, as he always did, when Robert seemed himself once more.

The King called for a meal, and they broke their fast as a warm breeze drifted through the fluttering curtains.

Ned found himself laughing, as Robert told the story of when he had knocked the Eyrie’s old Maester on his backside.

“Jon just looked at me when he heard,” chucked Robert, “in that stern way of his. But I was only a boy, Ned! I didn’t know my own strength!”

“I remember,” said Ned, smiling fondly.

“I spent the next week at the grindstone,” grumbled Robert goodnaturedly, “until the old man got back on his feet. He kept me in line, Jon did.”

Ned felt his expression falter, as grief thickened the air.

“I should have listened more,” said Robert, rubbing his thumb along the edge of a golden plate, “he always gave me sensible advice. Not that I followed it.”

“It’s no easy task, ruling,” Ned said gravely.

“I was never so alive as when I was winning this throne,” said Robert harshly, “and never so dead as now that I’ve won it.”

Ned was silent.

“Let me tell you a secret, Ned,” Robert said, leaning close, “More than once, I have dreamed of
giving up the crown. Take ship for the Free Cities with my horse and my hammer, spend my time warring and whoring, that’s what I was made for. The sellsword king, how the singers would love me. You know what stops me? The thought of Joffrey on the throne, with Cersei standing behind him whispering in his ear. My son. How could I have made a son like that, Ned?"

Ned could see as clear as day. Robert as he once was, his hammer at his side, standing at the helm of a ship as it sailed across waters bluer than the summer sky.

“He is only a boy,” said Ned, his words like gravel in his throat.

Robert shook his head. “Youth is outgrown,” he said gruffly, “other things, less so. But, perhaps your daughter will change him for the better. They seem quite taken with each other, don’t you think? A good wife tempers any man.”

“Sometimes,” Ned said, but Robert was scarcely listening.

“They should be wed soon,” said Robert, his eyes glazing, “I’d like to hold a babe in my arms while I’m still young. Our grandchildren, Ned. We’ll name one of the girls Lyanna.”

Ned thought the image might come to mind, but Robert’s words conjured only emptiness. The King’s dreams fell on barren earth.

“Yes, your grace,” Ned replied gently. Sansa’s pleas tugged at him, and he chose his next words carefully. “Our daughters have become close as well.”

Robert nodded absently. “Sweet thing, Myrcella is,” the King said, “as pretty as her mother once was, and lacking any of Cersei’s venom.”

“Perhaps Myrcella would like to visit Winterfell,” Ned said carefully, “I was planning to take the girls to visit Catelyn in the coming year. Myrcella could accompany us, and Tommen of course if you wished it. We might join our families in another way. Lady of Winterfell would be a fitting title for a princess of the realm.”

Robert turned to him, his interest returning. “You see it as I do,” said Robert softening, “our families tied together. Stark and Baratheon. An empire of our own making, just as we always wanted.”

“You will consider it then?” asked Ned.

“Consider it done,” said Robert, slamming his cup down on the table, “a beautiful bride my daughter will make your son. And take my youngest, Ned. The boy is far too soft. A stay in the North will strengthen his spine. Let your sons have at him, good, strong boys they seemed.”

“They are,” Ned responded.

“You love your children, don’t you, Ned?” Robert asked him, peering through his drunken haze.

“With all my heart,” Ned replied.

Robert smiled, and raised his glass. “To us, Ned. We’ll make this a reign to sing of, yet, you and I.”

Ned tightened his fingers around his own wine glass, and lifted his hand to meet Robert’s toast.

“To us.”
“You must have ideas.”

“Some.”

“Such as?”

“My good dress, the Tully blue one. Hair around my shoulders, like mother’s. I’d draw him away, and Lady would be waiting to give him a kiss at his throat. He does know better than to refuse a lady.”

“Oh, that’s much too fast.”

“You think?”

“He’ll be your captive audience one last time. Don’t you want to whisper his own words in his ear as he dies?”

“What would you suggest?”

“Gag him. Slow cuts. Shallow. Make him beg until he realizes it’s futile. I like that part, when they realize. You get to see the fear cloud their eyes.”

“I don’t think I need that, as much.”

“What?”

“To see his fear.”

“Pity. I was hoping to see him piss himself this time. It all went so fast, before. Although, the crying and begging were good bits.”

“It’s different this time. He doesn’t even know us, and I don’t plan on waiting until his death feels more poignant.”

“You want to stop the chaos before it begins.”

“It’s for the best.”

“As you wish, my lady.”
“Brienne,” said Sansa suddenly, looking up from her seat at the table, “I think I’d like to meet Father as he finishes with the council.”

She felt Brienne’s eyes studying her critically, just as they had when Sansa emerged from her chambers this morning. Sansa had left her hair down around her shoulders, in a pretty southern style. She had also donned a blue silk, embroidered with a hundred leaping, silver fish.

“Of course, my lady,” Brienne responded, climbing to her feet. “Where is your sister, this morning? She should accompany us.”

“Arya is otherwise occupied,” Sansa said, laying a reassuring hand on Brienne’s arm, “it will be just the two of us.”

Brienne asked no questions, but Sansa could feel, rather than see, the crinkle appear between her knight’s eyebrows.

She walked silently by Sansa’s side as they made their way towards the council chambers. Thank you for trusting me.

Sansa did not shrink as she normally did when moving through the halls of the Keep. She walked with all the assurance and grace as was befitting a lady with the noblest bloodline.

Sansa registered the eyes that followed her across the courtyard. She damned them all, and smiled.

The council was emerging from their chambers as she approached, and she noted the moment when they caught sight of her. If there was one thing that Sansa had learned, it was how to manipulate the eye.

“Father!” she cried out gaily, waving her hand delicately. He moved to come to her, but she preempted him, coming closer so that she could see the faces of the men he was with.

Her father’s eyes darkened with concern immediately, and he went to her, drawing her close. She allowed her head to rest on his shoulder for a moment, before pulling away.

“Sansa,” Ned said, looking over her quickly, “what is the matter, my love?”

Sansa let a pout slip onto her face, tracking the others in her periphery. “Arya was horrid this morning,” she told her father, letting pettiness slip into her voice, “she stole my doll, the nice one with the pretty hair. She’s going to ruin it!”

Her father blinked, caught off-guard by her words. Listen to what I mean, she urged him silently,
“I’m sure your sister meant no harm,” said her father, recovering himself, “I will speak with her.”

“She’s sulking in her room,” Sansa told him dismissively, “like a child.”

Ned shook his head in confusion, “Let us go back to the Tower,” he said, “we will - ”

“Ned, you keep this lovely girl too close,” interrupted Renly, smiling widely. He kissed Sansa’s hand. “I have not seen you since the tourney, my lady. I hope you have fared well.”

Sansa blushed prettily. “Thank you, my lord,” she said to Renly, “I have recovered somewhat from my fright. It helps to know that Brienne is close by.”

“Of course,” Renly agreed, bowing to Brienne, “Lady Brienne makes us all feel safer.”

Sansa smiled, twisting a lock of her hair around her finger. Her eyes darted to Littlefinger, and back again when he met her stare.

“If you would just talk to your sister,” her father urged, placing a hand on her back. Sansa squirmed away from him.

“I’m not talking to her until she apologizes,” Sansa said hotly, “she’s always taking my things, it’s not fair!” She tossed her hair. “Besides, Brienne and I are going to take tea and cakes under the pavilion. It’s such a beautiful day, I want to be by the sea.”

Ned hesitated, studying her. “Very well,” he said, finally, “I will see to your sister.”

“Good,” sniffed Sansa, “she cannot behave like this. We are guests of the King. Come, Brienne.”

She rose to her tiptoes, and kissed her father on his cheek. She swept a low curtsy to the council, and allowed her eyes to linger on Littlefinger’s once more. Then she strode off towards the pavilion, Brienne following close behind.

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“I love lemoncakes, don’t you?” Sansa inquired of Brienne.

“They are lovely,” Brienne said, fidgeting in her place beside Sansa. Her eyes darted nervously about, as if looking for the next enemy.

“It’s a beautiful day, Brienne,” Sansa said taking Brienne’s hand in her own, “try to enjoy it.”

“Yes, my lady,” said Brienne, meeting Sansa’s eyes with an incomprehensible expression.

Sansa hummed under her breath, eating lemoncakes, and playing with the flowers that dripped down over the table.

She stilled when Brienne’s head snapped to attention.

“Lord Baelish,” Brienne said, her voice mistrustful.

Sansa looked up. He hovered by their table, a half-smile on his face, his eyes glinting.

“Lord Baelish,” Sansa greeted, taking her napkin and wiping her mouth daintily.
“Lady Sansa,” he said, his smile growing. She proffered her hand, and he took it and kissed it. His eyes flickered to Brienne, and he inclined his head in greeting.

“Are you taking in the gardens, Lord Baelish?” Sansa asked him, “I was just telling Brienne how beautiful the day has become.”

“Indeed,” Littlefinger said, “quite different from what you are used to in the North, my lady.”

“I am a southern lady now,” Sansa told him primly, “this weather suits my constitution.”

“I see that,” he said, his eyes running over her hair and dress. He gestured to an empty chair, “may I join you?”

“Oh,” said Sansa, turning to Brienne as if in question. She turned back around with an apologetic smile, “we were just finishing. Brienne was going to escort me to the godswood.”

“Ah,” said Littlefinger, withdrawing, “perhaps another time then.”

“You could join us,” Sansa said, smiling up at him, “it would be a pleasure.”

“I would not intrude on your prayers, my lady,” Littlefinger said, but his fingers wrapped around the top of the chair, staying him.

“I keep to the Seven,” Sansa told him, “my mother’s gods. I simply enjoy walking through the trees.”

“If you do not mind,” he said, studying her.

“I do not,” Sansa told him firmly, gathering her skirts and getting to her feet, “and Brienne will be with us, as an escort.”

He offered his arm, and she took it. They walked, and Brienne trailed them like a shadow.

“I wanted to apologize,” Sansa said, looking up at him, “if I seemed rude or reticent when we first met. I did not realize, at first, who you were.”

He looked down at her, in interest.

“I wrote my mother of you,” she informed him. His fingers tightened the slightest bit on her hand.

“Oh?” he hummed lightly.

“She said you were very dear to her,” said Sansa, “and she asked how you’ve fared. I told her you seem to have done quite well for yourself.”

“I rose on tricks of the trade, my lady,” he said gamely, “a bit of luck landed me in the service of our good king, and I intend to honor my position as long as I possess it.”

“You do honor it, my lord,” she told him, “the North will be ever grateful to your assistance in finding the gold for the glass gardens.”

“Fascinating idea,” said Littlefinger, “the North has all the land of the other six kingdoms combined, and yet so little of it is hospitable. To transform arid soil, is to transform an entire economy.”

“How so?” Sansa asked.
“The North can never be tamed,” said Littlefinger, “and so it must be managed in other ways. Food production, for one. The North depends on grain shipments from the South, especially in the Winter years. But if that need is removed…”

“Oh, our gardens are mostly flowers,” said Sansa dismissively, “and lemons of course. The trees don’t grow nearly as well as they do here, though. Princess Myrcella’s garden is the most wonderful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Isn’t it?” asked Littlefinger, as they reached the edge of the godswood.

“Do you know the way, my lord?” Sansa asked him.

“No, my lady,” he said smoothly, “I will follow you.”

Sansa stepped into the clearing of the heart tree. Her heart pounded, as she pulled her arm free of Littlefinger. Brienne stepped off to the side, watching.

“I thought you might frequent the godswood,” Sansa said, stepping towards the great tree, “mother wrote that you loved to go there with her when you were children.”

“Many years ago,” he said, stepping closer to her, “how the time does pass. You look just as she did, all those years back.”

Sansa smiled, pleased. “I’ve been told I look just like her,” she said, tucking her hair behind her ear, “I hope I’m as beautiful as her one day.”

“My lady,” he said, glancing at Brienne's stony face, “you already are.”

Sansa hummed in acknowledgement, and bent to gather the daisies that littered the base of the tree. It was in that silence, that she caught the faintest whistle of a blade.

*He* caught the sound as well, but Arya’s dagger hit its mark, just as he made to turn around. The blade buried itself deep in his skull, and he stumbled. Sansa watched, as his eyes widened, and his mouth opened in shock. Blood dripped out the corners of his mouth, and he fell heavily to the ground.

He jerked several times, moaning, but Sansa knew that he would not get up. Arya emerged from the trees, a grim smile on her face.

Sansa whipped her attention to Brienne, who was staring at Littlefinger’s body in shock. Her horrified eyes met Sansa’s.

“I’m sorry,” Sansa said, tripping over her words in haste, “I wasn’t sure if you would stop us.”

“You should have told me,” Brienne rasped, her breathing unsteady. She shook her head, a hand at her heart.

Arya strode briskly over to the body, and poked at his collar.

“We need to get these clothes off him,” Arya said, keeping her eyes on Sansa. She did not look at Brienne.

Sansa nodded slowly, staring at the back of his head where the blade had entered.
Arya’s mouth twisted the tiniest bit. “Go wait in the trees,” she told her sister, “I will see to this.”

“No,” Sansa told her sister firmly, although she made no move to approach the body, “I will stay.”

Brienne stepped over to them quietly, her face pale. She put a hand on Arya’s shoulder. “What do we need to do?”

They worked quickly. The body was stripped of the top layer of clothing. Sansa placed his yellow cape, his fine doublet, and his mockingbird pin in a pile to the side.

“There’s a shovel behind the tree,” Arya instructed Brienne, “the hole needs to be out of the clearing.” Brienne vanished into the trees to her task.

“There’s less blood than I expected,” said Sansa, staring at the dark stain on the ground.

“It’s all contained,” said Arya, pointing to the darkened earth, “cleaner than wolves.”

“Yes,” Sansa agreed.

She helped Arya flip the body. Arya took a cloth, and wiped the face, closing the eyes. She stopped then, looking up at Sansa.

“You can’t be here for this part,” Arya said flatly.

“I’m not afraid,” Sansa started to argue.

“No,” Arya said, and something in her sister’s sudden monotone frightened her, “you cannot stay for this part.”

Sansa jerked her head in a nod, and stood quickly. She hurried into the trees to look for Brienne.

Silently, she helped Brienne, careful not to dirty her dress. They lingered by the hole, long after it was finished. Reluctantly, Sansa led the way back to the clearing, her steps hesitant.

“Arya?” she called softly. Her sister stood over the body, but her hands were empty. Arya looked up and nodded at them. Her eyes were fathomless.

“Take it,” Arya said gesturing to the body, “I’ve finished.”

Brienne dragged it off, her face damp with exertion.

“Is it done?” Sansa whispered.

Arya nodded. “Close your eyes,” she told Sansa quietly, “and do not open them until I say so.”

Sansa nodded, and sank to the ground, her hands over her eyes. She shifted her thumbs, so that they were pressed over her ears, blocking out all sound. She stayed like that, in a huddle, waiting.

“Sansa.”

“Sansa.”

Sansa opened her eyes with a sharp intake of breath. Littlefinger stood in front of her, dressed in his clothes. As she stared, he took one of his thin hands, and brushed a bit of dirt away from his doublet.
She was frozen in fear.

A look of hesitation passed over his face. It was a look that Sansa had never seen Petyr Baelish wear in all his many faces. It relaxed her a touch, and she stared in wonder.

“It’s alright,” Littlefinger’s raspy voice assured her, “it’s me. It’s not him.”

“Arya,” whispered Sansa, brokenly. She had not meant to sound so shattered, but it could not be helped.

“Do not fear,” Arya told her gently, “it will only be for a short while. Rest assured, he is gone.”

The three of them made their way out of the godswood, Sansa on Arya’s arm. Brienne a step behind them. They parted at the gardens. Arya bowed low, and kissed Sansa’s hand. She then strode briskly off, yellow cape fluttering in the breeze.

Sansa fought to keep her steps steady.

“Wasn’t that lovely?” she asked Brienne in a sweet, hollow voice as they walked.

“Yes, my lady,” Brienne responded quietly. Sansa looked up. She could still see where the sweat had run down Brienne’s face, leaving traces of salt behind.

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Arya slowed herself, walking at an unhurried pace. Like a man who believes he owns the world, she thought.

She nodded to all those she passed, making sure to catch their eyes. He needed to be remembered.

Her hand, she kept at her breast. There was blood there, and around the collar. But Arya knew how easily people missed what they did not look for.

Littlefinger’s chambers were a fair walk away. She greeted the guards in the corridor, and reached into her pockets to extract his key.

His rooms were meticulous, not a hair out of place. Arya perused his desk, and drawers, but he was a careful man. There was nothing of interest here.

She threw some of this clothes in a bag, along with a fine silver chain and several gold dragons. And then she left, leaving the door unlocked behind her.

No one stopped her, as she walked through the Keep, and passed through the gates. She crossed the streets, ducking into an alley. She dropped the bag. Someone would find it, and make use of its contents.

And Petyr Baelish of the Fingers, vanished into thin air.

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They ate in a tense silence. Sansa couldn’t meet her father’s eyes, couldn’t answer his questions.

“Where is your sister?” Ned demanded again.

“Busy,” Sansa said, pushing at her food with her fork, “she’s safe.”
“That is not what I asked,” Ned said tightly, “Sansa, you must tell me. I am worried.”

“I know you are worried,” Sansa told him, “but I cannot tell you until Arya returns. Which she should, shortly.”

Ned sat back, the chair scraping harshly against the stone. He looked once more at Brienne. She shook her head, her mouth in a thin line.

He came to Sansa, kneeling in front of her, and taking her hands. “Sansa,” he pleaded again, “child, please. What is it that you cannot trust me with?”

Sansa looked down, saying nothing, but her fingers curled around his.

Ned sighed, looking down at their clasped hands. He pulled their hands apart, and caught her fingertips between his. Sansa jerked away.

“There’s blood under your nails,” said Ned harshly.

Sansa swallowed hard, and her chin trembled.

The door slammed below, and Ned jumped to his feet as the sound of rapid steps on the stairs approached. Arya skidded to a stop when she realized they were waiting for her.

Sansa flew to her sister, and pulled Arya off the ground into her arms. Arya struggled half-heartedly, her eyes on Ned and Brienne. Sansa felt her sister tentatively put a hand on the back of her neck, trying to soothe her.

‘Where were you?’ Ned demanded of Arya, coming forward to embrace the both of them. He squeezed them tightly, then stepped back, his face a mask.

Sansa met Arya’s eyes. “An errand,” said Arya, shifting on her feet, “I was successful.”

Ned sat down at the table, and in that instant, her father looked old and weary.

“What have you done?” Ned whispered, beseeching them.

“What was necessary,” Arya said quietly, “only what was necessary.”

“Arya is right,” said Sansa, her fingers drifting through her sister’s hair, “it was just.”

“What?” snapped Ned, “what was so necessary? So important that you kept it from me?”

“We didn’t tell you, or Brienne,” Sansa said, her eyes flicking to Brienne’s face, “we didn’t wish to burden you with something that was inevitable.”

“You should have told me,” Brienne said in a grim voice, “I would not have stopped you. I am no stranger to justice. I have acted upon it myself when I saw fit.”

“Perhaps,” Sansa agreed, “but we did not. And I am sorry for the grief and shock that we have caused you, but I do not regret our decision.”

Her father stared at her. “Who?” he murmured, trepidation lacing the word.

Arya stepped towards him, and held out her fist. She uncurled her tightly clenched fingers, to reveal a silver mockingbird pin sitting in the palm of her hand.
There was silence. Sansa did not dare look upon her father’s face.

“For you, my lady,” Arya said, turning and depositing the pin into Sansa’s hand, “the deed is done.”

“Thank you,” Sansa said, staring at the glinting silver.

She would throw it in the bay, she decided at once. Stabbed, buried, drowned. There were so many ways to dispose of a man and his belongings.

It was the memories, however, that lingered long after flesh and bone had rotten away. She looked at the pin, and swore she could taste mint on her tongue.

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“I’m going to have a drink,” Ned said, into the silence, after the girls had retreated upstairs, “would you like one?”

Brienne hesitated, before sitting down across from him. “I think I will,” she said. Ned poured them wine, and she wrapped her hand tightly around the cup she was given.

“I never liked to drink,” Ned said, gazing off into the fire, “on occasion I would, but I never found it soothing as so many do.”

“I don’t either, my lord,” Brienne said, staring down into the wine, “I’m hesitant weaken my body and mind. It’s all one has.”

They drank in silence, the fire crackling.

“I did not know,” Brienne murmured after a while, “I spoke truly, I would not have stopped them. But I cannot protect them if I cannot anticipate their actions.”

“She dressed like her mother this morning,” Ned croaked, “for an instant when I saw her coming, I thought it was Cat. I was so proud, she looked so beautiful. And it was all for him.”

“She laid a sure trap,” Brienne said quietly, “he came to her without a second thought.”

Ned drank deeply. “How was it done?” he asked, his voice catching roughly.

“A dagger,” said Brienne.

“Who wielded it?”

“It was not me, my lord,” Brienne admitted, but she would say no more.

There was a dead man’s blood underneath his daughters’ fingernails, and the thought of that made Ned want to wretch.

_Festering worm of a man, Arya’s words whispered in his ear, I slit his throat for his crimes._

“But it’s done,” said Ned, emerging from his stupor, “and there is no trace of him? No chance it can be linked to the girls?”

“No, my lord,” said Brienne, her eyes dark, “of that I can assure you. It has been done, and it has been done thoroughly.”
Thoroughly. Ned could only imagine what her words meant.

“Do not blame them, too much,” Brienne said gently, “they have suffered greatly.”

_I know_, Ned longed to respond, but something stopped him. _How could I?_

“How can I blame them?” Ned asked, weary to his bones, “they sought to protect themselves, and I would never deny them that right.”

“They were protecting you too,” said Brienne softly.

“Us,” agreed Ned, thinking of Littlefinger and the thousand of ripples that would still across the realm as a result of his death.

He felt satisfaction simmer in his stomach, and then, sickening guilt. He couldn’t protect his children. Not from any of this.

Chapter End Notes

Sansa and Brienne lead Littlefinger into the godswood. Arya kills him with a dagger. Arya takes his face, and they bury the body in the woods. Arya, wearing Littlefinger’s face, walks out of the godswood with Brienne and Sansa.
‘Winterfell!’ Yoren called back over his shoulder.

Tyrion sagged over his weary pony in relief, dreaming of the feather bed that surely awaited him.

The gates of Winterfell opened as they rode through, and Tyrion watched as Yoren and the other brothers were greeted warmly.

His reception was less fond, although a stable boy came quickly when he had clambered rather gracelessly to the ground on his aching legs. He hoped he would be shown his rooms, quickly.

He winced as he caught sight of Robb Stark hurrying across the courtyard, his steward by his side. His wolf, bigger even than Jon’s, trailed behind him.

Tyrion squinted as the boy came closer. In his memories, Lord Robb Stark had received him with all the suspicion and dislike his mother had curried in him after Bran’s fall.

It was jarring then, to be received with such a look of relief and expectance. But not unwelcome, Tyrion concluded, hobbling forward to greet the young lord.

“Lord Tyrion,” Robb said, stopping in front of him, and dipping his head. A far cry from the unsheathed sword that had lain across the boy’s lap the first time he had returned to Winterfell.

Tyrion bowed awkwardly in return.

“Forgive me, young Stark,” he grumbled, “I am not as suited to the art of riding as I may appear.”

“Vayon, see Lord Tyrion to his chambers,” Robb said at once, directing his orders to the man beside him.

“Right away, my lord,” said Vayon. He called for a boy to carry Tyrion’s things, and Tyrion followed them into the castle, regaining some of the feeling in his calves as he walked.

He was limping down a familiar hallway, when he was knocked back suddenly, sprawling uncomfortably on the hard stones.

“Summer!”

“Bran!” Tyrion heard Vayon scold, “your brother forbade you from running the halls with that beast!”

“We were racing,” Bran protested.

Tyrion struggled to put himself back on his feet. He felt an arm at his elbow, and looked up into the face of Brandon Stark. His little face was anxious, two spots of color high on his cheeks.
“Summer didn’t mean to,” he insisted, helping Tyrion up. Vayon tutted, and assisted at his other side.

“Apologize to Lord Tyrion,” Vayon ordered, “he is a guest of your family.”

“I’m sorry,” Bran said scuffing his boot along the stone, “Summer didn’t mean it.”

“It is no trouble,” Tyrion lied, feeling a bruise beginning to rise on his hip, “don’t trouble the boy over it.”

*What was a bruise to the sight of the boy on his feet?*

Bran looked at Tyrion as if recognizing him for the first time.

“You’re the Queen’s brother!” Bran said, his face lighting up, “have you come from the Wall? My brother is there! Is he safe?”

Tyrion stifled a laugh. “Yes, little lord,” he told Bran, “I spent a good deal of time with Jon Snow. He is well, and so is your uncle.”

“Is he coming back soon?” asked Bran, hopping from foot to foot, “Father said Jon isn’t staying forever like Uncle Benjen.”

“There is work to be done at the Wall,” Tyrion told him gently, “he will return, but not for a long while. He plans to join a ranging north of the Wall.”

Bran stopped bouncing, his face torn between awe and disappointment.

“I have something for you,” Tyrion continued, reaching into his cloak. He pulled out the bundle of letters, and selected the one meant for the boy in front of him.

Bran took the letter eagerly.

“That’s meant for you, and the little one,” Tyrion said, “from your brother.”

“Did Jon see a giant yet?” Bran said, tearing at the wax seal with his fingers, “Old Nan says there’s giants beyond the Wall.”

“I imagine he would tell you if he had,” said Tyrion with a tired smile.

“Go find your brother,” Vayon told Bran, a hand at his shoulder, “Lord Tyrion is tired after his journey.”

Bran ran without a glance back, and Tyrion followed Vayon gratefully into his chambers.

“Lord Stark requests that you join him and his mother for dinner,” Vayon said, with a short bow, “someone will be sent to collect you after you’ve rested.”

“Alas, it would be rude to refuse my host,” Tyrion quipped, but Vayon’s face stayed stern. “Of course,” Tyrion said, sitting down with a sigh, “tell them I am at the service of House Stark.”

“Very good, my lord.” Vayon nodded, and left, leaving Tyrion to his thoughts of soft furs and a feather bed.
“Lord Tyrion, please sit.”

Robb Stark sat at the table, holding himself in an approximation of his father. His mother was beside him, her face cool and closed.

Tyrion hesitated, his hand on the chair in front of him. Without the others, he suddenly felt as if he was staring across a battlefield. He’d ridden against this man once, in a war, a man that had been murdered on his father’s orders. He’d damned Catelyn Stark, and all she loved seven times over once upon a time. All that happened could have been avoided if not due to her arrogance.

And yet, there was nothing of this in their eyes. Do not judge a man by things he has not done, Tyrion reminded himself, but do not forget what he is capable of.

“Lord Robb,” Tyrion greeted, “Lady Catelyn.”

“I trust your journey was pleasant,” Robb pressed. Tyrion watched his fingers drum on the table, belying his smooth tone. Beside the boy, Catelyn watched Tyrion closely.

“It was not fatal,” said Tyrion, sipping wine from his cup, “I am satisfied with that. I have never liked the cold. It reminds me too much of death.”

“You’ll smell the dead coming.”

“I imagine I’ll see them as well, Jon Snow.”

“It’s the first warning. You smell the cold. Like fire in your lungs.”

“You’ll be headed South soon enough,” said Robb, “you’ll have our fastest horses, and Northern men at your command.”

“Are you you so eager to be rid of me, boy?” asked Tyrion, with a wry smile.

“My son is Warden of the North, Lord Tyrion,” Catelyn said, her eyes stern, “you will address him as such.”

“Apologies,” said Tyrion, inclining his head, “Lord Stark.”

Robb shook his head impatiently, “titles are not what concern me. What concerns me is the safety of my family. I cannot go to them, but you can.”

“I appreciate your faith in me,” said Tyrion, “I cannot say that I am anxious to return to the capital, but it is a necessary venture. I will leave as soon as I have recovered.”

“You will be an ally in a place where they have none,” Robb said. His words sounded like an order.

“I will do my best,” said Tyrion, smiling faintly, “I am only one small man. But I do not intend to fail in my purpose, that much I can offer you.”

“What of Jon’s work?” Robb asked.

“Well on its course at the moment,” said Tyrion withdrawing Jon’s letter and handing it to Robb, “he instructed me that this letter is only to be seen by your eyes and by Lady Catelyn’s.”

Robb scanned the letter silently. “He has secured a place in the ranging,” said Robb finally, “he will be granted safe passage beyond the Wall. Lord Commander Mormont is amiable to his
purposes."

“Lord Mormont is a desperate man,” Tyrion responded, “and a practical one. The Watch is crumbling, their numbers are dwindling. He has reports of Others beyond the Wall, and it frightens him. He would be a fool to refuse a request by your father. They need the support of North, and of the Crown on their side.”

“The dragonglass has arrived,” said Robb sitting back, “accompanied by gold, and glassblowers. I intend to send it all North at the earliest possible instance. The Watch will have the weight of the Seven Kingdoms behind it.”

“For now,” said Tyrion grimly, “tell me, what news has there been from King’s Landing?”

“All seems well,” said Robb slowly, “they write of trivial things, so I must believe that they are safe and secure for the moment.”

“What has Sansa wrote?” Tyrion asked, earning a sharp glance from Catelyn.

“Trivialities,” Robb grunted again, “Arya spilled ink on her silk dress. The princess has the prettiest dolls, and the loveliest gowns. Ser Loras Tyrell gave her a rose, and told her she was pretty. The Queen is radiant and beautiful, the Prince is as handsome as he is kind -”

Tyrion snorted into his wine.

“- and she witnessed her first tourney,” finished Robb, “and she said that all the knights looked as if they had ridden straight out of a song.”

“All is well then,” said Tyrion, a note of admiration touching his voice, “you sister has survived King’s Landing before, she will do it again.”

“Not unscathed,” snapped Catelyn.

“No, my lady,” said Tyrion, his smile falling, “none of us did.”

“I was wondering if you could make sense of Arya’s letter actually,” said Robb standing up, and walking to the desk. He shuffled his papers, and brought the letter to Tyrion. “It’s the only one she’s sent so far.”

Tyrion took the parchment, and smoothed it out. He read it quickly, his eyebrows drifting up as he did.

“You have two clever sisters,” he told Robb, amusement dancing across his face, “she’s hidden a message in this charming story.”

“Of what?” Catelyn asked, leaning forward.

“I cannot make sense of all of it,” said Tyrion, his eyes drifting over the words ‘dragon princess,’ “but I can illuminate one aspect. Gendry the Blacksmith. One of Robert’s bastards. Your sister was quite fond of him as I recall, as was Jon.”

“The king’s bastard?” asked Robb, frowning, “I don’t understand.”

“Your sister is a terrifying girl,” said Tyrion looking down at the letter again, “but, fiercely devoted to those she loves. My sister ordered the massacre of all of Robert’s baseborn bastards, hoping of course, to ensure the succession of her own bastard. If there was a way to save this boy, I
am sure the plans have already been put into motion."

Robb and Catelyn stared at him.

“Arya is in love with Robert Baratheon’s bastard?” asked Robb incredulously.

Tyrion chuckled. “I could not say for sure. But, I can tell you that Gendry is a fine lad. He followed us North against the Others.”

“For the Targaryen girl?” said Robb.

“No,” said Tyrion carefully, “for Jon.”

Robb nodded, his eyes distant.

“I would keep an eye out for a blacksmith,” Tyrion offered, “if this story speaks any truth, there is surely one headed North.”

“We could use one,” said Robb rubbing his chin, “I want to expand the trainings in the practice yard. Theon and Jory have been doing a fine job with the boys, but I want to go further. I’m going to offer daily practice to the men and boys of Winter Town.”

“You’re going to start training the small folk?” Tyrion asked in interest.

“Jon advised it,” said Robb gruffly, “and I agree it's a necessary measure. If we go to war, whichever war, we will need every able-bodied man familiar with a weapon in his hand.”

“You might not limit yourself to the men,” Tyrion advised mildly, “many northern women marched in defense of their home. I recall that Lady Lyanna Mormont led the women and girls of Bear Island, and she was but a girl of one and ten.”

“Lady Mormont’s babe?” asked Catelyn, her face paling, “I remember when she was born, they wrote to tell us that they had named her Lyanna. Surely the women can be spared taking up arms this time.”

“No one was spared, Lady Catelyn,” Tyrion said, bitterness creeping over him, “and they won’t be this time. However this plays out, everyone in the seven kingdoms, noble and common alike will feel its affects.”

“I don’t like it,” said Robb, his face stern as his father’s, “if it were my sisters…”

“Your sisters are warriors in their own right,” said Tyrion, “they… benefited from the ability to protect themselves, and to protect others.”

A darkness swept over Robb’s face. “You speak as if you know my sisters better than I do,” he muttered.

“We knew them at different times,” Tyrion responded evenly, “they were greatly changed by the things that happened to them.”

“My daughters have not changed so much,” said Catelyn, breaking the silence that fell, “they are Starks, and belong at Winterfell. With their family.”

“And I will do everything in my power to see them safely returned,” said Tyrion, meeting Catelyn’s eyes, “but their presence is required in the Capital for the time being. They cannot effectively ensure peace from the seat of the North.”
Robb nodded grimly, but it was Catelyn who he watched. She was displeased, and Tyrion felt a flicker of irritation. Catelyn was a smart woman, of that he had no doubt. But smart, as he knew too well, did not always mean wise.

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It was warmer in Winterfell, Tyrion had to laugh at the thought. The sky was still summer blue, and he did not miss the dampness of melting snow that had soaked into everything he owned at the Wall.

He paused to watch the training ground. A useful idea it was, to begin training the smallfolk. However, Tyrion mused, it smacked of suspicion. If the other Northern houses caught wind of Robb’s efforts to train the commons, there would be questions.

“Bran fights well, doesn’t he?”

Tyrion turned, at the sound of Robb’s voice. They stood on the balcony, surveying the men sparring below.

“He does,” Tyrion said, looking down at Bran, “his life will be entirely different now. It only ever requires one decision to change our path.”

Robb stood beside him silently. Tyrion watched Theon Greyjoy instruct two young boys, fighting with wooden swords.

“Theon’s done well,” Robb said, his eyes following the Ironborn, “I suppose all he needed was the chance to prove himself. He’s given me no cause to doubt him yet.”

“I assume you have a plan this time?” Tyrion murmured, “to avert Theon’s actions?”

Robb didn’t respond, and Tyrion turned to him. Robb’s fingers tightened around the railing.

“I’m to keep him close,” Robb said finally, his voice gruff, “and ensure his loyalty.”

“They didn’t tell you,” Tyrion noted, realization dawning.

“I know he betrayed us,” said Robb, a stony expression on his face, “but he redeemed himself. Sansa said she owes him her life.”

“Theon was never a good man,” said Tyrion, “but I admit, he managed to do some good in the end. Of course, that cannot erase what he did.”

“Tell me,” Robb demanded, “I cannot fight my battles blind. To do so will surely lead me down the path of failure. I feel as if I am balanced on a wire that threatens to break at any moment.”

Tyrion shook his head. “I cannot,” he said quietly, “I understand exactly why they have chosen not to reveal the nature of Theon’s betrayal. There are some things, that a man cannot come back from.”

“Tell me anything,” Robb insisted, “anything to help me navigate these waters. My mother would rather send him away at once, but I think it wiser to keep him close.”

“You have made the right choice,” said Tyrion, “he is of more use to you as an ally than as an enemy. Your mother acts too quickly, when she thinks she has been wronged. It only leads to chaos and destruction.”
“You will not speak ill of my mother, Lord Tyrion,” Robb warned.

“Apologies,” said Tyrion, biting his tongue.

“I disagree with her assessment of Theon,” said Robb, “but I will always give weight to her counsel.”

“Who is Theon?” Tyrion asked, abruptly.

Robb stared at him, unsure. “Theon is a Greyjoy,” he answered slowly, “he is my father’s ward, sent as collateral after King Robert put down the Ironborn’s rebellion. He has been at Winterfell since he was a child.”

“And what does he want?” Tyrion pressed.

“He is loyal to my family,” Robb said, faltering slightly, “he wants to serve us.”

Tyrion looked at Robb sharply. “You would know,” he said, “is a man like Theon content to dutifully serve his captors for the rest of his life?”

“My father has been good to Theon,” Robb argued, “he was raised almost as a brother to me.”

“Almost,” Tyrion repeated, “almost as a brother is not quite a brother is it? Almost a Stark, but not quite. There is an impassable distance between almost and the truth. These things shape a man, Robb Stark. Weigh him down. Affect his principles.”

“You defend his actions,” groused Robb.

“No,” said Tyrion, “I merely advise that you look closely their root. Theon did not betray you on a whim, he did it for a purpose. You need to examine that purpose if you wish to retain him and his loyalty.”

“We gave him everything,” whispered Robb, “how could he do that to us?”

“Because he looks at you, and sees everything he does not have,” Tyrion interrupted, “he grew up beside the heir to Winterfell, the first born son of Ned Stark. You are the honor in your father’s heart, and the pride in your mother’s eyes. Do you know what it feels like? To be unwanted?”

Robb’s Tully blue eyes were shuttered. “No,” he muttered, “I do not.”

“A good leader does not need to have experienced every struggle of his people,” Tyrion said, “but he must be able to empathize with their plight. He needs to understand their struggles, and be able to foresee a solution to move beyond them. This is what I can offer you in regards to Theon”

“Shouldn’t I be able to trust the men I lead?” asked Robb.

“How can you trust them if you do not know them?”

“I thought I did,” admitted Robb softly, “perhaps I was mistaken.”

Tyrion turned at his words. “A good leader is not one who commits no errors,” he said gently, “but one who is willing to admit when they are wrong.”

Robb absorbed his words, then spoke, “and you believe the Targaryen girl is this kind of leader?”

Robb’s question stopped him short.
Your Grace, nothing scrubs bold notions from a man's head like a few weeks in a dark cell.

I meant what I said. I'm not here to put men in chains. If that becomes an option, many will take it. I gave them a choice. They made it.

Your Grace, if you start beheading entire families -

I'm not beheading anyone.

“My faith was tested,” said Tyrion finally, “I will not deny it. There were times when she faltered in her objective. But I have to believe that things will be different this time. She is the best hope for the kingdom.”

Bend the knee and join me. Together, we will leave the world a better place than we found it.

“And if you are mistaken?” asked Robb quietly.

Tyrion smiled bitterly. “I suppose I would have to admit that to myself if the time should come.”

Or refuse, and die.
“Jon.”

Jon stopped at the hand on his shoulder, and turned to face his uncle.

“Stay with me for a moment, son,” Benjen murmured, guiding Jon over to the railing.

“I’m off to training,” Jon said, gesturing to the courtyard below, “I’ve kept my mouth shut, and practiced with the others. They’re getting quite good really.”

“Aye, they are,” said Benjen looking down into the yard, “which is why Ser Alliser will be passing most of them on. We’ve heard word that Gueren is marching five new boys up the Kingsroad. They’re ready to become men of the Watch. He’ll be announcing it to them, today.”

Jon stared down at the recruits gathered below. *Green and stinking of summer*, Thorne had said to him so long ago, *when the winter comes you’ll die like flies*. Jon hadn’t believed him then, none of the boys had.

“Is Sam moving on?” Jon asked softly.

“He is,” said Benjen, “I don’t think Thorne would have believed it at his first glimpse of the boy, but it cannot be denied that he is capable. He’s braver than he looks, and intelligent. He’ll be taken for the stewards. You’re right, Maester Aemon would make good use of him.”

“Sam served Maester Aemon well,” Jon murmured, “he served the Watch well. He lived, and died by the protection of the realm.”

“His watch is not yet ended,” Benjen reminded him, “it is just beginning.”

From below them, Jon heard Pyp shout. The chosen recruits were celebrating, laughing and whooping. Halder hit Toad with the flat of his blade and bellowed, “Toad, of the Night’s Watch!”

“A black brother needs a horse,” Pyp roared, and leapt onto Grenn’s shoulders, sending them both crashing to the ground.

Dareon went running into the armory, and Jon watched as he ran back out with a wine skin. The recruits passed it around, hooting with delight.

Jon’s lips were dry. He knew the taste of that wine, could feel the sour red hit his tongue, sliding down his throat. He knew what it felt like to blaze with that hot excitement, that anticipation of brotherhood.

He fixed his eyes on Sam, who wore an ill-fitting smile. Sam drank the wine, and accepted the other boys’ hearty handshakes, but Jon could read the tension in him.
He looked as he did the first time, Jon realized, when Thorne had not chosen him. Only his hesitancy was borne from quite the opposite.

Pyp snatched the wine from Grenn, and sprayed him in the face with it.

"Don’t waste good wine!" Halder hollered, chasing after Pyp who danced away.

He was stopped by a snowball to the face, and he wiped it away angrily, bellowing up at Matthar and Jeren who were laughing, their arms full of snow.

“They’re all so young,” Jon managed, when he realized he had been silent for a long time.

“It always seems that way,” said Benjen, staring down at them, “every year it seems they get younger. Yet, I was hardly a man when I took the black.”

“Why did you?” asked Jon suddenly, “take the black?” So many questions he had longed to ask of his uncle, and their answers had been wiped away by the silencing cold.

Benjen’s face was stoic, but Jon saw him swallow before speaking. “After your father returned from the rebellion, he was the Stark in Winterfell. Our brother and sister were dead, they had died while I held our family home. If I had stayed, Ned would have undoubtedly been good to me. He would have given me anything I wanted, a keep of my own even. A family to warm it, but I had never dreamed of that. Lyanna and I had always talked of being the knights in the old stories, fighting terrible monsters, and slaying dark creatures. She was gone, but I thought perhaps, I could have an adventure for the both of us. I wanted a bit of glory, and the Wall offered that to a third son of a great house”

Jon’s throat closed, and he was startled to feel the pressure of tears gathering behind his eyes.

“You found it,” Jon managed to say, in an even tone.

Benjen smiled. “I’m proud of the life I’ve lived.” He glanced at Jon. “And I still have more of it left if, I’m not mistaken.”

Jon dipped his head, his words dying on his lips.

“I’m not there, in the stories you tell me, Jon,” Benjen said softly.

“No,” Jon said roughly, “you’re not. But it won’t be like that, this time. I’ll be at your side, like I should have been, before.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Benjen said gently.

“You don’t know,” muttered Jon, “you don’t know how it was.”

His uncle sighed, and placed a hand at Jon’s back.

“Was it a good death at least?” said Bejen, with a lightness that Jon could not fathom.

_No death is a good death._

“You died fighting the Others,” said Jon, “protecting the Wall.”

“As it should have been, then,” said Benjen, his hand steady on Jon’s shoulders.

“Uncle Benjen?”
Benjen turned to him, looking so much like Ned that it made Jon’s stomach clench.

“Can you tell me about Lyanna?”

His uncle’s face shifted in surprise. “Lyanna?”

“Yes.”

He could feel Benjen studying him.

“Father always said she was… beautiful and willful.”

“She was,” said Benjen, shaking his head slightly, “and so much more than that. She was my only sister, and I loved her. I used to think it was strange, when I was little, that she had been there for my whole life, and I for just a part of hers. I thought we would always be together.”

Jon sucked in a trembling breath.

“She loved to ride,” said Benjen softly, “more than anything else, she said it was like becoming the wind. I wanted to terribly to be like her. When father forbade me from riding until I was older, Lyanna fetched me from my bed, and taught me by the moonlight. They couldn’t believe it. Father, Brandon, Ned, any of them when I rode for the first time by daylight. Lyanna just laughed and laughed. That gave the game away, of course.”

“I used to take Arya out,” said Jon, closing his eyes, “she wanted so badly to hold a bow in her hands, and once Bran became old enough to do so, she couldn’t stand the injustice. Robb would have never let her, too dangerous. Sansa wasn’t fond of such things. But I could do it. I took her out to practice. She was good too, better than Bran. Could have been better than me if she had the chance. I was so proud when she made that bullseye.”

“She’s a fierce girl, your sister,” said Benjen smiling, “Lyanna would have loved her. If you hadn’t put a bow in her hands, Lyanna would have. Did you father ever tell you the story of the Tourney of Harrenhal?”

“I’ve heard it,” grunted Jon, “Rhaegar crowned Lyanna his Queen of Love and Beauty at the end of the jousts, forsaking his wife.”

“Yes,” said Benjen grimly, before softening, “but I speak of a different part of the tourney. The joust of the Knight of the Laughing Tree.”

“There is no such House,” said Jon, frowning.

“There was once,” said Benjen, a fondness spreading across his features, “we had all gone to the tourney. Brandon, Ned, Lyanna, and I. While Lyanna was off wandering, she came upon Howland Reed, the crannogman. He had been set upon by three squires, and the poor boy couldn’t defend himself. Lyanna roared, and fought them off with a tourney sword.”

“Truly?” Jon asked, his heart leaping in delight.

“Truly,” Benjen confirmed, “she took Howland back to our tent, and cleaned his wounds. We all urged him to take up a lance, and fight in the tourney the next day, but he refused. He had no head for swords or horses. And so Lyanna hatched a plot. It was me she came to for help, and together we found armor, a shield, a lance, and a horse. She wasn’t a pretty knight, but she was a sight on that field. She unseated three knights that day, one for each of the three squires. The smallfolk cheered, they were in love with this mysterious knight. King Aerys demanded that she show her...
face, but Lyanna fled, dropping her shield in an empty tree.”

“She unseated three mounted knights,” whispered Jon.

“She had the blood of the wolf,” said Benjen, “she was as true a Stark as there ever was.”

And Jon felt a hot rush of pride well within him. My mother was the blood of the wolf, he thought to himself in satisfaction, she was fierce, and loving, and just, and kind.

She loved me, Jon allowed himself to cradle the thought just for a moment, she would have loved me.

“Thank you,” he told Benjen, “thank you for telling me that.”

His uncle only smiled sadly.

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Jon tipped his head back, studying the way the light filtered through the leaves.

He heard the crack of a stick underfoot, and turned to see Sam and Ghost coming out of the trees.

“Ghost came to get me,” said Sam with a tired smile, “he’s quite the persistent messenger, really.”

He sat down beside Jon, and rubbed his hand through Ghost’s coat. Ghost relaxed under Sam’s touch.

“I wanted to talk to you about today,” said Jon, “my uncle told me that Thorne is graduating you and the others.”

“Ser Alliser has deemed us ready to become brothers of the Night’s Watch,” said Sam with a forced cheerfulness, “apparently we’re fit now, to take the black and serve the realm.”

“I’m sorry, Sam,” Jon said, grief creeping into his voice, “if there was any way –”

“- But there’s not,” Sam interrupted, “I know what you would do for me, Jon, but I cannot allow you to ask for this. There can be nothing that compromises my ability to get beyond the Wall, to get to Gilly and Sam. If this is the path I must take, then it will be done.”

“And after you have them,” asked Jon, “what then?”

Sam blew out a long breath, shaking his head. “I’m not as honorable as you, Jon. I… I did my duty. I served my kingdom, I protected the realm. And I died for it. My watch… my watch has ended. What action I take now is for the safety of the realm, and those I love, yes, but I am not bound by any oath.”

“You still think me so honorable,” whispered Jon.

“I do,” Sam responded, leveling a look at Jon, “and that hasn’t ever changed. I meant it, when I said I would support you no matter what. No matter your name, your house… your loyalty.”

Sam said the last, with difficulty, and Jon wondered if his head burned with thoughts of blood and fire, as Jon’s so often did.

“I don’t think you wrong,” Jon said, anxious suddenly, to assuage Sam’s train of thought, “I don’t, I would never hold you to your oath. Sam, you’re one of the most honorable men I’ve ever met.”
Honor, it doesn’t always mean what we think it does.”

“Do you believe that?” Sam asked, with a strange smile, “you might tell yourself that every so often. Take your own advice.”

“Perhaps I should,” murmured Jon.

“I’m afraid of what’s coming,” said Sam, “I am. But, it’s not going to stop me. Whatever happens, I’m going to find Gilly and Sam. I’m going to make them safe. Even if... even if she doesn’t love me like she did the last time. They’ll be safe. They’ll be happy, I’ll do anything to ensure that. If I have to break my vow to make them safe, I’ll do it.”

“There’s honor in protecting the people we love,” Jon said softly, shivering.

_Love is the bane of honor, the death of duty._

“I suppose I must believe that,” said Sam, smiling faintly. He stood, holding out a hand for Jon. “Come on, brother. Hobb’s outdone himself for the recruit’s celebration. Don’t your remember?”

“I remember,” said Jon, grabbing Sam’s hand, and allowing himself to be hauled up, “blueberries and cream, if my memory serves me right.”

“Lamb with garlic and herbs, a sprig of mint,” Sam recited, and Jon followed him laughing.

“Yellow turnips swimming in butter, spinach and chickpeas…”

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“You came to us outlaws,” said Mormont solemnly, surveying the crowd below. Jon looked up, his eyes steady on his commander’s face. “poachers, rapers, debtors, killers, and thieves. You came to us children. You came to us alone, in chains, with neither friends nor honor. You came to us rich, and you came to us poor. Some of you bear the names of proud houses. Others have only bastards’ names, or no names at all. It makes no matter. All that is past now. On the Wall, we are all one house.”

Jon glanced at Sam’s head, tucked between Grenn’s and Toad’s. He was sitting as straight as the edge of a blade.

“At evenfall, as the sun sets and we face the gathering night, you shall take your vows. From that moment, you will be a Sworn Brother of the Night’s Watch. Your crimes will be washed away, your debts forgiven. So too you must wash away your former loyalties, put aside your grudges, forget old wrongs and old loves alike. Here you begin anew. A man of the Night’s Watch lives his life for the realm. Not for a king, nor a lord, nor the honor of this house or that house, neither for gold nor glory nor a woman’s love, but for the realm, and all the people in it. A man of the Night’s Watch takes no wife and father no sons. Our wife is duty. Our mistress is honor. And you are the only sons we shall ever know.”

_Sons_, mused Jon, thinking suddenly of Jorah Mormont. Halfway across the world, serving his queen. He wondered what Mormont would think of his son. If he would be proud, to know that his son had lost his life fighting his father’s battle to the last.

“You have learned the words of the vow. Think carefully before you say them, for once you have taken the black, there is no turning back. The penalty for desertion is death.” The Old Bear paused for a moment before he said, “Are there any among you who wish to leave our company? If so, go now, and no one shall think the less of you.”
It was silent and still.

“Well and good,” said Mormont. “You may take your vows here at evenfall, before Septon Celladar and the first of your order. Do any of you keep to the old gods?”

Jon thought he saw the ghost of himself stand, but it was just a memory, a whisper on the wind.

There was no response, and Mormont pressed on. “If there is no one, then we will proceed. We have placed each of you in an order, as befits our need and your own strengths and skills.”

The recruits held their breath. Bowen Marsh handed a paper to Mormont, who unfurled it.

“Halder, to the builders.”

“Grenn, to the rangers.”

“Toad, to the rangers.”

“Pypar, to the stewards.”

“Samwell, to the stewards.”

“Matthar, to the rangers.”

“Dareon, to the stewards.”

“Rancer, to the builders.”

“Balian, to the rangers.”

“Rast, to the rangers.”

“May all the gods preserve you.”

“Rangers, with me,” Benjen called, stepping forward and waving his arm.

“Builders,” shouted Othell Yarwyck.

“Stewards, report,” said Bowen Marsh, getting to his feet.

Jon stood by, and watched, as one by one, the men knelt and took their vows,

“Night gathers, and now my watch begins. It shall not end until my death. I shall take no wife, hold no lands, father no children. I shall wear no crowns and win no glory. I shall live and die at my post. I am the sword in the darkness. I am the watcher on the walls. I am the fire that burns against the cold, the light that brings the dawn, the horn that wakes the sleepers, the shield that guards the realms of men. I pledge my life and honor to the Night's Watch, for this night and all the nights to come,” the collection of voices filled the sparkling sept. The air came alive with the hum of voices, and the beating of hearts.

Jon watched Sam, as he recited his vow. He said every word, a look of grim determination tightening his features into a mask.

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“Everyone is here,” Sam whispered, as he entered the hall, beside Jon.
Jon saw at once, what he meant. Every man of the Watch was taking a seat in the hall. Maester Aemon and Lord Commander Mormont sat at the high table, surrounded by the officers. Brothers and recruits thronged the lower tables, swarming the plates of food, and the flagons of ale that had been put out.

He and Sam hurried to take a seat next to Pyp and Grenn. Pyp flicked a pea at Jon’s ear, cackling when Jon scowled at him.

The din quieted, as Mormont got to his feet, and spread his arms for quiet.

“Brothers!” he called out, his gruff voice ringing through the hall. Jon thought that Mormont’s eyes touched on him, as he said the word. “You have all been gathered here tonight, to discuss a matter of the utmost importance.”

Silence spread through the tables, each man in rapt attention.

“My brothers,” Momont continued, “these are days of great peril. Our numbers dwindle, the Wall falls to disrepair, the realm has forgotten us at the edge of the world.”

Grimness trickled like a sickness through the men.

“But we are not men of weak constitutions,” bellowed Mormont, “we are the swords that guard the realm of men, and steel does not bend, nor break in the face of trial. I have received reports, from Eastwatch, from beyond the Wall. The Wildlings are fleeing south, they are abandoning their villages, banding together their parties.”

Muttering broke out between the men. Jon watched, as hands tightened on their knives.

“I have decided that this is a threat that requires our active engagement,” Mormont continued, “I have called for a ranging, to investigate the actions of the Wildlings. First ranger, Benjen Stark, will lead a team of men to gather information.”

“I will go, my lord!” Jon heard someone shout, “it would be my honor to slit a wildling’s throat!”

“I will go!”

“As will I!”

“I am ready, my lord!”

The voices rang out around the hall, until every man was on his feet, and the hall was filled with the roaring and yowling of angry men.

“Silence,” thundered Mormont, his voice overwhelming the others, “Brothers! I commend your dedication to the Watch. The brothers that will accompany the first ranger have been chosen already.”

A hush fell over the hall.

Mormont waited, scanning over the crowd. “Benjen,” he said, keeping his eyes on the men.

Benjen stood, clearing his throat, “I have chosen eight brothers to join me on this mission. They have been picked for their skill and potential in what will surely be a dangerous and deadly mission.

Jon held his breath. Sam tensed beside him.
“Jafer!” Benjen called. Jon watched as the man raised a flagon to Bejen.

“Othor!” The big, ugly man grunted in consent.

“Bedwyck!” The little man banged his fist on the table in agreement.

“Dywen!” The old man grinned with a wizened smile, showing his wooden teeth.

“Grenn!” Beside Jon, Grenn’s mouth fell open. Pyp whooped, and slapped Green on the back.

“Matthar!” the boy looked shocked, his drink paused halfway to his lips.

“Toddar!” Toad looked uncertainly up at Benjen, his eyes doubtful.

“Samwell!” Benjen called out finally, and the tension spilled out from Sam’s shoulders. He sighed in weary relief.

‘He’s bringing you?’ Grenn asked, dumbfounded.

Pyp elbowed him in the side. “He’s no craven on the field,” Pyp said, “and he’s got a great bloody sword. You’ll want someone like that beyond the Wall.”

Grenn looked apologetic, but his brow was still furrowed in confusion.

“What of you?” Sam whispered, turning to Jon.

“I’m coming,” Jon murmured, “but I’m not a brother. It won’t be announced here.”

Bejen sat down, and conversation resumed amongst the men. Jon watched as Benjen turned to Lord Commander Mormont. He saw Maester Aemon, tilt his head to hear them better. The old Maester’s milky eyes stared out over the tables. Jon felt almost as if they were watching him.

*Kill the boy,* Maester Aemon’s voice whispered in his ear, *kill the boy and let the man be born.*

*Which boy?* Jon thought, tiredly, *Which man?*

He felt as though he had lived a hundred lifetimes. The events of each as clear as day, yet as untouchable as the dawn.

But Jon was stronger than despair, stronger than what sought to pull him down to grief.

*And so it begins.*
“I don’t think we should risk it,” muttered Gendry, eyeing the bustling inn through the trees.

“Nothing to it,” Lommy insisted, “we’ve gold, and we’re in need of a hot meal and a soft bed. I’m tired of sleeping in dirt, and eating rabbit roasted on a spit.”

“You’ve been sleeping in the dirt all your life,” Gendry retorted, “you can’t miss what you never had.”

“I can try,” snapped Lommy, seizing the reins of his horse “and I’ve made my decision. I’m getting myself a room at that fine establishment. You lot can fuck off for all the shits I give.”

“I wouldn’t say no to a bed,” said Hot Pie, looking longingly at the smoke rising from the inn.

“And what are you going to do when they demand to know why two dirty children have horses, and enough gold to drag down their tattered britches?” Gendry asked.

Lommy glared at him. “I’m a sellsword,” he boasted, waving his skinny green arms in the air, “traveling up the Kingsroad to seek my fortune in the North. A southern lass broke my heart in two, and I’ve gone to find myself an honest job and a doting wife.”

Gendry and Hot Pie sniggered.

“You’ll not get two steps into the inn before they throw you out,” said Gendry, “without this.” He patted his breast pocket.

“We can’t be all king’s bastards with fancy letters, m’lord ,” sneered Lommy.

“Hush,” growled Gendry, “you won’t speak of that here. I told you, the Queen’s after my head.”

“But what does she want with your head?” asked Hot Pie, “you’re a bastard, and bastards have no claims.”

“I’ll not risk it by asking her,” said Gendry grimly, “I’d rather live without the answer.”

Lommy sighed, impatiently. “Time to decide,” he said to Hot Pie, “are you hungrier than you are craven?”

“Both,” grunted Hot Pie, “I’m coming with you.”

They looked at Gendry. “Fine,” he sputtered, “but we’re leaving if there’s trouble.”

Lommy laughed, “You’ll be praising me tonight when your head hits that feather pillow.”
The innkeeper squinted at them suspiciously.

“A room, if you please, madame,” Lommy said graciously.

“I’ve got rooms left,” Masha Heddle said, “but why should I give one to the likes of you? I can’t have my guests thinking I’ve let thieves and pickpockets through my doors.”

“Madame,” said Lommy, “we are reputable gentlemen - ”

Gendry interrupted him before the boy could speak any further. “We’re not traveling by any dishonorable reason,” he said, drawing Master Mott’s letter from his pocket, “my companions and I are traveling North to Winterfell. To serve the Warden of the North, Lord Robb Stark. My master has given me a letter, explaining our purpose on the Kingsroad.”

Masha took the letter from him, her fingers running over the heavy parchment and fine wax seal. Gendry could not decipher Mott’s elegant, spidery writing, but he had read it to Gendry before sending him off.

“I hereby grant permission to my apprentice, Gendry, to ride North to Winterfell to be in service to House Stark. He is accompanied by two companions, and has been given the necessary gold to accommodate him on his journey.”

“Hm,” said Masha, considering them, “what’s your trade, boy?”

“Smithy,” said Gendry, “and my friends are a dyer’s and a baker’s apprentice. We’re honest men, looking for a place to rest for the night, I swear it by the Seven.”

“Very well,” said Masha, handing the letter back to Gendry, “but I’m warning you, boys. Anything goes missing, and fingers will start pointing your way. Keep to yourselves, and stay out of trouble.”

“Of course,” said Gendry, “thank you.”

She called for a maid to show them to their rooms, a cramped thing with three beds at the top of the stairs. Lommy waited until she shut the door behind her, before throwing himself face first onto the bed.

Hot Pie, did the same, sighing as he sunk into the straw. Gendry sank down on the last bed, cradling his bull’s helm, wrapped in a sturdy cloth. He pulled it out, shining it until it gleamed.

“Don’t let any of these see you’ve got that,” Lommy warned, eyeing it appreciatively, “one of those knights would stab the lot of us if he took a fancy to it.”

“It’s mine, I made it,” said Gendry, covering the helm back up quickly, “I’d fight the man who tries to take it from me.”

“You might forge steel,” said Lommy, “but you can’t wield it.”

“Can you?” asked Gendry, scowling.

“Never claimed I could,” Lommy replied, tucking his hands behind his head, and staring up at the cracked ceiling.

“They have Masters-of-Arms at castles,” said Hot Pie, “maybe they’ll train us to hold a sword.”

“Beside the little lordlings?” Lommy scoffed, “we’re going there to work, not to become lords. It’ll
be just like it was in the capital, except colder.”

“I’d like to see the kitchens of a castle,” said Hot Pie, “I’ll never be cold there. Warmest place there is.”

“Smithy stays warm too,” noted Gendry, “Winterfell’s blacksmith might have want of an apprentice. Lord’s always need steel for their men.”

“What do you think the lord is like?” Lommy asked, “maybe he’s as fat and ruddy as the old King.”

“No,” Gendry said, “he’s not even a proper lord yet, just the son of the lord. His father’s the Hand of the King.”

“A ruddy, fat boy then,” said Lommy, “who rides around on a golden throne, and shits in a sapphire bucket.”

“I’ve heard the Starks can turn into wolves,” said Hot Pie with a shudder, “that they kill their enemies by ripping their throats out during the full moon.”

“That’s silly,” said Gendry, “the Starks can turn into wolves no more than the Baratheons can turn into Stags.”

“Shall you give it a try then?” Lommy asked, chucking one of his boots at Gendry’s head.

Gendry sputtered, as clumps of mud and leaves sprayed his face.

“I see them!” hollored Lommy, scampering away from Gendry, “I see the antlers sprouting! Right out of his hair.”

Hot Pie hooted, his eyes darting, just briefly to the top of Gendry’s head.

“And then he sprouted hooves!” Lommy shouted, vaulting over the bed, “I swear I’ve never seen anything like it in my life!”

Gendry caught the edge of his tunic, and yanked him back. Hot Pie threw a pillow at Lommy’s head, and Gendry used it to pin Lommy to the floor.

“I yield, m’lord,” Lommy cried in a muffled voice that was full of laughter, “spare me your fury!”

Gendry flicked him hard on his ear, and let him up.

Lommy rubbed his ear, and climbed to his feet, grinning. “I need some ale,” he announced, “who’s going to join me?”

“Me,” said Hot Pie, hopping down.

Gendry placed his helm in his sack, and slung it over his shoulder.

“Shall we?” said Lommy, opening the door and dipping into an exaggerated bow.

Gendry cuffed him on the back of the head as they went out.

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They squeezed onto a bench by the door, beside a stinking fisherman who eyed them with distaste.
Lommy waved brightly to two men whose forearms were dyed blue and black. They paid him no mind.

Merchants sat next to singers, who lounged across from knights, whose swords lay harmlessly to the side in favor of a drink.

Gendry stuck his helm in his lap, and called for service. Against the far side of the drafty hall, a fire roared cheerily. Behind them, the wall was stacked from floor to ceiling with barrels of ale. Masha Heddle moved smoothly through the chaos, chewing red sourlead, and grinning with a terrifying smile.

They were given bowls of bread, hollowed out and filled with a steaming stew, accompanied by sizzling skewers of roasted peppers and onions. Mugs of ale were placed at their elbows, and they seized them greedily.

Gendry sighed, as the taste and heat of the stew hit his tongue.

“Not bad,” said Hot Pie, prodding at the crust, “I’d do better.”

Gendry barely heard him, lulled as he was by the warmth of the room, and the pleasant hum of conversation. It reminded him of Master Mott’s shop. Safe, warm, and full of liveliness.

They had traveled cautiously up the Kingsroad, looking over their shoulders at every sound. Why me? Gendry had thought, lying under the stars, the boys sleeping, huddled beside him. Why us?

He thought of the man that had come in his shining white cloak. His eyes had been so sad, in that hard face. If he’s truly no one, then who are we?

He shoved Lommy’s hand away, as the boy reached for what was left of Gendry’s skewer. Hot Pie saw Lommy eyeing his, and shoved the whole thing in his mouth quickly.

“Order more,” said Gendry, waving his hand, “we have the money. Might as well.”

Lommy’s face shifted in surprise, and then delight. He almost fell off the bench, so eager he was to get the attention of the serving girl.

There was a commotion suddenly, as the door nearest their table swung open with a bang. Masha Heddle scurried forth to meet the new arrivals. It was a company of several guards, dressed in grey and white, dusty and mud-splattered from the Kingsroad. Beside them, a stooped man stood, dressed in tattered blacks.

Gendry didn’t notice the last man, until he stepped forward and spoke.

“Innkeeper,” the man called, “we have horses that require stabling. And rooms must be prepared for myself and my companions.”

Masha Heddle was bowing and smiling. “Of course, m’lord, I shall see to it at once. We are honored by your presence, Lord Lannister.”

“And my coin, no doubt,” said the man, pulling gold from his pocket. It twinkled in the firelight, catching the eyes of the crowd.

“Who’s that?” asked Hot Pie, staring at the man in amazement.

Gendry’s heart stuttered with dread, as he caught sight of the sigil adorning the man’s chest.
“It’s the Imp,” said Lommy, his mouth dropping open, “look at his doublet, burgundy trimmed with gold. Lions embroidered at the collar. Gold spilling out of his pockets. That’s the Queen’s brother. There’s no other dwarf in the Seven Kingdoms who could afford such finery.”

“Do you reckon he wants you dead as well?” Hot Pie whispered, breathing in Gendry’s ear.

“Shut up,” Gendry said roughly, “we should leave.”

“I’m still eating - !”

“ - leave now, and you’ll definitely catch his eye.”

Gendry wrapped his hands around the horns of his helm, holding onto them tightly through the cloth.

“Keep your big head down,” Lommy ordered, shoving him. Gendry gritted his teeth, and twisted his head so he could watch the Imp out of the corner of his eye.

“You’ll be able to manage food, I trust?” the man asked, his voice glittering like the coin he spun between his fingers.

“Anything you like, m’lord, anything at all,” Masha promised.

“Whatever you’re serving these people will do,” said the Imp, his eyes sweeping the room, “double portions, as we’ve had a long ride. Serve my guards first, and then my table. Yoren, you’ll sup with me?”

“Aye, m’lord,” croaked the man in black beside the Imp. They made an odd pair, Gendry thought, relaxing slightly. The Queen would not have sent her dwarf brother and this crooked man to find him. The men they had brought with them were already sitting down, removing their swords, and reaching for cups of ale.

Gendry waited for the Imp to take a seat, but the man made no such move. Fear ignited in his belly once more, as the man’s eyes swept the room.

“He’s looking for someone,” Lommy hissed in his ear, and Gendry swatted him away.

The Lannister paid Masha Heddle no mind as she chattered pleasantries, urging the lord to take his seat at any table he liked. “ - of course you will have hot water for baths, just ring the bell and I’ll send one of the girls to - ”

“Have you had many sellswords pass through?” the Imp interrupted.

“Sellswords?” asked Masha breathlessly, frowning slightly, “well of course, m’lord. We get all sorts at the crossroads, but I assure you there’ll be no trouble here - ”

“No, no,” said the Lannister absently, although his mouth turned down sharply, “forget I asked it of you. Just the food will do.”

Not me. Gendry sat up in relief. Hot Pie looked at him nervously, and Lommy shrugged, biting off a chunk of bread.

The Imp took a seat at a farther table, and the man in black followed him.

Gendry’s fears faded as the night wore on without incident. The food and ale had soaked into his bones, and he was sleepy and warm. He clutched his helm, and clambered unsteadily to his feet.
Lommy and Hot Pie were half asleep on the table, and Gendry pulled them up.

“Where’s’a bed?” Lommy asked, leaning heavily on Gendry.

“Up the stairs,” Gendry told him, pushing them along. The hall still buzzed with pleasures, as Gendry knew it would, late into the night.

Hot Pie and Lommy staggered towards the stairs, to the amusement of their crowd who shouted after them, shoving the boys good-naturedly.

Gendry started to follow them, but he was pushed off balance by a stumbling knight, and his helm fell from his grasp, and hit the ground with a thud.

He froze as the helm rolled across the floor, coming to a stop against the Imp’s leg. The man looked down at it in surprise, a glass of wine held carelessly in his hand. And then he looked up at Gendry.

*There is no denying your parentage, Gendry. You have the Baratheon look.*

Was that the recognition he saw in the Imp’s eyes? *Does he see the king in my face?*

Gendry waited for the man to speak, for there to be a sword at his throat.

Instead, the Imp reached down, and picked up his helm. He reached out, offering it to Gendry, who stood, motionless.

“This young man is drowning in his cups,” the Imp jeered to the delight of the table. He shoved the helm at Gendry, holding Gendry’s stare. “Run along to your bed, boy. You’ll be man enough to handle it one day.”

Numbly, Gendry took his bull’s head. The Imp’s eyes gleamed. “Run along, boy,” he said softer this time, under the din of laughter.

Gendry didn’t hesitate to do as the man said, turning quickly, and making his way up the stairs. He didn’t look back, fearing that if he did, the Imp’s eyes would be there, watching him.

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“Is there anything else you require, m’lord?”

Tyrion looked up at the innkeeper blearily. “No,” he said grasping for the woman’s name and finding nothing, “I’m quite well, my good woman. Fine - fine place you run, madame.”

She continued speaking to him, but Tyrion heard nothing of what she said. He shook his head, waving her away with one hand. Yoren snored beside him, his whiskers floating in a puddle of spilled wine.

“I bought you a bed,” Tyrion groused, prodding the brother. He took the last of the wine that was on the table, and threw it down his throat.

A singer was warbling to his left, and Tyrion felt blindly in his pocket. He found a copper, and chucked it at the man.

*My Lord of Lannister! Might I entertain you while you eat? I can sing of your father’s victory at King’s Landing.*
Lady Stark. An unexpected pleasure.

“No,” Tyrion said loudly, slapping his hand down on the table. He started. For an instant, he thought he glimpsed Catelyn Stark in the firelight. A ghostly shape lit by the flames.

This man came into my house as a guest and there conspired to murder my son. Seize him!

“It wasn’t me,” Tyrion told Yoren, who slept on, “but no one ever suspects a golden knight when a terrible dwarf is afoot.”

“I thought you were a lion,” Shae’s voice cooed against the nape of his neck, “my golden lion.”

“Sleep soundly, my sweet,” murmured Tyrion, sliding off the bench with a thump, “you’ll never be my anything.”

“M’Lord!” Tyrion distantly heard a woman call, “go on, boy. Take Lord Lannister to his chambers.”

There were hands at his arms, and he batted ineffectively at them. They grasped him, pulling him to his feet, and leading him up the stairs.

“Have you seen my man?” Tyrion slurred to the face closest to his, “Ser Bronn of the fucking Blackwater. I was supposed to meet him here. I fear he’s quite late.”

“It’s well, m’lord,” said the boy, his face dipping in and out of Tyrion’s vision, “she says I’m to see you to your room.”

“I want no whores,” growled Tyrion, “I’ve had enough of that. She’s not to be brought to me this time. Tell him I don’t want her.”

“Yes, m’lord.”

He was pushed into his room, and the door was shut behind him. Tyrion stumbled to the bed, and collapsed.

Tomorrow they would take to the Kingsroad again, creeping ever closer to the bloody capital. The image of his nephew’s leering face pressed itself against Tyrion’s eyes, and he groaned.

“No cure for being a cunt,” Bronn chuckled in his ear, “boy’s got nothing to do all day but pick wings off flies.”

Tyrion wrenched himself over the side of the bed, fumbling for the chamber pot, and vomiting into it noisily.

“He forced me to m’lord. He held the crossbow to my head.”

Ros sobs, her arms slick with Daisy’s blood.

“He wanted to you know,” she whispers, her voice trembling, “he wanted you to see what he did.”

She’s twisted with grief, and Tyrion can only stare at the girl’s mangled back.

“I never intended,” he begins, but stops. It doesn’t matter what he intended. It will do no good for either of them now.

“It will be as I intend.” His words were broken by a fit of coughing. There’s spittle hanging from
his mouth, and he wiped it away roughly.

He held tightly to the bed, even as the floor seemed to swell up underneath him, as restless as the waves during a storm.

Myrcella will kiss his cheek when she sees he is alive and well, Tommen will hug him and beg to hear of the Wall, did you see a giant? And Tommen’s face fades into Bran’s, who looks at him with Catelyn Stark’s blue blue eyes, and then she is Sansa, tears dripping down his wife’s lovely little face.

No one’s going to hurt you, Tyrion tries to tell her, but her face is cool and steady once more, and she’s no longer looking at him, she’s looking behind him to where his Queen stands, her silver hair blowing in the biting wind, littered with snowflakes that look more like twinkling jewels.

A wise man once said… he hears himself say, his voice swelling against his eardrums until it becomes a roar in his head. It sounds like lions, it sounds like dragons, it sounds like monsters and Tyrion cannot think straight, he is slipping off the edge of the rock, the fall is a thousand miles down, and Lysa is laughing.

Which wise man said that? Sansa’s fingers tear into his belly, shredding him like he is paper, but it isn’t her, he hasn’t got it right. I would never do that to you, he tells her, and it is Shae’s sorrowful eyes that he falls into, drowning under a sea of gold, and gasping at the teeth that lock around at his throat.

Are you terribly hurt m’lord? - No, no, my lady. It was nothing - I’m no lady, m’lord. Just a crofter’s daughter. But it wasn’t nothing to me. He reaches up, pushing her dark hair away from her face. Tysha smiles down at him her fingers dancing across his cheek. Again? Again.

I loved a maid as fresh as spring, with sunrise in her hair, his wife sings. As she does, silver coins began dropping from her lovely lips.

Stop, Tyrion tries to sit up but he’s trapped against the bed, held down.

I loved a maid as fair as summer, with sunlight in her hair, whispers Tysha. The silver clatters to the floor, spilling from her lap.

I loved a maid as red as autumn, with sunset in her hair, she murmurs. The silver spills from her fists, and she fills her pockets, until they are swollen, and she cannot move.

Tyrion closes his eyes, but is as if his eyelids are made of glass. He can still see her, waiting for him.

I loved a maid as white as winter, with moonglow in her hair, croons Tysha, when she sees his eyes open. And she takes Tyrion’s limp fist, and places a golden dragon in the palm of his hand.
Uncertain Times

Ned swallowed hard. He rested his hand on Sansa’s shoulder, as she faced the small council.

“Can you tell us anything, child?” asked Varys, “anything at all?”

Sansa bit her lip, and shuffled her feet. She glanced up at him, and he forced his face into a reassuring smile. He felt lightheaded.

“Lord Baelish stopped to talk on his way through the gardens,” said Sansa, “Brienne and I were having tea and cakes. The lemon ones. With… with the sugar on top. He inquired about my mother’s wellbeing, and asked if he might join us.”

Her tone struck a tender spot on his heart. It was a silly, affected thing. It reminded him of when she had been a little girl, giggling over dolls and dresses. *It is what she intends*, thought Ned, unease rising up in him. *She knows exactly how to play them. Us. Him.*

Pycelle seemed to be attempting a sort of gentleness, but his voice still rasped unpleasantly against Ned’s ears. “Did he seem strange at all?” the Maester asked, his chains clinking softly, “ill, perhaps?”

“I don’t think so,” Sansa confessed, “I don’t know. I’m not very well acquainted with Lord Baelish. I know only what my mother has told me. He was almost a brother to her in Riverrun when she was growing up. She said I could trust him to be a friend to me.”

Renly snorted. “Littlefinger is everyone’s friend,” he scoffed, “until he isn’t.” At his words, Sansa’s chin began to wobble.

“What did he speak of, child?” Varys coaxed, drawing Sansa’s focus back to him. His pale eyes stared intently at her wan face.

“I told him we were done, having lemon cakes and tea,” said Sansa, “I had planned to go walking in the godswood, Lord Baelish asked if he might join us, and I didn’t think to refuse him. He said he used to go walking in the godswood as a boy, and that he missed it. It seemed a harmless request, and Brienne was with me, so I had no thought for impropriety.”

“But?” prompted Varys, glancing at Ned. Ned felt his face was a stiff as if it had been carved from granite.

“We talked about flowers,” said his daughter, her nose scrunching up, “about the weather, and the embroidery on my dress. But he began to make me quite nervous after a time. He…” Sansa trailed off and looked down.

‘What did he do, child?” Barristan Selmy asked.

“He told me how beautiful I was,” Sansa murmured, playing with the edge of her sleeve, “how much I looked like my mother.”

Ned sighed at that, and ran his thumb across his daughter’s cheek. He drew his hand away quickly, after realizing he had done it.

*Was that for your daughter’s comfort?* Ned asked of himself bitterly, *or for her performance?*
“It wasn’t proper of him to say,” said Sansa, her lips trembling, “and so I asked him to escort me back at once. And I went straight to my room.”

Varys sat back, tucked his sleeves together, and glanced at Ned. “You did well, sweet one,” Varys told Sansa.

His daughter looked up at him with wide, wet eyes. Beseeching him.

“You may go,” Ned told her, cupping her cheek and kissing the top of her head, “Brienne waits for you right outside the door.”

Sansa curtseyed, and then disappeared through the door of the council chamber. Ned strained, and could just hear the faint murmurs of conversation as her and Brienne moved away.

When he could no longer hear them, Ned took a seat heavily, and clasped his hands.

“Well?” he asked gruffly, “my daughter has been interrogated for nothing.”

“Apologies, my lord,” said Varys smoothly.

Ned did not like how the Spider looked at him now, after their previous conversation. It was far to knowing for his taste.

“I felt it necessary to examine all possibilities,” Varys continued, “as of now, I have found no trace of Lord Baelish. Not in the Keep. Not in the Capital. Not in all the Seven Kingdoms.”

“He must be somewhere,” Renly objected, “he couldn’t have vanished into thin air. For all his boasting of being a magician, he is still only a man. And men can be found.”

“I have thrown my net out over this whole country,” Varys responded tightly, “and no sign of Lord Baelish has appeared. He rose that day, took breakfast in his rooms. Emerged for the small council meeting. Spoke to the servants regarding his laundry. Went for a walk in the gardens. Escort Lady Sansa Stark through the godswood. Returned to his rooms. Packed a bag. Left the Red Keep, and ventured into the city. After that, there is an emptiness.”

“The castle guards report the same,” said Barristan, nodding solemnly, “he was clearly seen leaving the Red Keep with a packed bag.”

“Then he must have taken a horse,” Ned heard himself say, “A wagon perhaps. Called for a ship.”

“Nothing,” repeated Varys, “every horse in the city is accounted for, every wagon, every ship.”

“Then he ran away,” said Renly, dryly, “or swam.”


“There are no mysteries that remain so forever,” said Varys, coolly.

“Let us not trouble ourselves over it too much,” said Renly with ease, “Littlefinger is a man that will not be sorely missed.”

“The man, yes,” said Varys, “but replacing Master of Coin is no small thing, Lord Renly.”

“There are plenty of Lords eager to serve the crown,” said Renly, “I can think of many. The Tyrells perhaps. Lord Mace is a wealthy man - ”
“Mace Tyrell reaps what has been sown by those before him,” Barristan interrupted, “he has always done so.”

“Ser Barristan is correct,” said Varys, “Tyrell gold would buoy the Crown’s spending for a time, but as for management of finances… I cannot say that I would trust Lord Mace’s abilities.”

“This is Robert’s decision,” Ned interjected, “he will have the final say in this.”

Renly looked pleased Ned’s words, throwing his hands behind his head, and leaning back.

“Of course, Lord Stark,” said Varys, tilting his head in deference, “pure speculation on my part.”

“On other matters,” said Pycelle suddenly, breaking the silence, “it seems congratulations are in order, Lord Stark. I hear that your son has been promised the princess’s hand in marriage. A fine pairing for the realm, indeed.”

“A suggestion,” said Ned, “not a promise. Princess Myrcella is young yet, for marriage. If she is agreeable, I would gladly escort her North alongside my own daughters.”

“The King is quite agreeable,” said Varys, studying Ned, “and his is the opinion that matters, is it not? Your grandchildren would rule both the North and South, Lord Stark.”


Pycelle coughed wetly. “Princess Myrcella is a delicate child,” he croaked, “her constitution is fragile. She may suffer in the northern climate.”

“She seemed well enough on her last visit,” Ned bit back, “she is a lively child, and as Lady of Winterfell she would have warm castle walls, and a kind husband in my son.”

“The Princess Myrcella is stronger than she looks,” Barristan agreed, “I have every faith that she will grow into a bright and brave young woman.”

“And as beautiful as her mother,” Renly said, with a strange grin tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“Aye,” agreed Ned, avoiding Renly’s seeking eyes.

“The Queen likes her children close, Lord Stark,” said Varys, “this news will not please her.”

Ned caught the undercurrent of a reprimand in the Spider’s voice, and a sharp spike of anger coursed through him.

“Every mother must learn to let her children go,” Ned replied stiffly, “the Queen is no different in that respect.”

“Of course,” said Varys, his voice like syrup. “There is one last matter I would like to bring to your attention, my lords.”

Ned’s head was aching, and he put his fingers to his temple. “More whispers, Lord Varys?”

“As per my position, my lord,” said Varys, “one of my little birds has sent word from across the Narrow Sea. The Targaryen children ride east into the grasslands amongst the Horselords. The beggar king sits atop a common mount with a crown of twigs and bones in his silver hair.”
“East,” murmured Ned, imagining the shadow of wings on a wide sea of grass, “far from here.”

“Robert can sleep soundly,” said Renly, his tone affected by boredom.

“Have you told the King of this?” Ned asked of Varys.

“I supply information at the Crown’s command,” Varys offered, delicately.

“The King should not concern himself with whispers a world away,” said Barristan.

“Yet he will,” said Ned, “and he must be dissuaded of that. There are many more matters that require his attention, waiting at his own gate.”

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“I thought you had decided to take the black, brother,” Jaime called out when he saw Tyrion approach.

“The whores would go wailing from Sunspear to Casterly Rock,” Tyrion, said dismounting with difficulty. Jaime reached out to help him, and Tyrion grasped his brother’s hand gratefully. “I would never leave them wanting so.”

“How thoughtful of you,” said Jaime, as they embraced. “and you’ve brought company.”

“The Starks were kind enough to send me with a retinue,” said Tyrion, looking back at the dismounting grey and white guards, “and Yoren of course made for a lively companion.”

His brother glanced at Yoren, whose stench was more than evident in such close proximity.

“I’ll be finding lodging in the city, m’lord,” Yoren grunted, “I’ll be ‘round soon enough to lighten the Keep’s cells. No sense in wasting time.”

“Charming man,” Tyrion said, as Yoren hobbled off.

“I will take your word for it,” said Jaime, with a grimace.

“Ser.” The commander of the guards approached, nodding at Jaime.

“Brother, this is Alyn,” said Tyrion waving at the man, “he wants to become a knight some day, isn’t that right, Alyn?”

“Aye, m’lord,” said Alyn, reddening slightly, “not many knights in the North.”

“You’ll be wanting Lord Stark then,” Jaime asked, calling over his shoulder for a steward.

“Yes Ser,” said Alyn, “Lady Stark was quite insistent that we return with word of her children and lord husband.”

“And her sworn shield,” said Jaime, a smile playing at his lips, “you’ll want to tell her of Lady Brienne’s wellbeing as well.” He hefted Tyrion’s bag over his shoulder.

“Aye,” said Alyn, casting a strange glance at Jaime.

“Have you taken to the Stark’s sworn shield, brother?” Tyrion asked as a steward led the Stark guards away. He fell into step beside Jaime.
“A fascinating wench,” Jaime commented lightly.

Tyrion studied him as they walked. “Your fascination with women begets a short list.”

Jaime glanced waringly at him. “And to think I had almost been convinced of missing you, little brother,” sighed Jaime, “I suppose I was mistaken to think so fondly of you. I’ve been affected by your long absence.”

“A long journey it was,” Tyrion agreed, rubbing his legs as they walked, “I shall be glad if I never see another horse in my life.”

“Do you mean to stay in the Capital then?” asked Jaime, “you won’t get to Casterly Rock by walking.”

“I have things to do here,” said Tyrion with a yawn, “people to see. Fine wine to drink.”

“I am glad of it,” said Jaime, “you can keep me company while I listen to the King shit.”

“Tempting,” said Tyrion, his mouth twisting in disgust, “but tell me what’s happened since I left. Surely there’s more to hear than of the King’s privy habits.”

“Our dear sister is in distress,” said Jaime, his amusement fading.

“When is she not?” Tyrion asked, keeping his voice unaffected.

“Lord Stark has proposed a betrothal between Myrcella and his eldest.”

Tyrion stopped short in surprise. “Lord Stark has? he asked, “are you quite sure?”

“Very,” said Jaime, frowning at him, “Robert’s amenable of course. He’ll be tied twice as tightly to his beloved Starks now. He’s also suggested sending Tommen north to foster. To ‘toughen the boy,’ he says.”

Tyrion rather felt as if he was sinking, as if the stones of the keep were pulling him down into their terrible depths.

“Cersei won’t allow it,” he forced out.

“It’s not exactly her decision, is it?” asked Jaime, “if the King decrees it, then it will be so.”

“And Robert will,” Tyrion murmured. He thought of Myrcella and Tommen, their golden curls peeping out from behind great furs. He could picture Sansa, fierce and determined. She’ll be safe there, my family would never harm her.

But my family will harm you if you try to take her, Tyrion thought bitterly, or have you forgotten?

“Robert would,” said Jaime, his eyes glinting.

And therein lies the crux. What plans has our sister laid?

“It might be good for them,” Tyrion prodded gently, “as dull as you consider the Starks, they are fine people. They welcomed me into their home, and sent their own guards to see me swiftly here.”

“How fares young Robb Stark?” Jaime asked, pushing the door to Tyrion’s chamber open. He stepped inside, and dropped the bag.
“His father in miniature,” said Tyrion, running his finger along the table, and checking for dust, and finding none. “He’s a good lad. Green around the edges, but he is only recently a man. And what better match could be made for our niece? Would you rather she be betrothed to the Arryn boy? Or perhaps the Dornish Prince?”

“I never knew you to take such an interest in the family politics, brother,” groused Jaime, but Tyrion could see he was considering his words.

“I have always been interested in the family,” said Tyrion, finding wine beneath the side table, “it is our family that has seldom taken an interest in me.”

“And you have a chance to prove it,” said Jaime, taking the cup he was offered. “We need our family close, in times like these.”

“Exactly what times are we in the midst of?” Tyrion asked.

“Uncertain ones, little brother.”

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“Lord Rickon was soaked from head to toe,” said Fat Tom, his deep laugh echoing throughout the room, “his wolf too! Both of them shivering, and Lord Bran insisting that he hadn’t seen a lick of what happened.”

Ned chuckled, his shoulders loose and relaxed, surrounded by his men. Sansa smiled at the sight. She was seated next to her father at the table, Arya on his other side. Brienne was deep in conversation with Harwin, who was gesturing wildly with his hands.

Alyn and Fat Tom were regaling them with stories of Bran and Rickon.

“Bigger everyday, m’lord,” said Alyn of Rickon, “knows more words now too. Lady Catelyn is most pleased.”

“Does he ask about us?” said Arya, “he won’t forget, will he?”

“It’s me, Rickon. Your sister, Arya. Remember?”

Rickon stared at her blankly, his fingers buried in Ghost’s fur.

“It’s not you,” Sansa murmured gently, a hand at her sister’s shoulder, “he didn’t recognize us at first either. It’s just been too long.”

Arya drew back, the grief evident on her face.

Rickon said nothing, just buried his face in the wolf’s belly.

“Forget you?” Alyn teased Arya gently, “he hears all the time of his brave sisters who ventured south with the king. And of course your mother and brothers talk of you constantly.”

Arya smiled, and Ned ran his fingers through her hair.

“You’ll rest here in the tower until you take your leave,” said Ned as they finished eating, “there’s plenty of empty rooms, intended for the Hand’s court.”

“M’lord,” said Fat Tom, looking up, “would it not be better if we stayed? All of us are prepared to stand at your side as long as you are in the capital.”
The others nodded.

“I am honored by your offer,” said Ned, looking at them steadily, “do not mistake my refusal for a lack of faith in your duty. But I would prefer to know that you were in Winterfell, safe with your families, and guarding mine.” His tone spoke of no concession.

“Brienne protects us,” said Sansa, smiling at Harwin who looked unconvinced, “and the city watch, and the castle guards.”

“Of course, my lady,” Alyn responded, gently. He turned to Ned. “Still, Lord Stark. If you ever have need of us, there will be fifty swords that would not hesitate to ride to your side. More if given adequate time.”

“Thank you,” said Ned, “all of you. But there should be no need for swords. I am running a kingdom, not fighting a war.”

“Yes, m’lord,” said Harwin, “as you say.”

There was a sharp rap at the door, and Lady and Nymeria’s ears perked up. Alyn rose at once to open it.

Sansa heart jumped in her chest, when Tyrion stepped into the room. For a wild moment, she allowed herself to imagine Jon walking in beside him, fresh snowfall in his hair.

He would take me in his arms, kiss me, and sweep us all away from this lion’s den.

“Lord Stark,” Tyrion greeted, “I wondered if I might have a moment of your time to discuss my dealings with the Night’s Watch.”

Sansa pressed the thought of Jon back into her heart, and covered it with an armor of duty.

Dreaming makes one despondent. And there is still work left to do.

“Let us step into my solar, Lord Tyrion,” said Ned, waving at his men to dismiss them, “Brienne, why don’t you see the girls off to bed.”

“Of course, my lord,” said Brienne. Sansa and Arya jumped to their feet. The five of them climbed the stairs, trailed by the wolves. They stayed silent as the grave until Ned had shut the heavy door to the stairs.

Her father walked right past his solar door, making for the small chamber that connected to Sansa’s bedroom. He opened the door, and they all stepped through.

“We’ve been speaking in here when necessary,” said Ned, after they had entered, “the godswood is preferable, of course, but this room does serve its purpose. I’ve looked, it doesn’t seem to be accessible to the passage you spoke of.”

“You’re quite right,” said Tyrion, walking to the stone walls and running a hand across them, “as my memory serves me, the passage that Varys’ little birds make use of runs along the Hand’s solar and the accompanying sleeping chamber. He walked to the window, and glanced out it before shutting it tightly.

He turned around, meeting Sansa’s eyes, and for a moment the sheer, overwhelming weight of every question on her lips made her speechless. Beneath the table, Lady nosed at her knees.
“Well,” said Tyrion, sitting down beside Sansa, “we have quite a lot to discuss don’t we? And not very much time to do it. I’m afraid this must be our last meeting for quite a while yet. Apparently, our families are already at formidable odds.”

Arya bristled at Tyrion’s tone, and narrowed her eyes. “Were we supposed to have waited for you to get back?” she asked, “sat around, and done nothing?”

“I assumed that was the plan, yes,” Tyrion responded, with a half-smile.

“Our plan was peace for the realm,” said Sansa, laying her hand on top of her sister’s, “something that would not have been accomplished, if we had done nothing.”

“What were you thinking?” Tyrion asked Sansa, his voice becoming weary-tinged, “betrothing Myrcella to your brother? And suggesting that Tommen be fostered in Winterfell? You have sent my sister into a tailspin.”

“I asked Robert to betroth our children, Lord Tyrion,” Ned cut in warningly, “you speak to all of us, not only my daughter.” Nymeria growled from beneath the table, and Tyrion shifted awkwardly in his seat.

“I could think of no better way to ensure their protection,” said Sansa, with all the steel of the Lady of Winterfell. She paused, weighing her words. “And I did not act entirely of my own accord. Myrcella asked to be taken away.”

“Did she?” Tyrion asked, her words giving him pause, “why would she? Her life is in no danger yet, and she is still the undisputed and beloved princess of the realm.”

“Being a princess does not protect her from Joffrey,” Sansa told Tyrion, severely.

“But Joffrey never hurt Myrcella,” Tyrion said, more to himself than to her, “he might have frightened her perhaps…”

“Everyone hurts Myrcella,” said Sansa fiercely, “everyone. She is a pretty pawn, and she will suffer because of that. I saw an opportunity to make her safe, and I took it. I will not allow her to languish here in perpetual fear.

Tyrion was silent for a moment. “It’s not the same as it was for you,” Tyrion said, softening slightly.

“And what would you have done differently?” Sansa asked, “where in all the seven kingdoms would Myrcella be safer than in Winterfell under House Stark’s protection? We don’t beat little girls bloody for their brother’s war victories in the North.”

She heard her father breathe in deeply from across the table, and turned to see him gripping the edge of his chair.

“It is not the place that I object to,” said Tyrion, “I do not doubt that she would be treated kindly. But the fact remains that you have loaded and drawn back the crossbow. Do you know what my brother told me today? He said that if the King decrees it, then Myrcella will go. And I do not think he spoke of Robert.”

“Cersei has a thousand grievances against Robert,” said Sansa, “his death comes about as surely as Winter. I am not so ambitious to think that we might prevent it for much longer. At least with a betrothal, we would have cause to bring Myrcella, and even Tommen with us when we return home.”
“It’s too deadly,” said Tyrion, shaking his head, “you know my sister, Sansa. And I have no power with which to force her hand this time.”

“I refuse to not try,” said Sansa, “I know my purpose, I see it stretched out before me, a daunting, endless road. And I also know that purpose would be waylaid if I were to see Myrcella’s pain, and do nothing.”

“It has been done,” Ned said before Tyrion could speak further, “the precedent has been set. As much as you believe your sister would never allow it, it nevertheless remains an open option now. Whether we are able to take Myrcella with us when we go or not, she will always have Winterfell as a place of safety.”

“You would wed your shining son to the trueborn princess of the seven kingdoms,” Tyrion said, his smile dry as death, “but would you do the same for a bastard girl born of incest?”

Ned’s mouth turned down. “There are other options if it comes to that,” he said, “I have several sons who would make Myrcella a fine husband. Jon, perhaps.”

Sansa felt a swooping sensation in her stomach, and beside her, Tyrion choked on his drink.

“You mean the son that is one of the heirs to the Iron Throne?” Tyrion asked, coughing, “forgive me, but do you never intend for him to be known by his true name?”

“I have never intended for him to aspire to the throne,” said Ned, “the crown is a terrible burden. I’d rather my son be a living bastard than a dead prince. Do you remember what happened to his half-siblings? What your family did to those children? It haunts me still, to think of them lying there. If left in my hands, Jon would not even know his true name. He would have a good wife, land of his own. A simple life.”

“He will not stay hidden forever,” said Tyrion, recovering himself, “under Robert’s rule, I understand the necessity. But when Daenerys comes, everything will change. Jon will be an asset, a vital one. He is no ordinary man.”

“He remains Jon Snow, yet, Lord Tyrion,” Ned said, stiffly.

“Tyrion, how is Jon?” Sansa asked, cutting in, “how are the boys? How is mother? We’ve been waiting desperately to hear of them.”

“Apologies,” said Tyrion, “I did not mean to keep you waiting on that account. All is well, do not fret, my lady. Everything has gone to plan. Jon has kept his head, and has secured the assistance of Lord Mormont. Your brother has received Stannis’ shipment of dragonglass, and the materials for the garden. They were sent north with the same escort of brothers that saw me back to Winterfell.”

Sansa sighed, as relief spread throughout her.

“Robb has put Theon to work, training the boys and men,” Tyrion continued, “he told me he intends to host daily practice for the smallfolk of Wintertown as well.”

“He must be cautious,” grunted Ned, “it would arouse the suspicions of our bannermen to see us preparing as if for war.”

“And I told him this,” said Tyrion smoothly, “he is being as covert as possible. Your Lady Wife has been quite busy as well. She is overseeing repairs on the broken tower, and has begun stocking supplies for Winter. She has sent letters to all the great houses of the North, informing them that the long summer will soon be at an end, and that it is necessary to begin preparations.”
Pride glowed in Sansa’s chest, making her long all the more to look upon the faces of her family. Her mother and Robb, strong and steady with Bran and Rickon at their sides.

“I must inform the small council then,” said Ned, rubbing a hand over his face, “the southern houses will hear of our preparations before long.”

“A very small council it is,” said Tyrion fixing his eyes on Arya, who scowled at him, “I hear that there’s been an opening for Master of Coin. Has Littlefinger been indisposed of late?”

“You could say,” Arya retorted.

“You’ve managed to flummox even Varys,” said Tyrion, chuckling darkly, “no small feat. How did you do it?”

“Swiftly and quietly,” said Brienne, “he’s vanished as surely as if the Others had taken him.”

“He outlived his usefulness,” said Sansa, “once he had procured the gold for the Wall, there was no reason for him to linger.”

“And that gold is Lannister gold, I presume?” Tyrion asked.

“Littlefinger exaggerated the cost of the tourney,” Ned said gruffly, “something I did not ask him to do, but he did nonetheless.”

Tyrion laughed. “All his fine plans will fall to dust now won’t they?” he said, grinning, “I am sure that he would have leveled that financial discrepancy for his own benefit at some point in the future.”

“That was the idea,” said Sansa, “cut the lines before he could draw in the catch.” She looked at Tyrion intently. “And you will fill his seat on the small council.”

“Ah,” said Tyrion, raising his eyebrows, “I had wondered.”

“You need to hold more power in the Keep if you are to be successful,” Sansa said, “I can’t make you Hand of the King, but a seat on the small council can be managed. Ingratiate yourself with your sister, and with Robert. Cersei will want a Lannister in that position anyway, before Robert can appoint another. You are here, and available.”

“My sister still hates me,” said Tyrion, drumming his fingers on the table, “and she thinks I am a drunken fool.”

“Sober yourself,” said Sansa, “and go to her. Tell her you want to help. Remind her of how much you care for her children. If she feels threatened by Father’s influence, then she will be looking for allies.”

“I’m impressed,” said Tyrion, regarding her with a fondness, “this may well work.”

“It will,” said Sansa, “and it is due to all of our efforts.”

“If Robert asks, I will put my word in for you,” said Ned, leveling a look at Tyrion.

“Don’t be too fawning, Lord Stark,” said Tyrion with a wry smile, “we are to be at appear at odds when I leave this room. From here on out, I must be devoted to my family’s cause.”

“Is there anything else?” Ned asked.
“A great deal,” said Tyrion, quietly, “but it cannot all be said now. I must be going before my stay is seen as more unusual than it already is.” He started to rise, and then clapped his hand to his breast. “Ah, I had almost forgotten. I have letters from your family. Jon, Robb, and Lady Catelyn.” He reached over Sansa, handing them to Ned.

Her father took them gratefully. “You have done us a great service, Lord Tyrion, thank you,” Ned said, gripping the letters tightly.

“I am only the messenger,” said Tyrion, “and now I will truly take my leave.”

He stood, and Ned did as well, reaching out a hand to Tyrion. Tyrion paused for a fraction of a second, and then accepted the hand.

He turned to leave, and Sansa hastily made her decision. “Lord Tyrion, I will escort you down the stairs.”

Tyrion blinked up at her, an unreadable strangeness in his expression. “Of course, my lady,” he said, eyes darting behind her.

He offered his arm, and she took it, not daring to look behind her. They walked silently to the heavy door that guarded the stairs. Her skirt whispered softly against the stones.

She glided halfway down the stairwell, well away from the door and stopped.

“Well, you’ve engaged the ire of your family against me,” said Tyrion, smiling up at her, “what do you wish to speak of in private?”

Now that she had him here, Sansa was hesitant. She bit the corner of her lip, frustrated with her apprehension.

“Are you expecting something, perhaps?” Tyrion asked, drawing a sealed and folded parchment from his pocket.

Sansa drew a quick breath, looking down at the proffered letter. “I asked you to keep an eye on Jon,” she said, making no move to take what he offered, “I wish to know how he has fared. How he is.”

“And you will find that in this letter,” said Tyrion, “which I have been instructed to deliver to you personally. Out of sight of your family.”

She took the letter delicately, running her fingers over the smooth edge of the red wax.

Where had he stood when he sealed this letter? Was he cold? Tired? Hungry? Lonely?

Tyrion cleared his throat, pulling her from her from her thoughts. “I’ve also been given a message. I’m to tell you that… he’s counting the days, my lady.”

Sansa looked at him sharply. He stared back, his manner frank and curious. She broke their gaze, and tucked the letter deep within her skirts.

“He is well?” she asked again.

If he was disappointed in her response, he wisely did not let it show. “He is,” said Tyrion, “be assured of that, Sansa.”

Sansa felt in her pocket, letting her fingertips brush the edge of Jon’s letter. “I am. I must be.”
Sansa hurried to shut her chamber door behind her, Lady following swiftly at her heels. She had brushed off her family’s curiosity, insisting she had only needed to speak to Tyrion in private.

“For what purpose?” her father had asked, looking almost as though he did not want to hear her answer.

“Lord Tyrion is a proud man,” Sansa had explained, feeling Jon’s letter burn where it brushed against her leg, “I merely wished to speak with him when he was no so guarded. To reassure him of our shared purpose and commitment.”

“He seemed very sure of himself, my lady,” Brienne said, frowning.

“Don’t we all?” Sansa said, with a slight smile.

Sansa sank to the floor in a puddle of her skirts. Lady wound herself around Sansa’s legs, and Sansa stroked her wolf’s head. She broke the red seal as carefully as she was able, and smoothed out the letter with trembling fingers.

To Lady Sansa Stark, The Red Wolf of Winterfell, Protectress of the North, dearest,

Dearest. The words seemed to catch in Sansa’s chest, fluttering there, like wings brushing up against her heart.

Sansa,

I have been successful in my purpose thus far. I have taken no vows, and yet I have been granted passage on the ranging that will head North once the dragonglass arrives. It is a thorny path that lays before us. The men underestimate me, mistrust me, and I cannot blame them. To them, I am just a lordling playing at their struggle. I will gain their trust and their friendship in time. They are still my brothers yet, even if they do not know it.

I am anxiously awaiting Sam’s arrival at the Wall. Even if he does not accompany the ranging, I need to see him through training before our departure. He will suffer if left to Thorne’s hand, and I will not allow that. The fate of Gilly and Little Sam troubles my dreams. I must tread carefully in order to save them from Craster’s Keep. The Watch cannot know of my intention to see the Wildlings over the Wall. That will be a heavy blow when it falls.

Uncle Benjen and I will lead the ranging towards the Fist of the First Men, at the edge of the Frostfang mountains. The official purpose of the ranging is to inform the Watch of the Wildling’s recent, unfamiliar movements. Mance Rayder has been raising his army, and his scouts are sure to be traversing the mountains and the surrounding areas. The brothers do not know that we intend to hunt and capture a wight, returning with it to Castle Black. They can doubt stories passed around the fire, but there will be no denying the truth when the dead stand before them.

I cannot guess as to how long we will be gone. Our last ravens will be sent from White Tree. It pains me to put even more distance between us, but I bear in mind that every step I take will one day lead me back to you. We will be together again. Home, and surrounded by our family. One of the brothers asked me the other day, why my hand strayed so frequently to my breast. I thought to
tell him that your token lay hidden there, warming me better than furs or fires.

Everyday, I look to where the Kingsroad begins, and imagine riding South to your side. Whisking you away from all that has ever caused you unhappiness or harm. I can never decide, whether you would be furious at the presumption that you needed saving, or delighted by the fact that I had come. A bit of both, perhaps. It always ends with you safe in my arms.

And yet my duty to you, and to our family sends me Norther still. I pray to any gods that are listening that they protect you. And then I wonder if there is any god that holds half the strength, the grace, that you do. When I stall or stumble, it is the thought of you beside me that floods me with strength. And when you face the same, when you find yourself faltering, my love, know that I stand with you. Wherever you are, whatever you face, you will not be alone. We will confront it together, every step of the way.

Yours, always, Jon

Sansa leaned over, laying her head on Lady’s stomach. Lady licked her ear, and Sansa smiled, her eyes tracing over Jon’s letters once more. He had written this with a hard hard, she mused, looking the dark ink of his careful writing. The ink had pooled around his signature, as if he had lingered over the last words. Yours. Always. Jon.

She wound her fingers through Lady’s fur, her wolf’s heart a steady thump against her ear.

“Can you see them?” Sansa whispered to Lady, “do you dream of the North?”

Sansa closed her eyes, and tried to imagine that she was Lady, running through the snow. Her great chest heaving, her ragged breaths, the chill on her twitching ears.

She opened her eyes. Lady stared steadily back at her, and Sansa sighed. She climbed into bed, and Lady followed.

Sansa closed her eyes, and dreamt of home.

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“I’m here to see my sister.” Tyrion told the guards outside Maegor’s Holdfast. Lannister men, Tyrion noted. He had seen nothing but Lannister men guarding the doors.

“The Queen’s not sent for anyone,” the guard told Tyrion, looking balefully down at him.

“I’ve sent myself,” said Tyrion with a crooked grin, “nothing foul afoot, I assure you. Can’t a man want to greet his loving family?”

Perhaps ‘loving’ had been an overstep, Tyrion thought, as he watched the guards glance at each other. Tyrion ran a hand down his red, velvet doublet, straightening it, so that the prominent golden lion on his chest shone. It caught the guards’ eyes and Tyrion waited.

“No weapons,” the guard grunted finally, “Queen’s orders.”

Tyrion obliged, lifting his arms, and turning slowly in front of them.

The guards stepped apart, letting him pass through the great doors. Tyrion strolled down the hallways, draped red and gold. He started to turn towards his sister’s chambers, when he heard Robert’s booming laugh.
Tyrion turned at once to follow the sound. Jaime stood languidly by the open door, and he raised his eyebrows when he spotted Tyrion.

“I’ve come to pay my respects to our sovereign,” said Tyrion, grinning, “may I pass?”

“I thought you intended to speak to our sister,” said Jaime, looking at him intently.

“After perhaps,” said Tyrion, “we’ll have to see who provides the better wine.”

He stepped through the doors. Robert was sitting at his desk, shouting at Lancel and Barristan Selmy.

“Wine, Lancel! Gods, what a name, Lancel Lannister. Who named you - ” Robert cut off as he caught sight of Tyrion. “The Imp of Casterly Rock! My dear wife was sure that you’d perished somewhere in the North!”

“Sorry to disappoint, your grace,” said Tyrion with an easy grin, “my sister is so much lovelier with a smile, and I’m afraid my being alive will bring her nothing but frowns.”

Robert laughed loudly, snatchings the fresh wineskin away from Lancel. “We’re telling war stories, Imp! The first time we ever killed a man, looked in his eyes, heard his last words. But you’re not a warrior, are you?”

“You... you are no... no son of mine

I am your son. I have always been your son.

“Alas, no,” said Tyrion, “never did get the knack of it. Words, I find, make far better weapons.”

“Piss on that,” Robert grunted, “men don’t bleed from words. Get your blasted cousin in here, Lancel, he’s run his sword through plenty.” He blinked blearily at Tyrion. “Surrounded by Lannisters. Everytime I close my eyes I see their blond hair, and their smug satisfied smiles.”

“An epidemic in my family,” Tyrion agreed lightly, “one cannot look down into their privy pot, see gold, and not be a bit smug.”

Robert paused as his words sunk in, and threw his head back, roaring with laughter.

Jaime sauntered in, his white cloak brushing the floor. Robert’s merriment faded, and he eyed Jaime with distaste.

“It must wound your pride, eh?” Robert said to Jaime, “Standing out there like a glorified sentry. Jaime Lannister, son of the mighty Tywin. Forced to mind the door while your King eats and drinks and shits and fucks. So come on, we’re telling war stories. Who was your first kill, not counting old men?”

Jaime glanced at Tyrion in mild irritation, as though it was Tyrion’s fault Jaime stood before the King. Tyrion smiled back pleasantly.

“One of the outlaws in the Brotherhood,” said Jaime.

“I remember that,” said Barristan, starting, “you were only a squire. Sixteen years old.”

“You killed Simon Toyne with a counter riposte,” said Jaime with a slight smile, “best move I ever saw.”
“A good fighter, Toyne,” said Barristan, “but he lacked stamina.”

“Your outlaw,” Robert interrupted, “any last words?”

“I cut off his head,” said Jaime, “so no.”

“What about Aerys Targaryen?” asked Robert. Tyrion glanced at Jaime, who’s face was placid once more. “What did the Mad King say when you stabbed him the back? I never asked. Did he call you a traitor? Did he plead for a reprieve?”

“He said the same thing he’d being saying for hours,” said Jaime, laxly, too much so, “burn them all.”

Dracarys.

“You ask me to spare the man who put a sword through my father’s back,” Daenerys had asked of Tyrion coldly, “the man who sought to run me through with a spear.” There was no throne at Winterfell, but his Queen sat upon her fur covered pallet like it was one.

“He has come here in supplication,” said Tyrion, tersely, “to pledge himself to our cause.”

Daenerys glanced over to where Jaime stood, an iron grip on the hilt of his sword. “He does not look like he is kneeling.”

“Bad knees,” said Jaime, with a wry smile. Tyrion winced.

“Tell me, Kingslayer” said Daenerys leaning forward, “shall I let you live, and wait for the moment when you plunge a dagger into me?”

“Do you think you’d deserve it?” asked Jaime.

“Brother,” Tyrion commanded, as Daenerys reared back in fury, “I beg you take to the advice you once gave me on the eve of a trial. Keep your mouth shut.”

“As I recall,” said Jaime, staring at Tyrion, “you didn’t take my advice then, and I won’t take yours now.” He turned his attention back to Daenerys. “I put my sword through the Mad King’s back because he threatened to burn King’s Landing to the ground. Told me to bring me my own father’s head. Did anyone ever tell you how he killed Rickard and Brandon Stark? He suspended the father from the rafters and lit a blaze beneath him. He placed a sword in front of the son, oh yes, he teased the possibility of rescued. He wrapped a leather cord around Brandon Stark’s neck, and every inch the man crawled closer to his chance of salvation, the cord tightened more and more. He strangled himself trying to reach his father, roasting alive in his armor.”

“I am not my father,” Daenerys whispered, her hands curling into fists.

“And yet I watched you bear down on an army of men with three dragons,” said Jaime, calmly, “the people you claimed to be liberating died screaming, just as so many of your father’s victims did. I watched you burn thousands of sheaves of wheat. Food that was meant to alleviate the starvation that bears down upon the South after so many years of brutal war. Tell me, Mother of Dragons. Can your children plant grain? Can their claws dig a harvest? Will their flames bake bread?”

“My children will be this country’s salvation,” said Daenerys, her violet eyes flashing, “when the dead come, marching on your armies, it is their flames that will cut them down. You will do well to remember that.”
“Ah, yes,” said Jaime, tilting his head, “our armies. About that, it seems my sister has gone back on her word. Something about hiring a mercenary army from Essos, and taking back the South while you’re forces dwindle away in the North.”

Daenerys fury was a palpable thing that swept the tent, and seemed to sear the air. Outside, the dragons shrieked.

“A regrettable choice your sister has made,” whispered Daenerys through clenched teeth, “she will rue it.”

“Is that so?” Jaime asked softly, goading her, “so you plan to defeat the Others with no loss of your armies, of your dragons? When you emerge, battle worn from the fight against the dead, if you emerge that is. Are you certain you can defeat a Queen who has only gained forces, strength and land in your absence?”

“I will fly south,” said Daenerys, casting off the fur wrapped around her shoulders, “she will bend the knee, or die. And her armies, what is left of them, will ride North to defend their kingdom in my name.”

“There’s no time,” said Tyrion, frustration swelling up in him, “your grace, the Wall has fallen, there’s a blizzard bearing down on us. You must stay here, so we can formulate a plan of attack. If you go South now, we are all lost.”

Daenerys drew her head back, and stared at him with hard eyes.

“I am a dragon.”

“If that’s all, your grace...” said Jaime, regarding Robert.

Robert grunted and waved Jaime away. “Your brother’s not as funny as you, Imp,” Robert told Tyrion with a snort, after Jaime had left.

“Handsome men rarely are,” Tyrion confirmed, and Robert laughed again.

“I take it you haven't come all the way to this shithole to jest with your King,” said Robert, snapping his fingers at Lancel, who reluctantly fetched Tyrion a drink.

Tyrion met Lancel’s eyes as the boy handed him his drink, and smiled winningly at his cousin.

“I’m afraid even I can’t draw any humor from what I am about to tell you,” said Tyrion, turning back to Robert, and drinking deeply, “I assume my sister told you of my intention to see the Wall before leaving the North.”

“Aye, I heard,” Robert acknowledged, his interest dimming, “and what dull asking have you been sent to request of me. The Watch has all the wretched vermin they desire from the dungeons. What else do they need to beat off wildlings armed with sticks?”

“Lord Commander Mormont has informed me that the Wildlings are moving souther every day,” said Tyrion, “he thinks they’re running from something.”

“They’ll run straight into the Wall if they do,” grunted Robert, “and they’ll be picked off like flies.”

“It’s not the Wildlings, that concern the Lord Commander,” said Tyrion, “rather, what they are running from.”
“You’ve come to tell me stories, Imp,” said Robert, gripping his glass, “first Ned, and now you?”

“And what did Lord Stark tell you exactly?” asked Tyrion.

“He regaled me with a fairy tale that a deserter fed him before his execution,” said Robert, “I hope you are not about to do the same.”

“Forgive me, your grace,” said Tyrion steadily, “but fairytale or not, the Watch is dying. If the whispers are true, if the wildlings have banded together, the current strength of the Wall will not contain them. They need more men. Money and supplies.”

“I never knew you to be such a pragmatic man, Lannister,” said Robert, eyeing Tyrion.

“It’s a skill acquired out of necessity,” said Tyrion easily, “and never applicable to drink, or women.”

He sat back, pleased, as Robert roared in agreement.

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Myrcella squealed with delight when she glimpsed him, and Tyrion scooped her up in his arms and spun her in a circle. He kissed her brow lightly, as she clung to him. Tommen crashed into him happily, and he squeezed his nephew hard, and clapped him on the back.

“Such a fine prince and princess, here to greet their poor old uncle,” Tyrion teased them.

“They said you were dead!” Myrcella said, tugging at his hand, “I’m terribly glad that isn’t so.”

“We share that view, sweet child,” said Tyrion, chucking her chin affectionately, “where is your mother? I need to speak with her.”

Tommens pointed to the doorway, and Tyrion crossed to enter his sister's sitting room. Her mouth tightened when she spotted him.

“You?” she asked, in distaste and disbelief, “I did not believe it when I heard. What are you doing here?”

“Can’t I want to see my family?” Tyrion asked, reaching for glasses and pouring them both wine. He placed one in front of his sister, and took a seat. She took it, watching him all the while.

“You have no love for our family,” Cersei scoffed, “you never have.”

“I admit to being dishonest at times,” said Tyrion, toying with his glass, “but not about this. You know I love the children dearly. And I have a passing fondness for our brother.”

“Myrcella and Tommen have been asking about you,” Cersei admitted, begrudgingly, after a moment.

“So I am here,” said Tyrion spreading his arms, and flashing his sister a grin, “to spoil the children, and to help you, sweet sister, in any way that I can.”

“What help could you offer me?” Cersei sneered, “what use would I make of a drunken, twisted little man?”

“Our brother has informed me that we are in the midst of uncertain times,” said Tyrion, “times which we place our trust in family. And I never bet against my own family. It is the surest
His sister narrowed her eyes at him. “Again, I ask you, what use would you be to me?”

“You know as well as any that certain... disadvantages in this life leads one to put their stock in other abilities,” said Tyrion, “my overdeveloped wits and intelligence are at your disposal. Feel free to make use of them.”

“You overestimate yourself,” Cersei retorted.

“Perhaps,” said Tyrion, “but perhaps not. Do not think yourself the only astute member of our family. Tell me, when were you planning to kill Robert?” He bent forward to say the last, the words low and steady.

His sister’s face, so often inscrutable to outsiders, flushed with fear. “How?” she demanded, half rising to her feet.

“Hush, sweet sister,” said Tyrion smiling, lazily, “it comes as no surprise to me. I’d be more taken aback if you weren’t plotting your charming, husband’s imminent demise. It would be so unlike you, to grown more generous with age.”

Her slap was quick and hard, leaving his cheek stinging.

“You dare,” she seethed.

“And when you do,” said Tyrion, “your son, Jaime’s son, will sit on the Iron Throne, back by the full might of the South, and all the gold our father can pull from the earth. You will be Queen in all but title, and your children’s children will carry on our dynasty.”

“Ours?” repeated Cersei scornfully. “Ours? While you were drinking and whoring these last seventeen years, I was here, suffering. I was the one who listened to Father, I was the one who learned his lessons, I was the one who birthed the future of our house.”

“You are our father’s daughter,” agreed Tyrion, willing her to cede to his words, “as much as I, and even Jaime, have never been the sons that he deserved nor wanted.”

“You only ever flatter me when you want something,” said Cersei, dropping her glass on the table.

“And you must be slipping,” Tyrion replied, “if you cannot ascertain what that is.”

Cersei watched him, her lovely face turning sullen.

“You think I am a monster,” said Tyrion softly, “I’m not. I’ve never been. I am a man. A Lannister. A smaller lion to be sure, but you cannot doubt that my blood runs red and gold just as yours does. I went North to find a bit of glory. I didn’t realize how much I wanted that until I stood atop that wall at the end of the world. I want that again, I want to find another bit of glory. There are things, creeping in the shadows, in the light, that seek to threaten our family. Let me help you make them kneel before us. Let me help you bring glory to our family.”

“And I’m supposed to trust you,” Cersei asked, fiercely.

“You could try,” said Tyrion, “and in return, dear sister, I will try to do the same.”

Chapter End Notes
Jons letter took me a ridiculously long time to write. Picture me, next to my family on the couch, with a hard copy of the letter on a clipboard and a red grading pen, trying to imagine that I'm a reborn preteen but actually grown man jon snow writing a desperate one way correspondance to Sansa stark trying to assure her that everything is a okay when it is so totally not. It was a weird headspace y'all, but hopefully it paid off. Thanks for reading!
Catelyn read Ned’s letter again. She could see where Robb had gripped it tightly, smudging the ink.

_I have spoken to our good King, and arranged a betrothal that will further unite our houses, and the kingdom. Robb will be set to wed the Princess Myrcella when she comes of age._

The words seemed to sink like a stone in her stomach. _What are you planning, Ned?_

“I don’t understand,” said Robb, staring at the letter, “how can this be my duty? What does Father intend for me to do? I - I can’t marry… her.”

“A betrothal is not a marriage,” said Catelyn. She ran her fingers through Robb’s curls, “betrothals can be broken.”

“But if Father intends for it to be broken, then why make it at all?” asked Robb.

“You must think it through,” Catelyn urged her son, “if Myrcella is to be the Lady of Winterfell one day, what would be the likely course of action?”

“She would come here,” said Robb, slowly, “and foster here until she is of age. If she is to run the castle one day, she should have experience with life here.” He looked up at Catelyn. “Father wants her to come here for some purpose.”

“Yes,” agreed Catelyn, “it seems that your father wishes to bring the princess to Winterfell under the guise of a betrothal.”

“Father was meant to stave off the Lannisters,” said Robb, irritably, “not bring them back to our gate.”

Catelyn laid her hand on top of Robb’s. “My love. If your father has decided to send the girl north, then it is for purposes of protection. Ours, most likely, or perhaps hers. If it does come to war, we will hold one of their own. And there is nowhere safer that the girl could be. Your father would never allow her to come to harm.”

Even as she said the words, she felt a doubtful flutter in her chest. Arya’s face came to mind, her fierce daughter was only one year older than the princess. _What would I do to those who would_
snatch her from me?

The northern lords will not pleased when this reaches their ears, they would have hoped one of their own daughters would rule from the seat of the North to have another southern girl come to wed their northern lord will surely give rise to misgivings and not only a southern girl, but the crown princess, they do not well like the crown’s reach creeping up past the Neck, and that is not to say of when her parentage comes to light, they will see it as an insult, that a bastard girl of incestuous birth was offered for the prized son of the North, that my son and my husband had the folly to accept such a child into our home, Robb will have to write to them at once, it is better that they should hear it from his raven then spilling out the mouth of some singer at the tavern, singing of the wolf and the lion. Stag. Ned, I wish you were here.

“No,” said Robb, “nor would I.”

The door swung open with a crash, and Jory burst in, blood on his shirt, and a sheen of sweat across his forehead. “My lady, my lord!”

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“Mother!”

Bran ran towards her and Robb, his curls mussed, and mud smeared across his cheek and down his front. He skidded to a stop in front of them, his little chest heaving. Beside him, Summer paced, restlessly, blood drying on his muzzle.

Catelyn reached out at once to pull him close, but he resisted her.

“It was wildlings!” said Bran, his eyes wide, blue saucers, “and deserters! Jory and Theon slew them, and Summer torn one open!”

“It’s true then?” Robb asked, with an approximation of Ned’s thunder. He looked to where Theon was strolling towards them, swaggering with pride. Lew and Donnis flanked him, grimly. Behind them, Cayne and Desmond led a horse with a dreadful figure atop the poor creature.

“Aye, it's true,” Theon boasted, “I put an arrow through the skull of the one that held your brother, he’s alive and well thanks to me.”

“And how did he come to lay a hand on Bran?” Robb questioned harshly, and Catelyn’s fury rose up beside his own.

Theon’s smirk soured slightly. “He went off a bit on his own. We were close by.”

Not close enough.

Beside her, a hand in Bran’s curls, Robb seemed to to draw himself back. “It was foolish of you to leave my brother on his own,” Robb said, “but you have done my family a great service, and I thank you for that.” He thanked the men profusely as well, before turning his attention to the horse and its rider.

“A wildling, my lord,” said Desmond, “the deserters fought and were cut down, but this one begged for mercy. We thought you should like to pass her judgement.”

Robb looked taken aback, as the woman raised her filthy head, and stared at him with stony eyes. “What is your name?” Robb asked her.
“Osha, as it pleases you, m’lord,” said the woman. She slid down from the horse's back with difficulty, and prostrated herself, bound fists held out to Robb.

“Osha,” Robb repeated, a strange familiarity coloring his tone. Catelyn felt it too, the flickering of a remembrance.

Saved the boys... carried them on her back... she had a tenderness and a mercy in her for lost things... Bran said...

Catelyn regarded her again. Although on her belly, the woman’s eyes darted about as if for escape. She looked as tender as a dangling shard of ice.

What did you look like in despair? Were you merciful and tender when they killed your baby boy, and slit your throat to the bone?

“Very well,” said Robb, finally, “see that she is bathed and clothed in something proper. I will speak to her at a later hour. Do not harm her, but do not leave her unfettered.”

“Yes, m’lord.”

Catelyn pressed a firm kiss to Bran’s head. “Clean him up,” she said, nodding at Summer, “he’ll be frightening the maids like that. And then change your clothes and wash up.”

“Yes, mother,” said Bran scampering off, past Jeyne and Beth who looked so frightened they shrieked. Catelyn sighed, and turned to her eldest.

“We will speak to her later,” he murmured, before striding off to speak with Theon and Jory.

And Catelyn felt as if she had stepped onto a slick stone in the river, the current nipping at her heels.

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The wildling was better suited to the rags they had found her in. Catelyn watched the woman pull at the edge of the rough wool dress. A pity it must be to lack a proper dress, even if one did live in an icy hut.

“You’re Lord Stark,” the woman asked, gruffly, glancing up at Robb, “you’re just a lordling.”

“Lord Stark is my father,” said Robb, evenly, “but I am the warden of the North at present, as he attends to southern business.”

“You’re all southerns,” said Osha, lifting her head, “its why I’m here. We were running south. As south as south goes. I meant to get much further than here.”

“You and the deserters?” Robb asked.

“Crows are foul company,” said Osha, “but far better than traveling alone. As I see it, I trust the men running more than I trust the ones atop your great wall.”

“And what is it you’re running from?”

Osha turned her heavy eyes on Catelyn. Catelyn held her gaze.

“I wouldn’t want to lose my head for telling stories,” said Osha, plucking at her sleeve, “I wouldn’t want to sear your fine southern ears with wildling tales.”
Robb drew back and clasped his hands. It was a face that Ned wore when he was considering his words carefully.

“Brothers arrived from the Wall not too long past,” said Robb, after a moment, “I sent them back with several crates of dragonglass from the island of Dragonstone. House Stark intends to arm the men of the Watch against the threat beyond the Wall.”

He reached into his desk, and produced a piece of the glassy, black rock. Osha stared at it, as he placed it in front of her, but made no move to touch it.

“Frozen fire,” Robb continued, “that’s what the Valyrian Dragonlords used to call it, or so my maester tells me. A weapon that could slay a monster of ice.”

“It won’t do you any good,” Osha said in a voice that was barely a whisper, “the North is no place for men to be. Not any more. There’s bad things coming.”

“But it works?” pressed Robb, leaning forward, “this will kill the Others?”

Osha shuddered at the word, and reached out to stroke the dragonglass with the tips of her fingers. “It’s said the children of the forest carried black blades, and they gifted them to men. I’ve not seen it for myself, m’lord, but I’ve heard the old stories.”

“You’re not running from stories,” said Robb, glancing at Catelyn.

“No, m’lord,” said Osha, “I was born in the ice and snow, and I loved that land fiercely. I had a roof over my head, and a good man to love me. I was his and he was mine. It was a good life, and I would have spend the rest of my days living it out if it had not been taken from me.”

A good life. Ned and the children within the walls of Winterfell, warm by the hearth.

“What was his name?” Catelyn asked, her voice strained slightly.

Osha looked at her, her dark hair falling over her face. “Bruni, his name was.” Met with silence, she continued, as if pulling the words from a deep place within her. “One night Bruni disappeared. People said he left me, but I knew him. He’d never leave me. Not for long. He’d always come back. And he did. He came in through the back of the hut only it wasn’t Bruni, not really.”

Catelyn drew in a shuddering breath. Her thoughts twisted like a pit of vipers, drawing horrid images, unbidden.

Ned’s head, cleaved from his neck, his blood staining the steps of the sept. And somehow even more terrible, the thought of his proud head, the one she had kissed tenderly, wound her fingers through his thick hair, rotting in the sun, a feast for the crows.

Did you linger, my love? Could you? Did you hear our daughters crying, did you feel my heart cleaving in two? Did your face cease to be yours when the Stranger took your soul?

“His skin was pale,” Osha rasped, “like a dead man’s skin. His eyes bluer than a clear sky, and he’d never had blue eyes before. He came at me, grabbed me by the neck, and squeezed so hard I could feel the life slipping out of me. I don’t know how I got the knife, but when I did I stuck it deep into his heart. And he hardly seemed to notice. I had to burn down our hut with him inside.”

“I burned Winterfell,” Sansa said in a low voice, her blue eyes, her own eyes, deep and distant, “burned it down with us inside, it was the only way.”
She reached up to wipe away the tears that had dripped down Catelyn’s cheeks, seemingly unaware of her own.

Catelyn drew in several ragged breaths before pressing her lips to the back of her daughter’s limp hand. “I burned it,” Sansa whispered, and Catelyn wondered if in Sansa’s dreams, she drowned in green flames. And Catelyn wondered how to spare her daughter such a thing.

Osha curled her fist around the chunk of dragonglass until her knuckles turned white.

“May the seven ease your grief,” Catelyn murmured. The words were an old blessing, learned in her girlhood.

“The gods are all dead, as far as I’m concerned,” said Osha, “they don’t give two frozen shits about the likes of us. Any of us.”

Robb passed his hands over his face. Catelyn noted the faint trembling in his hands.

“Gods or not,” said Robb, hoarsely, “the blood of the First Men runs through our veins. The Others have been beaten back once, it can be done again.”

“The South has made you soft,” Osha replied, “your blood’s forgotten what it’s like beyond your warm castle walls, and roaring hearth. If you were smarter, you’d run. The Free Folk know how to survive.”

“Free Folk like Mance Rayder?” Robb asked, and Osha looked up, warily.

“Aye,” she said, “Mance is a survivor.”

“So he’s coming south then?” Robb prodded. Osha shifted in her seat, and did not meet his eyes.

“I can’t rightly say,” said Osha with reluctance, “it’s not my business anymore, m’lord. I’ve struck out on my own.”

“And if we let you, where would you go?” Catelyn asked.

“South,” said Osha again, “the warmer the better.”

“And when you go south,” said Catelyn, “will you find work? Will you lie to an old man in need to a young wife? Will you rob honest people when you find yourself wanting?”

Osha glared at her. “I’ll do what is needed, m’lady,” she said.

“My son cannot in good conscience allow you to run South,” said Catelyn, watching Osha’s shoulders tighten, “he is Warden of the North. His duty is firstly to his people, not to you. But you have begged him for mercy, and shared your trials with us. This has not fallen on deaf ears. I would offer you a place in our kitchens. A warm bed, clothes on your back, a full belly. If you swear to serve us, and never bring harm into our home, then you may stay.”

Beside her, Robb nodded. “On my honor as a Stark, you will not be harmed nor shackled if you choose to stay.”

Catelyn watched the woman closely as she considered their proposition. Osha still held the dragonglass clasped in her hands.

“I’ll not follow your gods, nor kneel to your king,” said Osha.
“I will not ask it of you,” Robb replied, “but I will ask you to swear yourself to myself, and to House Stark. If this trust is broken, your life will be forfeit. Do you accept?”

Osha tilted her head, and studied him with her dark eyes. “Aye, m’lord. I swear to you and yours that I will bring you no harm.”

“Then I will call a steward to show you to your bed,” said Robb, rising, “you are surely tired after your travels.” He noticed Osha drawing the dragonglass towards her almost absentmindedly. “You may keep that if you wish. A gift of faith and protection.”

“Thank you, m’lord,” said Osha, shoving the chunk of dragonglass deep into the pockets of her dress. She hobbled unsteadily to the door, her ankles still shackled.

Catelyn watched her go, the image of Ned’s eyes, bluer than the summer sky seared into her thoughts.

Bran watched the wildling woman scrubbing the stones. Her shackles were gone which made him a touch nervous, but Robb had told him that she would bring him no harm. But Robb had also warned him to stay away from her, and yet here he was, straining for a glance of her face. He had heard that wildlings had sharp teeth like wolves and red eyes. He had been too scared to look at their teeth when they had pulled him from his horse.

He crept towards her, hoping for a glimpse of her razor sharp teeth. She whipped around suddenly, scaring him so that he yelped in fear and scrambled back.

“Little lordling,” she grunted, her shoulders relaxing, “what do you want, boy?”

Bran looked closely at her mouth, and frowned in disappointment. “You have teeth like me,” he said in disappointment.

She looked taken aback, before laughing. “And what did the little lordling expect to find?” she asked baring her teeth in a smile.

“I thought wildlings had long, sharp teeth,” said Bran.

“No,” said Osha, “I have teeth just as you do. We’re of the same blood, you and I. Only my ancestors were on the other side of your Wall. Your name’s Brandon?”

“Yes,” said Bran, proudly, “Lord Brandon Stark of Winterfell.”

“Wildling blood runs through the Starks. I know of another Brandon Stark, one who was borne of a Stark maiden and a wildling king. You are descended from him.”

“No!” said Bran, “I’ve heard all the stories, and Old Nan’s never mentioned that.”

“Perhaps you do not wish to hear it,” said Osha, returning to her scrubbing, “it is of no interest to you, little lordling.”

“Tell me!” Bran demanded. Osha shook her head, and poured more water over the stone. “Please?” he asked finally, and the woman relented, sitting back on her heels.

“My mother used to sing of Bael the Bard,” said Osha, wringing out her cloth, “around the fire, when our bellies were full and warm. He roamed the lands, taking what he pleased from the pretty
southerners, and bringing it back to his people. The Lord of Winterfell in that time was a silly and weak man. He feared Bael, and instead of meeting him battle, let it be known that he thought Bael to be a craven man, and therefore beneath a great lord such as himself.”

“That can’t be true,” Bran objected. He thought of his father, and Robb, both strong and solid. *They would meet a wildling king on a battlefield.*

Osha shrugged. “Bael swore to teach the old lord a lesson, so he scaled the Wall and crept down the Kingsroad to Winterfell. There, the lord was throwing a lavish feast. Bael disguised himself as a singer, and with his golden harp under his arm, he announced himself as Sygerrik of Skagos to all the fine lords and ladies.”

“*Sygrrik?*” Bran asked, his tongue tripping over the unfamiliar word.

“It was a jape,” said Osha smiling, “*Sygriik* means *deceiver* in the old language of the first men. And so it was that Bael was seated at Lord Stark’s own table. Bael was a magnificent musician, and he played on and on into the hazy night. His audience was enraptured, and as the clock struck midnight, Lord Stark declared that Bael could name any reward he saw fit, and it would be given freely. And Bael said, ‘all I ask is a flower/ the fairest flower that blooms in the garden o’ Winterfell.”

She said the last in a strange tone, and Bran could imagine suddenly, a hundred, a thousand voices joining hers, all singing the same line through the generations, against the backdrop of flickering flames and snowy skies. The thought made the hair on his arm stand on end, and he leaned forward eagerly.

“It so happened that the winter roses had just come into bloom,” said Osha, “rare and beautiful blossoms, coveted by all. Lord Stark sent for the most beautiful rose to be plucked from his glass gardens, and it was presented to Bael as a fitting gift for his services. But in the morning, when dawn broke over the castle, it was found that the singer had vanished. Along with Lord Stark’s only daughter. In her empty bed, they found a single rose, the same one that Lord Stark had presented to Bael the night before.”

*A cloaked figure atop a fleeing horse. Bran could not see his shadowy face, but the gold of his harp gleamed at his side. In his arms he carried the stolen Stark daughter, her long, red hair streaming down her back, her blue eyes gazing sadly back towards her empty maiden bed.*

“Where were her brothers?” questioned Bran, “surely they would go, and rescue her.”

*If Sansa was snatched from her bed then we would run after her. Me, and Robb, and Jon, and even Rickon and Arya. We would fetch her back, and slay the terrible bard.*

Osha shook her head. “The Lord had but his one stolen daughter. When he discovered what Bael had done, he was terribly grieved. He sent a thousand ravens so that they blackened the skies, and set every man to searching for his winter rose. A year they searched, and found no trace of Bael or the girl. The Stark lord sank into despair, and as he lay in his bed mourning the end of his line, he happened to hear a babe’s sweet wail. When he followed the cry, he discovered his daughter, fast asleep in her bed with a babe suckling at her breast.

“Bael brought her back?” said Bran, his eyes wide.

“No,” said Osha, “she had been hiding in Winterfell the whole time, beneath the stone with the dead. The song paints a desperate maiden, so in love with the bard that she bore his son. But I cannot say, for it was Bael himself who wrote the song. But it is always said that she loved the
child fiercely, and would not allow him to come to harm. When the old lord died, it was the babe now grown, another Brandon, who took his grandfather’s seat.”

“What happened to Bael?”

“The song does not say,” said Osha, “but the stories told are far sadder. It is said that when some years had passed, Bael, now King-beyond-the-Wall, led the free folk south in a war against the southerners. It was son that met them in battle. Bael could not bear to strike his own son, and so the young lord Stark slew his father unknowingly, and carried his head back on a spear. But kinslaying is an abomination in the eyes of men and gods. When his mother saw what her son had wrought, she threw herself from the tallest tower. The son died soon after, betrayed by another lord who wore his skin as a cloak.”

“That’s a terrible story,” said Bran.

“Aye, it is,” Osha agreed, “all the same, it means we share blood, little one.”

Bran put a hand to his chest, and felt his pounding heart. Did the bard’s heart beat fast when he spotted the rose? Did hers flutter in fear or delight? Did her son’s heartbeat fill his ears as he slewed his father? And what of when he saw his mother lying so broken on the ground? Did it still beat through his skin, when it cloaked another, reminding them of his sorrow?

He looked up. Osha watched him with dark eyes, and a crooked smile.
She knew the pavement to be rough under her bare feet. Sharp and jagged, littered with broken glass and bits of shells from shucked oysters. Yet, she felt no hurt as she ran, each step sent her flying, gliding over the familiar pathways.

Arya didn’t see the tower as it rose up before her, and pain of impact thundered across her nerves. She was thrown backwards, falling down, down, down. She hit the ground, and panicked, unable to move. Her screams were choked off by a wave that flooded her nose and mouth and eyes.

She thrashed in the water, a flurry of bubbles obscuring her vision. The lack of air made her dizzy, and forced her to breath in at last. The water filled her lungs. In. Out. The water flowed through her, giving her life. Arya looked up. The water was so clear, she could see the sunlight streaming through.

Minnows swam overhead, weaving through river weeds. The sand was cool and soft beneath her head, cradling her like a babe in the palm of a mother’s hand. Silence caressed her ears. Her heart beat beneath her fragile skin, her only marker of the passage of time.

It was a shock then, when she was ripped away from her secret place. Dragged to meet the sun and the earth, kicking and screaming. She shuddered, the water streaming from her hair. Take me back, she wanted to cry, but she knew only feelings, and could not remember how to speak.

She closed her eyes tightly, and pressed her hands to her ears, hoping to regain her shattered peace. Warm, wet pressure brushed across her forehead, and she opened her eyes to meet Nymeria’s golden ones. Her wolf licked her again, and Arya reached up for her, burying her fingers in her silky scruff.

Nymeria bent, pressing her forehead against Arya’s. There was the sensation of melting, and Arya was no longer cold and dripping, but warm and dry. Her fur ruffled in the breeze, and her ears pricked up at a wail in the distance.

Faster and faster she ran, the lush green land turning to a field of golden wheat, waving gently in the breeze. The ground rose up beneath her, leading towards a shining pavilion at the top of the golden hill. The cries were louder now, and she padded forward to see a woman sitting atop an ugly throne.

I’m going to kill the queen.

Cersei looked just as she remembered. Cruel mouth, cold eyes. The lion queen had stolen two sisters and the earth had wept with their blood. But her teeth were long and razor sharp, they would cut through the queen’s slim white neck like it was made of butter.
Power curled through her body as she prepared to lunge. Her mouth foamed in anticipation, and her nails dug into the red earth. Blood for blood.

My son

My son

Fat, blue sapphires tumbled from Cersei’s eyes, gathering in a glittering pile in the lap of her gown.

My firstborn son, my golden lion,

foully, falsely slain

I pray you found a lasting peace

free from strife and pain

No. she thought. No. You do not deserve your tears, but yet she was stayed. Cersei gasped suddenly, as if she had been skewered by an invisible blade. Blood blossomed across the bodice of her gown, mixing with the sapphires. She tumbled forward, crumpling to the ground.

Her golden wig was all askew, slipping off the reveal thick, dark hair. Arya nosed at the wound on her stomach, whimpering softly.

If you had done your job, I would have died painlessly, the Queen whispered, only it was not her, not at all.

No. You’re wrong. You needn’t have died at all. But her words were a long, mournful howl that sprung from her very bones.

Oh, darkest day

My heart is full of sorrow

All hope is lost

All joy is gone

And there is no tomorrow

The Queen sang, her lovely melody rising and falling with Arya’s cry.

Stay.

Not today.

Not today.

I’m not strong enough to stay.

You are the strongest person I know, Lady Crane whispered, reaching out her fingers, slick with blood. Arya sank down beside her on her haunches, resting her head atop the weeping wound.

Gentle Mother, strength of women

Help our daughters through this fray
Stay the swords and stay the arrows
Let them know a better day

Arya lifted her head. It was her sister singing, high and lovely. The white nightdress she wore had a terrible rip across the front. Sansa continued humming, and was stitching the gash with fine, tight stitches.

I’ll make you a new one, Arya wanted to say but all that emerged was a whimper.

Sansa smiled tenderly at her. I got good at patching them up. See?

Arya looked. Her sister had embroidered a thousand twinkling snowflakes across her nightdress. It reminded Arya of a story. Of constellations swirling across the northern sky. The stars remembered the world.

Her sister stroked Arya’s fur softly. I see yours too, said Sansa. I see you, little sister. The scars on Arya’s stomach tightened at her words. I love you.

Sansa beckoned, and Arya followed. Her sister slipped through a door, and darted lightly up the stairs. Arya found in her a familiar chamber. Sansa crawled into the bed, where a girl and a wolf already lay, fast asleep.

Arya leapt up on the soft furs, and looked at the girl that Sansa had snuggled in beside. Me. The two girls looked tiny and fragile in her eyes, but she knew the steel that built their spines. She moved closer until her nose nearly touched her sleeping face.

Arya awoke with a gasp. Nymeria stood overtop of her, their noses touching lightly. Her wolf’s golden eyes stared, calm and reassuring.

“Nymeria?” croaked Arya.

But Nymeria offered no answers.

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“How are you finding the books, Lord Tyrion?” Ned asked.

“Lord Baelish appeared to be rather meticulous,” said Tyrion with a crooked smile, “although I cannot shake the feeling that there are… gaps.”

“Perhaps you are not suited to the task?” Renly suggested.

“You shall have to take the matter of my appointment up with your brother,” Tyrion responded, “as the King has deemed my services useful. And I do live to serve, Lord Renly.”

“Don’t we all,” said Varys, mildly.

Ned sighed with impatience. “Where is Robert? It is not like him to call a meeting such as this. I was told it was rather urgent.”

Pycelle coughed, a wet, wracking sound. “The king has received news of a delicate nature, concerning the Targaryen girl.”

He knew the girl would one day be a formidable force, powerful and beautiful. A woman who raised both dragons and armies at her command. But try as he might, Ned could not help picturing
another little princess in her place. Rhaenys, Elia Martell’s little daughter. He remembered how it
was said that Tywin Lannister’s eyes gleamed when he presented their bodies to Robert. He had
wrapped them in red shrouds, better to conceal the blood. As if they could be mistaken for
sleeping.

“What of her?” Ned asked, trying desperately to push the images from his head.

The chamber door was flung open, the finely carved wood splintering with a crack where it hit the
stone wall.

Robert’s face was red, and flushed with fury. Barristan Selmy followed silently behind him.

“Robert - ” Ned began, rising to his feet.

“The whore is pregnant!” Robert growled, spittle flying from his mouth. The rest of the council
stood quickly at his entrance, but he paid them no mind. “I warned you this would happen, Ned.
Back in the barrowlands, I warned you, but you did not care to hear it. Well you’ll hear it now. I
want them dead, mother and child both, and that fool Viserys as well. Is that plain enough for you?
I want them dead. ”

Ned’s heart thundered in his ears. He grasped for a memory of Catelyn’s hand in his to steady his
nerve. “Robert, I beg of you. Hear what you are saying. You are talking of murdering a child. You
dishonor yourself if you do this."

“There is no axe.” Only fire and blood. “Only the shadow of a shadow, twenty years removed… if
it exists at all.”

“If?” The Spider looked affronted at the suggestion. “Lord Stark, you wrong me. Would I bring
lies to King and council?”

You trade in lies, Ned thought with bitter anger. “You would bring us the whisperings of a traitor
half a world away, my lord. Perhaps Mormont is wrong. Perhaps he is lying.”

“Ser Jorah would not dare deceive me,” said Varys with a careless wave of his hand. “Rely on it,
my lord. The princess is with child.”

Ned caught the Imp’s intent eyes. He could not guess the thoughts that lay behind them.

“So you say,” said Ned, “if you are wrong, we need not fear. If the girl miscarries, we need not
fear. If she births a daughter in place of a son, we need not fear. If the babe dies in infancy, we
need not fear.”

Lies.

“But if it is a boy?” Robert insisted. “If he lives?”

“The narrow sea would still lie between us. I shall fear the Dothraki the day they teach their horses
to run on water.”

But a Khaleesi?

Robert drank deeply from the flask at his hip, and glowered at Ned from across the council table.
“So you would counsel me to do nothing until the dragonspawn has landed his army on my shores, is that it?”

*Her army.*

“This ‘dragonspawn’ is in his mother’s belly,” Ned said. “Even Aegon did no conquering until after he was weaned.”

“*Gods!* You are stubborn as an aurochs, Stark.” Robert looked around the council tables. “Have the rest of you mislaid your tongues? Will no one talk sense into this frozen-faced fool?”

Varys smiled softly, and laid a hand on Ned’s sleeve. “I understand your qualms, Lord Eddard, truly I do. It gave me no joy to bring this grievous news to council. It is a terrible thing we contemplate, a *vile* thing. Yet we who presume to rule must do vile things for the good of the realm, however much it pains us.”

Renly was no better, only shrugging as his brother stewed. “The matter seems simple enough to me. We ought to have had Viserys and his sister killed years ago, but His Grace made the mistake of listening to Jon Arryn.”

“Mercy is never a mistake, Lord Renly,” Ned replied, his tone steady despite his churning stomach. “On the Trident, Ser Barristan here cut down a dozen good men, Robert’s friends and mine. When they brought him to us, grievously wounded and near death, Roose Bolton urged us to cut his throat, but your brother said, ‘I will not kill a man for loyalty, nor for fighting well,’ and sent his own maester to tend Ser Barristan’s wounds.” He gave the king a long cool look. “Would that man were here today.”

Robert flushed with shame. “It is not the same. Ser Barristan was a knight of the Kingsguard.”

“Whereas Daenerys is a young girl. Robert, I ask you, what did we rise against Aerys Targaryen for, if not to put an end to the murder of children?”


“To put an end to *Targaryens!*” the King growled.

Ned knew that he spoke too freely, but the tightness that that settled in his shoulders ever since they had set foot in this cursed city was unspooling wildly, and he could not contain himself. “Your Grace, have the years so unmanned you that you tremble at the shadow of an unborn child?”

Robert’s face turned as purple as the wine he held. “No more Ned,” he warned, pointing a thick finger towards him, “not another word. Have you forgotten who is king here?”

“No, Your Grace,” Ned replied. “Have you?”

“*Enough!*” Robert bellowed. “I am sick of talk. I’ll be done with this, or be damned. What say you all?”

“She must be killed,” Renly declared.

“No choice,” murmured Varys, his eyes on Ned. “Sadly, sadly…”

Barristan Selmy drew himself up. “Your Grace, there is honor in facing an enemy on the
battlefield, but none in killing him in his mother’s womb. Forgive me, but I must stand with Lord Stark.”

Thank you, Ser. Selmy’s words soothed the jagged edges of Ned’s nerves.

“My order serves the realm, not the ruler,” said Pycelle, “Once I counseled King Aerys as loyally as I counsel King Robert now, so I bear this girl child of his no ill will. Yet I ask you this — should war come again, how many soldiers will die? How many towns will burn? How many children will be ripped from their mothers to perish on the end of a spear. Is it not wiser, even kinder, that Daenerys Targaryen should die now so that tens of thousands might live?”

“Kinder,” Varys said. “Oh, well and truly spoken, Grand Maester. It is so true. Should the gods in their caprice grant Daenerys Targaryen a son, the realm must bleed.”

But Ned was sick of false words. His children spoke the truth. The realm would bleed as it always did from the folly of Kings and their advisors. The death of Daenerys Targaryen would be the fulfillment of a vendetta, no true justice at all.

Ned looked to Tyrion, whose face betrayed nothing. “I only ask that it is done cheaply,” he said with a grin, “as I have not quite yet balanced the ledgers. Perhaps we can ask my father for assistance. My family has quite the knack for murdering Targaryens.”

Ser Barristan paled in disbelief at the Imp’s response, and Ned closed his eyes.

Robert grunted in acknowledgement. “Well there it is, Ned. You and Selmy stand alone on this matter. So how shall it be done?”

“Mormont craves a royal pardon,” Lord Renly reminded them.

“Desperately,” Varys said, “yet he craves life even more. By now, the princess nears Vaes Dothrak, where it is death to draw a blade. If I told you what the Dothraki would do to the poor man who used one on a khaleesi, none of you would sleep tonight. Now, poison . . . the tears of Lys, let us say. Khal Drogo need never know it was not a natural death.”

Ned opened his eyes to regard the Spider. He looked far too comfortable.

“Poison is a coward’s weapon,” Robert complained.

“You send hired knives to kill a child and still quibble about honor?” Ned pushed back his chair and stood. “Do it yourself, Robert. The man who passes the sentence should swing the sword. Look her in the eyes before you kill her. See her tears, hear her last words. You owe her that much at least.”

It was not Robert that had shattered the children’s skulls against the stones in front of their mother’s eyes. It was not he who had brutalized the bodies, but it might as well been. He had condoned it, every day that Tywin Lannister sat, lording over Casterly Rock. Every day that the Mountain wore his bloody titles.

“Gods,” the king swore. “You mean it, damn you.” He reached for the flagon of wine at his elbow, found it empty, and flung it away to shatter against the wall. “I am out of wine and out of patience. Enough of this. Just have it done.”

“I will not be part of this murder, Robert. Do as you will, but do not ask me to fix my seal to it.”

Robert was slow to comprehend his words, the fury creeping up his neck as he realized Ned’s
meaning. “You are the King’s Hand, Lord Stark,” Robert said, in a barely constrained tone, “You will do as I command you, or I’ll find me a Hand who will.”

Ned steadied himself. “I wish him every success.” He unfastened the heavy clasp that clutched at the folds of his cloak, the ornate silver hand that was his badge of office. He laid it on the table in front of the king.

Robert, young and strong, laughing with his babe in his arms.

“Isn’t she lovely?” Robert had asked him, and Ned could only agree, gazing down at the tiny, little thing with her tufted black hair.

“Out!” roared the King. “Out, damn you, I’m done with you. What are you waiting for? Go! Run back to Winterfell! And make certain I never look on your face again, or I swear, I’ll have your head on a spike!”

Ned bowed, and turned without another word. He could feel Robert's eyes on his back as he strode from the council chambers. Behind him, the discussion resumed with scarcely a pause.

“On Braavos there is a society called the Faceless Men,” Pycelle offered.

“To kill a princess?” He heard Tyrion complain. “We’ll be forced to melt down every piece of gold in the kingdom to pay the price for that.”

Ned let the door slam behind him, striding quickly to the Tower.

I’m sorry.

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“We cannot stay.” Ned ran a hand over his face. “I am the King’s Hand no longer.”

He could hear Winterfell calling. If they rode the horses hard, it wouldn’t be long at all before they were back within its walls. In Catelyn’s arms. To kiss the little ones, and relieve Robb of his early burdens. Perhaps they could take a boat to White Harbor, it would be faster. They might stop and speak to Stannis before continuing North.

His children looked contemplative. Sansa’s eyes darted back and forth in thought, and Arya drummed her fingertips on the table.

He looked up at Brienne. “It would be safer to leave now with the girls,” she agreed, “I feel danger creep ever closer.”

“The King mentioned something about seeing my head on a spike,” Ned admitted.

Sansa paled, and Ned watched with sickening feeling, as Arya seized her hand tightly.

“Joffrey is a monster,” his daughter’s eyes were dull as she recounted, as if her words were not her own. “He took me up to where he had mounted your head on a spike, and bade me look at it. It wasn’t you anymore. Not really.”

“There is so much left undone,” said Arya, hoarsely. She looked to Sansa. “You should leave with Father and Brienne. Go back to Winterfell, I will do what I can here, and follow later.”

Sansa reared back, her face crumpling in shock and horror.
“No.”

“Absolutely not, it’s far too dangerous.”

Ned and Brienne spoke in tandem, and Arya pulled back, looking away from them all.

“Joffrey and Cersei still live and breath.” Arya gripped the dagger at her hip. “If they are left to rule, the people of King’s Landing will starve. Renly will run the moment Robert falls, and with him goes the food from the Reach. Tywin Lannister’s armies will ravage the land they cross as they march to defend the Keep. I will stay and deal with them.”

“We have discussed this,” Sansa’s voice was thin as a whip, “Trant and Littlefinger were one thing. Stealth was all that was needed to bring about their end. Their deaths have discomforted the Queen immensely. She hardly leaves the holdfast, and is surrounded by her own men constantly. Joffrey is no different. His is trailed by a retinue day and night.”

“I could do it,” murmured Arya, her grey eyes distant.

“You will not risk it!” Sansa trembled, angry tears gathering in her blazing eyes. “It is too dangerous. You may know the world like a woman, but you still wear a child’s face.”

“I am no child!” Arya stood abruptly, her chair crashing to the floor. “And I will not fail!”

Sansa whipped her head around to face Brienne. “Tell me, Brienne. Does Arya fight like you remember? She will need to best many fine fighters in quick succession if she is to reach her targets.”

Brienne hesitated, eyes straying to Arya. “No, my lady. She is still unaccustomed to her size. It leads her to overextend herself, easily. Her strength will come in time. Practicing will only do so much until she grows older.”

“It is not this body that I mean to wield,” Arya muttered.

“You will have to adjust to any body that you wear,” said Sansa, “will you be deft enough in another’s shoes to dodge an enemy's blows? Your vision is at a different angle, your weight will slow you in unfamiliar ways, your balance will be entirely changed…”

“Enough!” Ned thundered, stopping his daughters where they stood. “No one is staying alone, I forbid it. We will have no more talk of this… this…” His words failed him, unable to wrap his head around what his children were proposing.

“Haven’t you wondered how I killed them?”

Ned stared at his youngest daughter, whose face was a placid as the black pool of the Godswood.

“I took their faces,” murmured Arya. “Neither of them ever left King’s Landing. Indeed, Littlefinger never left the Red Keep. It was only I, that made it seem otherwise. I did it to protect us, to protect those who would have suffered. It is my duty.”

“Arya.” Sansa reached for her sister, but Arya jerked away.

“I was proud to do it too,” whispered Arya, her rapid breathing belying her smooth countenance, “it was justice.” She curled her hands into fists, and looked away from Ned.

“I do not doubt it.” Ned’s words spilled from his throat. “Arya, my love, I would not hold this
against you. The knowledge that those men will never again walk this earth, is a - a balm to my senses. I fear what you have told me, because it horrifies me to know the trials you have endured. I am sickly pleased with their deaths, yet I fear the toll that killing has on one’s mind and body.”

Arya did not move, but Ned could see the faint shudders that ran through her. He stood, almost as if moving through a dream, and reached for her. He rested his fingers on her shoulders lightly. When she leaned into him, he gathered her close in his arms, and pressed his lips to the crown of her head.

After a moment, Arya pulled away. “It is our duty to protect those who need it,” she said, looking to Sansa, “I do not think we should run yet. We have the power to make change here.”

Sansa nodded, her eyes far away. “We have already done immeasurable good. The realm holds together with a fragile peace. Everyday it lasts, means another day that life continues. Another day to make us strong for the real battle that lies ahead. Another tomorrow of harvest, of training, of children growing up. I think we should stay.”

She turned to Brienne, who laid her hand on the table. “I will shield your back,” said Brienne, “and keep your counsel, and give my life for yours if need be. I swear it by the old gods and the new.”

“And I vow that you shall always have a place by my heart,” Sansa said, her words drawing her true face to the surface. For a flickering instant, Ned could see the Lady of Winterfell sitting before him, “and meat and mead at my table. And I pledge to ask no service of you that might bring you dishonor. I swear it by the old gods and the new.”

“Thank you, my lady,” said Brienne, “I will stay as long as you wish it.”

They turned to look at Ned. The anticipation of home slipped through his fingers. “Robert is quick to anger,” he said with difficulty, “his temper will cool, and when it does, perhaps we can speak again.” He looked around at their faces. “If Robert denies me, if he still wishes me gone, then we will leave. This is my decision, and it will go uncontested.”

“We will leave,” Sansa agreed

Arya did not object, but she offered no more.

He met Brienne’s eyes. She looked ready for battle, and Ned felt the tension that had unspooled during his fight with Robert, knot itself back up in the hollow of his chest.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who has been reading and commenting! I love hearing your thoughts about this story, it really makes writing this story even more of a joy. So we are rapidly approaching the end of Year One - the plan is to divide this story into seven parts (we’ll see how that goes). I think I’m going to make a By Her Hand series, and then put each year as an installment. Anyway, let me know what you think in the comments!
The King was mumbling with a sour, red-faced rage. Under his heavy, black brows, his eyes were unfocused with raw fury. *“Insolence!”* Robert snarled. *“Ingratitude.”*

Tyrion felt wildly like laughing. Without Ned Stark, they looked like fools sitting around this great table. Yet here they were, the most powerful men in the kingdom. Fighting over the most economical way to murder a girl halfway across the world.

*Robert does not know how right he is to have his fears.*

If only his sister was here to see her husband’s shameful attempt at ruling. He could imagine the way her lip would curl in disgust, that it was Robert and not her that sat at the head of the table. It must be bitter indeed to be envious of such a loathsome man.

“Lord Tyrion is correct,” said Varys, with his sly smile. “The Faceless Men charge absurdly for their wares. It is an unnecessary expense.”

Tyrion smiled slickly back. *It’s much more fun to play your games, my lord, when I know all of your answers.*

“So long as it is done,” growled Robert. “Seven hells, is that so much to ask? Damn him, damn them all.”

“Many would rise to the occasion to serve the realm,” said Pycelle, stroking his heavy chain. “If given the proper incentive, of course.”

“Offer a lordship to the man who does the girl in,” said Renly. “Titles are cheap. That ought to please you shallow pockets, Imp.”

“Would I have deeper ones if I could, Lord Renly,” Tyrion responded, easily. “They tend to end up dragging along the ground.”

“I can spread the word of our intentions,” said Varys. *Will you specify that it must be an inept man to take this task?* “Discreetly. The dream of lordship will surely draw honest and dishonest men alike.” *As you were once?*

“Make it so,” grunted Robert, “and be quick about it. I shall rest easier knowing the pollution has been wiped out.” He slammed his fist down upon the table so that the wood shuddered. Beside him, Ser Barristan looked stalwartly forward.

“It will be done at once, Your Grace.” Varys dipped his head. To Tyrion’s eyes, it looked nothing but mocking.

“Ned never had the stomach for the things that needed to be done,” Robert snapped. “He does not
care to admit that there is a price we pay for peace. Is it not the King’s duty to remove threats to his Kingdom? Damn him for questioning me, damn him.”

Tyrion picked up the heavy, silver hand that Ned had left on the table. He well remembered the terrible weight of it on his breast.

_The King eats, and the Hand takes the shit._

_Left me to take the shit, Tyrion mused. Will you run or stay Stark? Cersei would be so pleased to see that wolf’s tail of yours between your legs._

He could see Robert cooling now that Ned was out of sight. There was the faintest touch of remorse in the crease of the King’s brow, surely brought on by the realization that Ned Stark would be a hard man to replace. Not that he would have much of a chance to choose a successor. With the Starks, went any chance of Robert’s survival. _If I am to be my sister’s devoted servant, I cannot raise a hand against her wishes. There is no surer way to crack the thin ice beneath my feet._

Tyrion sighed deeply, and chose his words carefully. “It seems we are short another colleague,” he offered, lightly. “Shall I remove the Lord Hand’s stiped from the books? We might turn the Hand’s tower into something a touch more lucrative. A brothel perhaps? No place has a surer hold on a man’s coin.”

Robert was not amused. “I have not granted Lord Stark leave. He will serve as long as I command it of him. I am the King, his King. And I need someone to run this damn kingdom.” He stood unsteadily, so that his chair clattered against the stones. “Enough of this. I will speak to Ned on the morrow. The man is not so fool as to leave this very night.” He strode out without a further glance, Selmy trailing behind him.

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Robert was sulking, his ever-present drink hanging loosely in his swollen fingers. Cersei could not find even a shadow of the fierce, young king that had greeted her at the sept on her wedding day so long ago. She could no longer picture that man’s face, only the hopeful pride that had swelled within her that day. Pride that had been so terribly dashed when she had come to realize what he truly was. No true man at all.

“I’m sorry your marriage to Ned Stark didn’t work out,” she said, with just enough bite to rankle Robert. “You seemed so good together.”

_You always had a fondness for Starks_, she thought to add. But she had no wish to cover a bruised face in the morning.

“I’m glad I could do something to make you happy,” snapped Robert. “Which one of your little spies came running with such choice news for your ears?”

She gazed back at him, soundlessly. Once his insolence might have vexed her. But she had grown thicker skin through the years. Embattled and embittered. He was only an obstacle now, one that would be soon overcome.

“The Northerners are too proud,” Cersei said, coolly. “They’ve grown arrogant in their wasteland. Let Lord Stark run and bury his head under the snow. It should be no concern to you.”

“I suppose this is where you tell me to give the job to your brother Jaime,” grunted Robert, staring into his glass.
He would do it, Cersei noted mildly, feeling her disgust flare. He sits there and does nothing, even as he sees us circling. Empty man.

“I would not presume to advise you of politics,” said Cersei, airly. The gods made Jaime to ride into battle, not to draw the plans. Without Ned Stark as your hand, everything will fall to pieces. You will be lost in the chaos, and I will build my own world from your wreckage.

Robert snorted. “As if I would believe that of you, woman.”

Cersei tilted her head, watching him. “You would hear my advice? Let Ned Stark go. Wed his daughter to Joffrey. Sansa Stark will cement the North’s loyalty to the crown for generations. Let the Northerner’s keep to themselves. We will find a more suitable marriage for Myrcella when she is older. It was foolish of you to promise another of the children to the Starks.”

“Careful,” Robert warned her. “I am in no mood for scolding. I will decide whether Ned is granted leave or not. He is the King’s Hand until the King says otherwise.”

“And yet you would let him defy you in front of your council?” Cersei goaded. “You should have no use for such a man. Let him go.”

Robert’s face soured once more, and Cersei felt a touch of satisfaction. Pride had made this man a king, and pride would unmake him in time.

“Everybody wants something different,” Robert muttered, his eyes distant. “Ned wants to bury his head in the snow, your father wants to own the world. One kingdom, one purpose, piss on that. Our purpose died with the Mad King, and now we squabble amongst ourselves like children. We haven’t had a real fight in nine years. Backstabbing, and scheming, and arse-licking, and money-grubbing is all the realm is now. I don’t know what holds it all together.”

“I believe that was the intended purpose of our marriage.”

The bitter laughter that bubbled up between them seemed to crack against her teeth.

“And here we sit,” said Robert. He didn’t meet her eyes. “Seventeen years later. Holding it all together. Aren’t you tired of it all?”

“Every day,” she said, truthfully.

“How long can hate hold a thing together?” Robert asked.

His face was blank. No fury at all. Certainly none worthy of a Baratheon. She wondered if he could even muster the disdain worthy of the word ‘hate’ anymore.

She ran her finger around the edge of her glass, and caught a drop of wine on the tip of her thumb. It trembled there, quivering like a bead of blood from a small, but insistent wound. “Well, seventeen years is quite a long time.”

“It is, isn’t it?” He sighed.

“It is,” she replied. The desire to pare him down even further struck her suddenly. To cut the remaining strings that held him aloft, and expose his weakness.

“What was she like?” Cersei asked. I hope she haunts you, as she once haunted me. I hope you see her every time you close your eyes. I hope you see blue rose petals at the bottom of every glass you drink dry. I hope her blood chokes you in your dreams.
His shoulders fell at her question, and his head bobbed forward like a broken marionette. “You’ve never asked me about her,” he said, almost like a disappointed child. “Not once. Why not?”

Her mouth folded into a strange smile of its own accord. *What was there left to hide from him?* “At first just saying her name, even in private, felt like I was breathing life back into her. I thought if I didn’t talk about her, she’d just fade away. When I realized that wasn’t going to happen, I refused to ask out of spite. I wouldn’t give you the satisfaction of thinking I cared enough to ask. Eventually, I realized that my spite didn’t mean anything to you. As far as I could tell, you actually enjoyed it.”

“And now?”

“Now?” Cersei gazed idly at the rubies that gleamed at her waist. “What could Lyanna Stark’s ghost do to either of us that we haven’t done to each other a hundred times over?”

*She remembered the cut she had made across her inner thigh their wedding night, after Robert had rolled on top of her sweating and stinking*

“Lyanna,” he had groaned in her ear.

“Lyanna,” she had whispered, as her blood had stained the white sheets.

“You want to know the horrible truth?” Robert wasn’t speaking to her anymore. Not truly. “I can’t even remember what she looked like. I only know she was the only thing I ever wanted. Rhaegar took her away from me, and the Seven Kingdoms couldn’t fill the hole she left behind.” Robert looked up at her at last. “Does that make you feel better, or worse?”

Cersei shook her head, lightly. “It doesn’t make me feel anything.”

She wondered if that hurt him, if it would have satisfied him to know it affected her one way or the other. And then she remembered that it didn’t matter. The Stranger stood behind him, waiting, and he was already half a ghost

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The King had taken care to dress today, in a black velvet doublet. A golden stag was embroidered at his breast, rearing back.

“Your Grace.”

“Dammit, Ned.” Robert shifted his weight, discomforted standing in Ned’s solar. Ned did not offer him a seat, but he took one despite that, scraping the legs of the chair against the floor.

One look at the remorse writ across Robert’s face, and disappointment pressed down on Ned’s shoulders. The thought of an easy escape, vanished like smoke on the wind.

“Some wine, Ned, please. Your King asks it of you.”

Ned stood stiffly, and poured the King a glass. At Robert’s look, he poured himself one as well.

“Your Grace, we must talk - ” Ned began.

Robert pressed his fingers to his temple and groaned. “Gods, I am sick unto death of talk. If I had known this is what Kinging was, I would have never sat my arse on that seven-times-damned throne. I was always stronger than the rest… no one could stand before me, no one. But this?
Ruling? Nothing to hit, I don’t know how to fight these battles, Ned. Sometime it seems as if Rhaegar had the last laugh in the end.” Robert shook his head. “Rhaegar… Rhaegar won, damn him. I killed him, Ned, I drove the spike through that black armor, into his black heart, and he died at my feet. They made up songs about it. Yet somehow, he still won. He has Lyanna now, and I have… what? Cersei Lannister? A throne of swords, and a court of fools? Gods.”

“As you say, Your Grace.” Ned was unrepentant.

Robert glared, bristling at Ned’s tone. It was a far sight better than Robert wallowing in defeat.

“Here.” The King pulled the heavy, silver hand from the inside of his cloak, and tossed it down in front of Ned. “Like it or not, you are my Hand.”

Ned stared at the abominable thing. “Your Grace, I cannot take this. You commanded me to return to Winterfell, remember? If the gods are good, I shall have a swift ride home.”

*If only.*

“The gods are seldom good,” snapped Robert. “And that is yours to wear until I command it otherwise. I forbid you to leave.”

Ned curled around the silver hand, delaying the moment when it would once more perch upon his breast. “The Targaryen girl - ”

Robert groaned, and waved Ned away. “Seven hells, don’t start with her again. That’s done, I’ll hear no more of it.”

“Why would you want me as your Hand if you refuse to listen to my counsel?”

“Why?” Robert laughed without humor. “Why not? Someone has to rule this damnable kingdom. Put on the badge, Ned. It suits you. And if you ever throw it in my face again, I swear to you, I’ll pin the damn thing on Jaime Lannister.


“We’ll talk more when I return from hunting,” said Robert, glancing down at his empty glass. “Killing things clears my head.”

Ned’s chest seized with shock and fear.

*It was a boar that did it, ripped him from groin to throat they said.*

“A hunt, You Grace?” Ned asked, attempting to keep his voice steady. “Are you sure it is the time for such a thing?”

“No better time,” Robert grunted. “A white hart’s been spotted in the Kingswood. I mean to carry it back as a trophy. At least there’s some damn pleasure left to be had in this world, and I mean to take it. You’ll sit on the throne while I’m away, and hate it even more than I do.”

A thousand voices warred in Ned’s head in an instant, and in that chaos he was unmoored. He grasped for anything. *We have the power to make change.* “Robert, let me accompany you.”

Robert frowned slightly. “I’ve asked you back to rule my kingdom, Ned. You’re supposed to be the
sensible one, while I gallivant about. There must be someone watching the kingdom while I’m away.”

Ned racked his brain. “Your son is nearly a man grown. He will need to be capable of ruling one day. Sit him on the throne in your absence. His uncles can advise him. He might as well get some practice with hearing the complaints of the smallfolk.”

Robert’s brow furrowed further, and Ned felt as if he was teetering on the edge of a cliff.

“I hoped I’d never live to see my son on the throne,” muttered Robert. “Very well then, you’re not wrong. The boy well needs a slap in the face from reality. Let him sit on the throne for a week or two, and learn what it is to rule.” He stood, and clapped Ned on the back, smiling. “Let us be boys again, one more time before we’re too old to enjoy ourselves. We’ll relive our golden youth.” He raised his glass triumphantly.

“To our youth,” Ned echoed. He met Robert’s toast, resolve thickening his nerves.

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“You’ll take the wolves.” Arya’s face resolute. “Nymeria and Lady will stay at your side.”

“Yes,” Sansa agreed, feeling a sliver of relief. “It will be like having us beside you every step of the way.”

“No,” their father objected, sharply. “You must keep the wolves with you. What of your own protection?”

“I will stay with them.” Brienne stood, placing a hand on Arya’s shoulder. “They will come to no harm, Lord Stark. I swear it to you. I agree with the girls. The wolves will accompany you.”

As if they had heard, Lady and Nymeria wound themselves through Arya and Sansa’s legs, and came to sit by Ned. They flanked him, twin pillars on either side, strong and steady.

“Joffrey will sit on the throne in our absence,” Ned said, casting his eyes to Sansa’s.

Sansa schooled her features. Leave her face, I like her pretty. She would not think about the last times she stood before Joffrey on the throne.

“Tyrion will be at his side,” said Sansa, “I’m sure Jaime will stay behind as well. They cannot control Joffrey, but they may well be able to check his impulses.” She breathed deeply. “As will I. If I am to be the Queen one day, it is only natural that I would join him in court.”

Arya’s face pinched up with displeasure. “Brienne and I will join you. You will never face him alone.”

“Aye, my lady,” said Brienne, “if you wish to leave, I will escort you out at once.”

Sansa nodded. “If I must leave, I will tug on my necklace to alert you. I do not think that Joffrey has any reason to harm me, I have done nothing but flatter him. It will be well.”

Her father’s face was lit by the flickering flame. It was he that had the true task.

“Lancel will carry strongwine in the King’s flask,” Sansa told him. “It seems a flimsy plan, but it has worked in another life. If it should fail, there would be nothing that might arise suspicion. Cersei thinks herself bold, but while her children still live, she is bound by fear of their exposure.”
“Protect the King,” Arya urged him, “but do not forget yourself. Carry your weapons on you, and stay alert. Nymeria and Lady will keep you safe.”

“You’ll wear a leather breastplate under your tunic,” said Sansa. “Keep thick layers on. Stay close to Robert, but not too close. You won’t find the hart - Joffrey returned early when it was found ripped to pieces by wolves. I remember being so disappointed - how stupid I was.”

Her father laid his hand over hers. “I will carry a sheath of arrows,” he said. “Perhaps Ser Barristan can be convinced to as well. He will be my best ally in protecting the King. If we can shoot the boar before Robert gets within distance of it, then he shouldn’t have a problem taking it down. If the worst thing I face is Robert’s wrath over a spoiled kill, I will be pleased.” Ned shook his head suddenly. “If I should fail - ”

“If it comes to that, return immediately,” said Sansa. “The King will name you Lord Protector on his deathbed. After he dies, you will politely refuse, and we will take our leave at once. Cersei will not protest, she will be flush with victory. You have given no indication that you know the truth of her children’s parentage, she has no cause for fear. We will pledge House Stark to Joffrey, and leave.”

“We will leave,” Ned echoed. Arya crossed to them, and Ned pulled her close and kissed her temple.

Brienne smiled at them, and Sansa clung to the moment, wishing she could keep it clutched between her fingers forever.
"Seven hells, Ned. Did you have to bring those creatures? Robert cast a distrustful look down at the wolves that ran silently beside their horses. "They're frightening the dogs. Gods only know what they're doing to the game."

"The girls thought that they might be feeling cooped up," said Ned. "They must know their brothers run free through the trees of the Wolfswood. It’s terribly unfair for a direwolf to feel only stone beneath their paws."

"You spoil your children, Ned," said Robert. He chuckled and shook his head. "Only you, Stark, would let your daughters keep wolves when they should have ladies' lap dogs. They’d be just as happy with puppies, you know."

"They are Starks," said Ned, a note of pride slipping into his voice. "They have a touch of the wolf blood in their veins."

"You're little one certainly does." Robert snorted. "Wild as a shadowcat. Your eldest, though. A wolf is no fit pet for a princess. Or a queen for that matter."

"The Queen in the North, they called her," Jon had said. His tone had been reverent. "The Red Wolf of Winterfell."

And Ned imagined his little girl, a woman grown, sitting at the high table of Winterfell. In his mind's eye, he saw a softer version of the crown of winter perched atop her graceful head. Try as he might, he could not glimpse her face through the shadows that drenched her features.

He thought of Lyanna, and those that had seen only her beauty and not the iron underneath.

How proud she would have been to look upon Sansa and Arya, and know that her legacy lived on in them.

"Both my daughters are of the North," said Ned. "As south as Sansa goes, she will hold the North in her heart. It will ground her throughout her life, as it has done for me."

"Girls ought to forget their roots when they marry," said Robert. "It's better that way. Makes them less prideful."

Did you once expect this of Cersei Lannister, and find yourself surprised when she did not meet your expectations? You would have found the same with Lyanna. Not matter how the years twist your interpretation of what would have been.

"More wine, Your Grace?" asked Lancel Lannister, hurrying up beside the King.
"You'll want to stay sharp for the hunt," Ned objected. Robert ignored him, snatching the skin from Lance and tossing it back.

"You've seen me hunt a thousand times, Ned," Robert retorted, shoving the skin back into Lancel's chest. "Have I ever missed my mark?"

"No," Ned said quietly.

Beside the King, the Lannister squire gripped the skin tightly. His eyes were lowered towards the forest floor.

-----

Sansa had taken great pains this morning to adorn herself in finery. She had given her lady's maids free reign over her hair, and so they had crowned her. Her hair was piled high with intricate braids wrapped in golden ribbons.

"I mustn't look finer than the Queen," she had warned her maids. But they had only giggled and shushed her.

Her dress was a light silk, that she knew gave her eyes the shine of sapphires under a summer sky. Around her throat, gleamed a golden lion on a chain. It had been a gift placed at her throat by Joffrey. One that had surely been chosen by Cersei's deft hand.

*You are steel,* she reminded herself as she approached the iron throne. But she let none of it show on her face. She softened the pout of her lips, fluttered her long eyelashes, and made the tilt of her head unassuming.

Joffrey straightened on the throne when he spotted her. She tracked his eyes as they darted greedily to the lion on her chest.

Sansa dipped low into a curtsey, her knees brushing the floor. An implied submission. She lifted her eyes to Joffrey's face, and then to Cersei's. Both looked satisfied with her pleasantries. Joffrey sat forward, offering his hand. She grazed his heavy rings with her lips.

*My mother tells me a King should never strike his lady.*

The bitter taste of steel, and sickly sweetness of melon filled her mouth. She swallowed her retch.

Cersei stood beside the throne, with Jaime beside her. Jaime's eyes seemed glazed, while the Queen's shone with bright intensity.

"Are you pleased to see me, Lady Sansa?" Joffrey smiled, his lips like two frightful, red worms.

"Very pleased, my prince," said Sansa. Her eyes darted briefly to Tyrion, who sat beside Pycelle and Varys at the council table. His face was inscrutable. "You look so fine and noble upon the throne."

"A thousand swords from Aegon's conquered enemies forged this throne, my lady," said Joffrey. He tossed his head back, dangerously close to the blades.

*Truly less than two hundred,* Sansa corrected absently. But she only smiled. "Truly, my prince?"

"Dog!" called Joffrey, drawing the Hound from the shadows. "Fetch a seat for my lady. My future
bride should sit beside her prince as I attend to my court."

The Hound silently placed a chair beside the throne, and Sansa thanked him before sitting. One of the blades from the arm of the throne jutted out beside her throat. She breathed deeply to quell her unease, and found Brienne and Arya in the crowd. They stood with the rest of the nobles beneath the heavy hunting tapestries that ringed the room.

Arya brushed her nose with her thumb when Sansa caught her eye. Alright?

Sansa lifted her hand to fuss with a piece of hair behind her ear. Fine.

Joffrey called for petitions to approach. He had dressed, or been dressed this morning as if the crown already sat upon his ill-suited head. He was draped in a heavy brocade of scarlet and gold, with his sword hanging uselessly at his hip. Lion's Tooth. It suited the riverbed of the Trident better than it did Joffrey's belt.

A seemingly endless parade of border disputes and petty squabbles were brought before the throne. Joffrey began fidgeting in impatience. Sansa hoped that one of Aegon's blades might draw blood when he inevitably leaned back a touch too far.

Two free riders from the Dornish Marches knelt before Joffrey, pledging their swords to the service of the Crown. Joffrey flicked his hand in acceptance, frowning when the men stayed on their knees.

"My love, you must return their vows," Sansa heard Cersei murmur to her son.

Joffrey's face darkened at his mother's interjection. "You shall have a place by the heart, and meat and mead at the table," said Joffrey, finally. "I swear it by the old gods and the new."

The men rose, and took their leave.

Sansa's heart leapt into her throat at the approach of the next supplicant. It was a crooked man dressed in the tattered blacks of the Night's Watch. He knelt unsteadily before Joffrey, and Sansa saw Tyrion crane his head forward. Yoren.

"M'Lord," Yoren said in a rasping voice. "I've come a long way South to request more men for the Night's Watch. We are struggling to man the castles, there are less than a thousand of us now."

Joffrey's emerald eyes narrowed in irritation. "You are manning against the threat of... what exactly? Have you spotted giants?"

The crowd tittered, and the black brother pulled his cloak around his shoulders.

"Taking the back is an act of honor that stretches back thousands of years," said Yoren. "There have been worrying whispers, m'lord, beyond the Wall of something old stirring. If there are any men here who wish to serve the realm, I will gladly escort them North."

"A generous offer," scoffed Joffrey. He raised his voice, shouting across the hall. "Are there any here who wish to take up this man's cause? Speak now!"

Silence swept the room, and Joffrey looked amused as he turned back to Yoren. "If that is all, then you are dismissed."

The gold cloaks were already moving towards Yoren, when Sansa found her voice and stood.
"My prince," she began. Fear licked the back of her skull when Joffrey turned his attention to her. "Perhaps the brother could have his pick of the dungeons. My Uncle Benjen and my half-brother serve at the Wall. Knowing they were safe by your noble hand would soothe my worried heart."

Joffrey regarded her for a moment, and then smiled indulgently. "Very well." He cast his eyes over Yoren. "You will thank my lady for her kind heart. She has inspired my generosity."

Yoren bowed low, mumbling his thanks.

Sansa stepped forward. "I pray you safe return," she said. She stared at the man who had carried Arya to safety in another lifetime. The men who would soon return to the Wall with more men to guard the realm. "Please give my love to my family when you see them."

Yoren met her eyes. "Aye, Lady Stark. The Watch is indebted to you."

"To your prince," Sansa corrected, gently, before retaking her seat. Her heart was pounding. Joffrey ordered that Yoren be escorted to the dungeons, and allowed to take what he saw fit.

"How much longer?" Joffrey demanded, leaning down to glare at the small council. "I grow weary."

"There are still many who wait for a chance to speak with you," urged Tyrion. "They await your words of judgement."

"And they shall wait," Joffrey announced. "I'll hear no more today. My lady are going to go exploring." He jumped off the throne, and reached out to pull Sansa from her seat. She hoped he took the sweat on her palms as a sign of being charmed by his forwardness.

"Darling," Cersei coaxed. "A king must attend to his duties."

"A king answers to no man," Joffrey responded, striding away. And Sansa saw no choice but to follow.

------

Ned looked down at the ragged hoof lying in the dirt. The hart's blood had dried brown, staining the white fur.

"The King is not pleased," said Ser Barristan. The knight was weary. Fatigue hung heavy on his shoulders. "He does not intend to return empty handed."

To his left, Ned could hear Robert shouting. His speech was slurred, but by wine or anger, Ned could not tell.

"Wolves!" The King roared. "Damn them!"

Ned clucked his tongue, and drew Lady and Nymeria closer. They watched with with patient eyes. Their muzzles were clean, but Ned doubted that such a fact would be enough to stop Robert if he thought to blame them.

"There's been reports of a wild boar spotted deeper in the woods." Ser Barristan shifted in his saddle. "If not the hart, the boar will have to do."

"Robert loves to hunt boar." Ned gripped the spear at his side. "Though I fear His Grace will be less nimble than he remembers with the volume of drink he has imbibed. We must watch him
"Aye," Ser Barristan agreed. "We must."

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"Tell me about Winterfell," Myrcella whispered. She and Sansa were curled up on satin cushions in the Holdfast. The late afternoon sun streamed through the gauzy curtains.

Sansa dabbed her mouth, brushing away cake crumbs. In her hand, she held the glass of weak honey wine that they had been given to share and giggle over.

"Winterfell was built thousands of years ago," Sansa began. The words were an old, familiar tune. "By Bran the Builder, who raised the castle walls after the long night had ended. Legend says that he was aided by giants. Winterfell has been the seat of House Stark since the beginning, and of the great kings and queens of Winter."

Myrcella sighed in wonder, wrapping one golden curl around her finger. "I shall need new dresses made. You must direct the seamstress on the northern styles, I want to make the proper presentation. And boots, and wraps, and furs. Father will surely let me choose new jewels as well. Shall I have them do a silver direwolf clasp? It would look so lovely against the furs at my shoulder. It wasn't very cold when we were there last, but I heard the servants whispering that Winter draws near."

"Sweet summer child." Old Nan's paper-thin voice murmured in Sansa's ear. "What do you know of Winter?"

"You will never know cold inside the walls of Winterfell," Sansa promised, the whisper of an ache in her heart. *Not ever as I have.* "The castle was built over hot springs, and the water is run through pipes that warm the chambers. Even my mother, born and raised in the south, never once complained of the cold in her rooms."

"It sounds lovely," said Myrcella, her voice drowsy with dreams. "And your brother Robb will be there. He looked so very handsome when I last laid eyes on him. Like a prince from the songs."

Sansa knew at once where Myrcella's thoughts wandered. To glittering images of beautiful dresses, and garlands of flowers. Of a gentle snow settling in her golden hair as the handsome heir to the North draped her in a grey and white Stark cloak on her wedding day. How people would laugh and sing at their wedding feast. They would tell Myrcella that she was the most beautiful bride that the seven kingdoms had ever seen. And she would dance the night away in the arms of her shining husband. A fantasy that would glimmer and flicker, skipping to armfuls of bouncing babes with an array of red and golden curls.

"He is very kind and brave and loving," Sansa told her. "And you will spend time with my other brothers as well. Bran and Rickon will be delighted to have playmates in you and Tommen."

"Tommen didn't want to leave," said Myrcella, sipping from their shared cup. "He thinks there are no knights in the North, but I told him that Northern men learn to fight just as Southerners do. And he wants to bring some of his kittens too. He can, can't he?" She looked up at Sansa.

"He will learn to fight beside my brothers," Sansa promised. "And he may bring all the kittens he wishes. Our wolves will not touch them if we tell them not to."

"And you will come with us?" Myrcella asked.
"For a time," said Sansa. "But my place will be in King's Landing, with Joffrey."

Myrcella's mouth twisted in unhappiness. "But you will visit often," she ordered. And for a moment, a shade of Cersei's boldness lit up her face. "You will be my sister, and sisters must be together, I shan't care what Joffrey says when I am Lady of Winterfell."

"Yes," Sansa agreed. "Sisters must be together."

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Blood thundered in Ned's ears, as he caught the sound of dogs howling and shrieking in the distance.

Robert perked up in anticipation, and spurred his horse to start towards the sound.

"More wine, Your Grace?" Lancel asked, fairly shoving the drink at Robert. Robert groped back for the skin with one hand, his eyes scanning the trees.

"The dogs have scented it!" Ned heard Renly shout.

Ned snatched the proffered wineskin from Lancel's hand, his palms slick with sweat. "Go! Alert the rest of the party that the boat has been sighted," he ordered. Lancel began to protest, his eyes darting nervously to Robert. "Now. boy!" Ned barked.

Lancel swung his horse around, and started back in the direction of the rest of the party. Ned took the deadly skin, and shoved it deep in his own saddlebags.

"Where is that damnable boy?" Robert called, and Ned thrust his own wineskin into the King's hand. One that Sansa had prepared carefully with a watered down Arbor Gold. Robert drained it, sputtering slightly, but his attention was elsewhere.

They pounded madly through the wood, the echoing of barking and squealing growing louder by the minute. Ned's nerves were strung as tight as a bow, and he fumbled to ready his arrows as they came upon the beast.

Robert pulled ahead, flanked by Renly and Ser Barristan. Ned cursed long and loud, slapping his horse hard to force the creature to move faster. He burst into the clearing, and there was shouting all around as the King dismounted.

"Stand aside!" Robert roared, and the howling of wolves filled the air. The boar emerged from the tangle of dogs, screaming and limping from where teeth had closed around its hind leg. It was an ugly brute. Its terrible eyes rolled in its head, and its tusks were long and deadly.

Ned saw Robert brace himself, almost as if time itself had slowed to syrup. The King was shouting and cursing, daring the monster to take him.

Ned had seen Robert take a thousand boars. Every time, he would stand his ground without flinching, waiting until the last possible second, until it was almost on him, before he killed it with a single sure and savage thrust.

As Ned watched, he clearly saw Robert's hand tremble. Only the slightest tremble, but it was there nonetheless.

"Robert!" Ned heard himself shout.
The men and the dogs and the wolves and the beast all coalesced into chaos. Ned felt his vision blur in panic, the sweat from his brow poured into his eyes. He rose out of his saddle, notching an arrow in his bow, and aimed it between the boar's eyes as it charged.

Ser Barristan was bellowing, his spear in the air. As the arrow left Ned's bow, his foot slipped from his stirrup. He fell, dragging his mount down, his legs tangling in the reins. His horse was screaming and rearing, desperately trying to dislodge the bit that had snapped its neck back with Ned's weight.

At the last moment, he caught sight of the boar meeting Robert. It lunged, its fearsome tusks sweeping up to meet the King's unprotected belly.

A shattering pain wrenched through his leg as it was yanked in the reins. It lasted only for an instant. Ned's head smacked against the ground, stunning his senses.

And the darkness rushed up to take him.

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Ned!

Ned was running through the godswood, his stubby legs pumping furiously.

Lya! He called. Lya! Lya!

His sister's childish giggles bounced off the trees. She was everywhere at once, in the air itself, and nowhere in his sight.

Catch me! She called. Catch me, Ned! You promised!

A flash of blue caught his eye, and he snatched the petal that fluttered to the ground. He looked up, and caught sight of more flowers tumbling through the air like snow.

She was sitting on a lower branch of the heart tree, swinging her legs happily. Lyanna's arms were full of wildflowers. They spilled from her grasp as she laughed.

Catch me! She called again, clambering down the white trunk. He caught her when her foot slipped, and they fell backwards into the soft dirt.

Lyanna sat up grinning. A crown of brambles was tangled in her wild, brown hair.
Sit still, she ordered. Close your eyes.

Ned did as she asked. He could feel her tugging at his hair, and fussing with his ears. Her humming blended in with the wind rustling through the leaves. He opened his eyes when something tickled his nose. A flower dangled over his forehead.

Ned! Lyanna scolded. He closed his eyes again. He sat still until the air grew cold, and the ground became uncomfortably hard. Lya? He called, keeping his eyes tightly shut. Her humming had stopped. He stumbled to his feet.

He reached up a hand to his head, and came away with a fistful of dead flowers. Lya! He cried. His eyes flew open. The light had vanished, leaving the godswood in darkness.

The red face of the heart tree loomed, stern and unforgiving before him. It was dripping, he realized, walking up to it. Bloody tears were spilling from the eyes. Ned tried to wipe them away, but the red only smeared under his hands.

Father!

He turned. Arya was standing barefoot in the dirt, reaching up for him. He wiped his hands on his tunic, trying to rid them of the stain. Ned reached for his little girl, scooping her into his arms. He brushed the hair away from her face, and she nestled into his neck.

Arya reached up, grasping at the dead blossoms that still littered his hair. No, he told her, catching her tiny hands in his. Don't.

Father!

Ned's head jerked up at Sansa's scream, and Arya wailed in his arms, reaching her arms out for her sister. Sansa was floundering in the black pool of the godswood. Its normally smooth surface churned around her.

He yanked her from the water. She was drenched and sobbing, her nightdress dripping into a puddle at her feet. He gathered both girls close, and pressed his hands against their trembling backs. To his horror, his hands left bloody smears across their white nightdresses.

He wrenched back from them, and his daughters reached for him, bewildered by his absence.

I'm sorry, he told them. I'm so sorry.

The red stain was spreading across their nightdresses, until they were wrapped in red.

Please!

Another little girl was crying, tears dripping from her violet eyes. Sansa and Arya surrounded her, soothing her and smoothing down the girl's dark hair. They formed a trio, dressed in red cloaks. Golden lions were splayed across their backs.

Ned! His sister appeared beside him. She tugged at his hands, her palms slick with blood.

Promise me, Ned.

He turned to her. She was older now, old as she would ever be. Her dark eyes were filled with pain, and her crown of brambles was askew. Promise me?

I can't, he told her, choking on the words. I can't. Lyanna was growing brighter beside him.
Rhaenys Targaryen was shining too, sharp and clear.

My daughters, Ned begged. They were fading. Rhaenys released their hands, and blew them a kiss.

You can, Lyanna insisted. Her voice was too loud. Promise me.

Ned's head was throbbing, his leg was aching. Fear and loss had poisoned him, sure as a viper's bite. He collapsed, and Lyanna sank down with him.

Promise me. Promise.

Ned?

Lord Stark?

Lord Stark?

Ned!

Chapter End Notes

... and the Hand takes the shit.
Cold sweat dripped down Arya’s neck as she jerked herself from sleep. Her chest heaved, breath burning her lungs. The lingering unease from her dream seared her stomach like a fresh wound.

Her fingernails scrabbled at her thighs, but there was no weapon there, only the soft cotton of her nightdress.

Sansa was still asleep beside her, tense and whimpering. Her sister’s hands were balled in fists beneath her chin, as if to make herself smaller.

The bed felt big and cold and empty without the wolves to warm them. For a moment Arya’s memories crossed, and she feared Lady dead and Nymeria gone. But it was not so. Both were beside Father, trying to outrun the bottom of the King’s cup.

She tried to call back the details of her dream, but all she could grasp was the feeling of frenzied heat and confusion that lingered. Her view through Nymeria’s eyes had cracked when she woke, and her remembrances were muddied.

Beside her, Sansa jerked with a gasp. Her eyes were wild in her flushed face, her soaked hair clinging to her neck and forehead.

“Again?”

Sansa nodded, bringing her hands up to cradle her head. Every night it was the same. Endless running. The scent of men and horses mixing with the damp smell of dirt and decay.

“It was different this time,” Arya felt for her gut feeling, and pressed down hard on it, searching for her answer. “They’ve been gone for too long.”

“Longer is better,” murmured Sansa, unraveling her braid. “Perhaps they cannot find the boar. The King will certainly be in no rush if they cannot.”

_The King is never in a rush._ Impatience skittered under Arya’s skin like a hot coal, and coiled in her belly like a flame.

“Arya?”

Sansa’s eyes searched her own. Her hands stilled in her hair.


Sansa dropped her hand on the bed, palm up. Arya’s hand crept into her sister’s, her pinkie wrapping around Sansa’s.
Those one who fears losing has already lost, Arya reminded herself. And we have not come to lose.

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Cersei had not bothered to dress, nor to arrange her hair when they had come for her. It was better to be artfully bedraggled, to lend her own bit of discord to the room.

Every night since they’d departed, she’d laid awake, breathless with anticipation. When she closed her eyes, visions of funeral processions and mourning gowns danced tantalizing just out of reach.

And now here they were. The men had carried Robert in, writhing and moaning. Perhaps he had possessed the strength to shout a day or so ago, but the hours had reduced him to a craven man’s whimpers.

It was sweltering in the bedchamber. Servants rushed to stoke the fire, over which they boiled pots of wine. Pycelle hovered over Robert, peeling back layers of mud and velvet congealed in the blood from the wound.

Renly was pacing relentlessly before the bed, badgering Pycelle with questions. Cersei felt his eyes burning into her back, but she would not give him the satisfaction of acknowledgement. He would surely not linger in the capital once Robert was gone, and she would not be sorry to see the last of him.


“Lord Stark must be attended to as well, sister,” Jaime murmured in her ear, placing a hand on her shoulder. “They say he has been in and out of consciousness since his fall. He has been placed in the adjacent chamber for the time being. What do you wish to be done?”

“Leave him there,” said Cersei. “Call for a maester until Pycelle can attend to him.” She looked up at her twin. For one, she thought his eyes looked near as sharp and shrewd as her own. “My children must be roused and dressed as well. The King will want to look upon them - ” She caught herself before finishing the thought that nearly slipped off her tongue with the slickness of satisfaction. The King will want to look upon them one last time.

“And Lord Stark’s children?”

Cersei pursed her lips. Sansa would come to her father’s side at once, a distraught and dutiful daughter. But the little one would cause a fuss, and she did not wish to have that little monster tearing around the Holdfast. Nor did she want to see that great, hulking beast of a woman that dogged their steps. “Send a maid to tell them that their father has been injured. They may see him once he has been evaluated by a maester.”

Jaime nodded, and stepped over to instruct the crowd of weary and disheveled men who still wore clothes stained with Robert’s sweat and blood.

“Lancel!” Cersei caught the boy as she noticed him trying to fade away with the rest of the crowd. She did not like the slight trembling that shook his fingers.

He scuttled over to her, head bowed. He was sweating, Cersei saw. And not from the heat of the room. She laid the tips of her fingers on his arm.

“Stay close, cousin,” she told him. “Your King may have need of you in the coming hours. Do not fret too much. The King is in the hands of the gods. May the Seven be merciful.”
Lancel nodded. He stunk of fear. Pyecelle called for more rags, and Lancel jumped to attention at Cersei’s sharp snap. Renly cast a dark look of disgust at the squire, and Cersei gritted her teeth. Only a little longer.

“Ned!” Robert called again, struggling to rise up off the bed.

“Your Grace,” Pyecelle said, pressing Robert down fruitlessly with his papery hands. “You must stay still. Your wound… it is too raw.”

“Has no one told him?” Cersei demanded, sweeping up her nightdress in her fists. She crossed to the bed. Robert struggled to focus on her, groaning when he registered her.

“I did not think it wise to trouble my brother any further with news on Lord Stark’s condition.” Renly spoke through his teeth.

Trouble him? Has he not given us all enough trouble? Why should he be spared?

“My love,” said Cersei, easily, laying her hand on Robert’s arm. He shifted, as if to throw her off, but he was far too weak. “Lord Stark was injured on the hunt, as you were. I’ve given instruction to see him attended to in the adjacent chamber.”

“Bring him to me at once,” Robert demanded. “I must… I must speak with him.”

“Lord Stark’s not fit for talking right now,” Renly said. “The pain has made him faint and delirious since his fall. And I’m sure the maester will give him milk of the poppy once they see the state of his leg.”

Robert was pale as milk himself, the sheen of sweat glistening on his forehead.

“Fetch a damp cloth for the King,” Cersei commanded on Lancel. He fled at once, presumably grateful to be free of the cloying air of the sickroom for a few moments.

Robert’s head lolled on his neck as he cast his eyes over them. “Fetch… fetch Ser Barristan. I have need of him.”

“Brother,” said Renly, leaning over him. “I am here for whatever you require.”

“Did I stutter?” Robert spat out a clump of blood. “Fetch me the commander of my kingsguard! And away with the lot of you!”

“Robert, my sweet lord,” Cersei began. Sweet indeed. She did not mind the false endearment so much now that it had an expiration.

“Away, I said,” Robert insisted. “What part of my dismissal don’t you understand, woman?”

Cersei felt her face fall into a cool mask despite the heat. She stepped back, away from Robert’s eyeliner. Renly stubbornly stayed.

“The milk of the poppy, Your Grace,” said Pyecelle. He attempted to put the cup to Robert’s lips. Robert reared up and batted it away, spilling it across the bed.

“I’ll sleep soon enough,” he growled. “Leave damn you. Damn you all!”

Pyecelle bowed stiffly, and removed himself as Barristan Selmy entered. The old knight was almost as pale as the King. A second king dead under your watch. You shall not be given the chance of a third.
“Your Grace,” said Selmy in a voice deep with grief. “I have failed in my sacred trust.”

“Enough of that, Selmy.” Robert coughed wetly. “I killed the bastard, didn’t I?” His laugh was a shuddering thing that cut off when he spasmed in pain. “Gods, have mercy.”

The Stranger’s mercy. How many times has she stood before the Stranger in the Sept of Baelor despite the whispers of her maids? The Stranger brought mercy just as surely as the Mother.

They never did say in the hymns who’s respite death would bring. Do I not deserve mine?

“Out!” Robert roared, sending the remaining servants scattering.

Cersei led the way to the door. She would not deign to appear waiting.

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There was no fire lit in the chamber that Ned Stark had been placed in. It was welcomed by Cersei after the heat of Robert’s room, but not so by the injured man. Perhaps wolves were less suited to the cold than they claimed, for Ned Stark shivered violently where he lay.

“I’ve ordered your children to be woken and dressed,” Jaime informed her when she entered. “Should the King request the comfort of their presence.”

Cersei nodded sharply. “What of him?” She tilted her head towards Lord Stark. “Lord Renly indicated that the wounds were quite extensive.”

“Yes,” Pycelle responded, prodding lightly at the man’s blood-soaked leg. “But not nearly as extensive as the King’s.”

Lord Stark moaned and mumbled something. His speech was slurred and choppy. Cersei eyed him curiously. She had not expected to snatch two birds with one stone. She luxuriated in the pleasure of it for a moment, savouring her triumph.

“The leg will need to be set and plastered,” Pycelle continued. “His pain is likely enormous after being jostled about by the horses. His head wound is also a contributing factor to the confusion and listlessness. I will need to evaluate his condition come morning, but I sense no threat of death.”

Pity.

“Foolish man,” said Jaime, staring at him. “Falling off his horse in the midst of a kill.”

“Hush, brother,” Cersei reprimanded him. “Lord Stark is an honored guest of our King, and Hand to the realm. We must wish him a quick recovery so that he may bring comfort to His Grace in turn.”

“Indeed,” Pycelle murmured, curling his fingers around his beard. He lifted Ned’s head to tip a goblet full of milk of the poppy down his throat. It dribbled down the sides of his mouth, but his breathing seemed to steady after a moment.

“You may wish to leave,” Pycelle advised her, as he beckoned men forward to grasp Lord Stark’s leg. “The setting of bones is a gruesome task, my queen.”

“Lord Stark has made a betrothal offer for Myrcella.” There was no hesitation in Robert’s tone, no remorse for any pain she might feel. Myrcella might have been a golden dragon dropping from his pocket into the hand of a whore. “She is to journey to Winterfell and marry his eldest.”
But the fury aching in Cersei’s throat burned as brightly as a swallow of wildfyre.

You will not take my child for your chattel.

“A true queen does not bow in the face of unpleasantness,” Cersei reminded him with a curling smile. And she did not flinch as guttural cries of distress gurgled from Lord Stark’s throat, mixing with the grinding of bone.

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Tyrion swore up and down at the grim-faced steward, but the man would only offer that the King had been injured, and that Tyrion’s presence as Master of Coin was required immediately in the Holdfast.

“It’s quite simple really.” Tyrion spit his words at the steward’s back as he struggled to keep up with the man’s gait. “Open that useless mouth of yours and tell me whether I should be planning a gift basket for the King’s beside or a dirge. I am a man who likes to be prepared.”

An image of Joffrey leering down from the iron throne came to mind suddenly, and with it, a searing pain that shot through his skull.

I need a drink.

No.

No, he reminded himself. You must be as sharp as the edge of a blade. Your mind is your sword arm, your words are your weapon. Do not dampen, dullen, your senses. Not with Cersei so close.

“The King is indisposed,” the man repeated. “The members of the small council are required to make decisions in his stead.”

“A job for the Hand of the King,” Tyrion replied, his anger mounting. “What use could the King possibly have for his Master of Coin at the hour of ghosts? Is the King financially indisposed? Did he pick up a whore on the ride back and find himself lacking the coin to pay? Hardly a cause for such alarm as this.”

“The Hand is similarly indisposed,” the steward retorted.

A cold horror dawned on Tyrion. “Have Lord Stark’s children been brought to him?” he sputtered after a moment. A strange concern for the Master of Coin, he noted far too late. But the steward ignored him.

Tyrion slowed, caught between the Tower of the Hand and the Holdfast. He thought of the Stark sisters waiting restlessly for news, not knowing that they had already lost. But then he hurried forward.

The smell of heat and sickness hung heavy in the air of the Holdfast. Servants scurried through the corridors, their arms full of useless things. Tyrion felt the familiar panic of helplessness clawing uneasily at them all, dripping from the walls.

Jaime was standing outside the King’s chamber, Varys and Renly beside him.

“Well?” Tyrion demanded of his brother at once. “Tell me that you can be of more use to me than the fool that was sent to fetch me.”
“The King is speaking privately to Ser Barristan,” said Jaime. Tyrion studied him, prodding at his brother’s stiff veneer of indifference. But Jaime revealed nothing. “He wishes to speak with the council when he has finished.”

“And Lord Stark?” Tyrion asked.

“Grand Maester Pycelle is tending to him,” said Jaime. Renly grunted impatiently at this.

“He shouldn’t have left my brother’s side,” Renly snapped. “Robert may require him.”

“Terrible, terrible,” Varys murmured. “These things that come to pass to one so just as our dear sovereign.”

The pain in Tyrion’s skull flared and cracked against his temple. “The King’s wound,” he insisted. “Is it manageable?”

There was no response to his question. Jaime eyed him with a hard edge of inquisitiveness.

Tyrion sidled close to his brother. “The children have been roused?” he asked softly. He could feel Varys’ pale eyes on him.

“The princes and princesses await their father’s summons,” Jaime responded.

“Gods!” Robert’s muffled roar was audible through the door.

Renly called for servants, and ushered them through the door. After a pause, Tyrion followed them. The whisper of Varys’ robes trailed behind him.

“Why is it so cold in here?” Robert demanded as servants rushed to feed the fires. Any hope that Tyrion might have held for Robert’s recovery vanished. It looked as if all of Robert’s fight had fled with the blood that darkened the sheets below him. He had little time left.

Ser Barristan sat beside the King, carefully folding a bloody piece of parchment.

“The King’s seal must be witnessed by the council,” said Barristan. His face was almost as ashen as Robert’s.

Tyrion nodded. They watched as Robert pressed his seal into the hot, yellow wax that was dripped to seal his words.

“There,” said Robert, dropping the seal, and collapsing back. “Now give me something for the pain, and let me die.”

Is that all? Tyrion did not know what he had expected from the man on the bed. Something more perhaps.

Pycelle appeared, and mixed a draught of the milk of the poppy for the King. Robert drank deeply when the cup was pressed to his lips. It spilled into his dark beard, but the King paid it no mind.

Robert closed his eyes, sagging into the bed. His hand came up, clawing at the empty air. “Tell him,” he mumbled. “Tell Ned. I will give Lyanna his love. Tell him to take care of my children.”

The bile that rose up in Tyrion’s throat shocked him with its intensity. For a moment, he almost mistook it for pity, but he was mistaken. There were far greater things that warranted his pity now. Robert’s death would just be a crack in the ice, the whole of Westeros sliding towards the dark depths.
“It will be done, Your Grace,” Ser Barristan assured him.

Robert’s face began to slacken, as the milk of the poppy pulled him down. Sleep took him quickly.

“Well?” Renly asked, staring at his brother.

Pyccelle sighed, his heavy chains clinking softly. “I will do all in my power, my lord, but the wound has mortified. It took two days to get back. By the time I saw him, it was too late. I can lessen His Grace’s suffering, but only the gods can heal him now.”

“How long?” Ser Barristan asked.

“By all rights, he should be dead already. I have never seen a man cling to life so fiercely.” Pyccelle shook his head.

“My brother was always strong,” Renly said. “Not wise, perhaps, but strong.”

Tyrion regarded the youngest Baratheon, tiredly. Renly would run in the night, that was sure. He had lingered only long enough to ensure that Robert’s injury would take him. And you think yourself wiser? To pit yourself in a foolhardy battle against your brother? Picking each other off while Cersei sits above, watching.

“Those are my brother’s last words,” said Renly, eyeing the letter that Ser Barristan held. “It should be reviewed by his council.”

Ser Barristan drew himself up, pressing the letter tightly to his breast. “The King is not gone yet, my lord. It would do us all well in the eyes of the gods to not be hasty in such matters.”

Renly smiled, bitter and chastened. “Of course, Ser Barristan. You are quite right.” He cast his eyes back over Robert. “I shall leave my brother to his rest. May the gods make it peaceful.” He stood and left.

“There was one matter that must be attended to at once,” said Ser Barristan turning to Varys.

Varys seemed almost pleasantly surprised, his features placid and unassuming.

“The King has had a change of heart regarding the Targaryen girl. He has ordered that whatever arrangements surrounding her be undone at once. He does not wish to have the weight of the child’s death on his soul.”

“Alas,” sighed Varys. “At once may be too late. I fear those birds have flown.”

Ser Barristan’s face hardened in displeasure. “These are the King’s orders I speak, Lord Varys. Do what you can.”

“As I always strive to do, Ser Barristan,” Varys said with a bow. He vanished through the door, his soft-soled slippers brushing against the stone.

*Those birds would fly on the words of Varys, never of Robert.*

Grief sat in every line of the old knight’s face. *Sobriety makes me soft,* Tyrion thought wearily.

“The girl rides beside Khal Drogo,” he told Ser Barristan quietly. “She is his queen and the mother of his child. She will be fiercely guarded, kept safe from harm.”

Ser Barristan’s eyes were strange and troubled. “She is only a child. I would wish her a long and
happy life, far from here.”

“She has survived much in her short life,” Tyrion replied. “Have faith in that, Ser.”

Somewhere deep in the Dothraki sea, Daenerys rode at the head of a great khalasar some forty-thousand strong. Soon, there would be a foolish and hasty assassination attempt on her life. And when she lived, Khal Drogo’s rage would ignite a fire beneath them, burning a blazing arrow in the sky that pointed back across the Narrow Sea.
“Lord Eddard was injured on the hunt. The Queen has requested that you wait to visit him until his wounds have been evaluated by a maester.”

“...if you think we’re just going to wait here while our father’s injured…”

“The Queen has requested…”

“I don’t give a shit what…”

“Arya!”

“She can’t keep us from Father!”

“Arya! We will do exactly as the Queen asks of us. You may take your leave, good woman.”

“We can’t just sit here!”

“Hush! That maid is running right back to the Queen, her ears’ are the Crown’s. And your sister looks faint. Lady Sansa? Sansa?”

“Sansa? What’s wrong… wrong with her?”

*My Lady Sansa has begged for mercy for her father.*

“Sansa can you hear me?”

*But they have the weak hearts of women.*

*Ser Ilyn! Bring me his head.*

*Her head was full of screaming, her throat red and raw from it. Terror was blossoming before her eyes as the greatsword swept down again and again. She remembered the way her father’s legs had jerked… when Ser Ilyn… when the sword. The spurting of the blood had blinded her, and the thud that his head had made when it hit the stone etched itself into her heart.*

*He’s dead. Father’s dead. All your fault. All your fault. Stupid girl… stupid, stupid little girl…*

“Sansa!”

There were hands on her face, and she wrenched herself away in fear. “Please, please, I’ll be *good*, please don’t.”

But no hands dug cruelly at her, she did not feel shock and blood that accompanied a strike. Instead she heard a soft, little gasp, and a cry of grief. It was enough to shake her from her stupor, and she
opened her eyes to blurrily focus on the familiar face in front of her.

“My father’s dead.” Sansa said dully. There was wetness on her face, and she touched it, but when she drew her hand away it was only tears.

“He’s not dead!” Her sister’s voice was far too loud. It grated against the pain in Sansa’s head. “I’d kill the bastards first! That stupid girl told us enough, he’s injured not dead.”

Sansa flinched. *Stupid girl.*

“They won’t keep us from him,” Arya said, her eyes burning.

_Not dead?_

“Father’s not dead,” Arya assured her. She reached out a hand again, hesitantly, and wiped Sansa’s tears with her thumb. “Alright? But we must go and save him now.”

“Truly, my lady.”

Sansa realized that Brienne was crouched beside them on her knees. Her hand hovered over Sansa’s shoulder.

“Your sister is right,” Brienne said. “The maid has no reason to lie. Lord Stark may be injured, but he can recover.”

A violent shudder ripped through Sansa. *Not dead.* She repeated to herself. She gently pushed Arya’s hands aside to wipe her own tears.

“Yes.” Arya stroked Sansa’s hair back softly, like Sansa was very fragile.

“Sorry,” Sansa murmured.

Arya’s forehead crinkled, and she shook her head. She gripped Sansa’s hands very tightly in hers, and helped Sansa to her feet.

“Careful,” Brienne objected, putting an arm around them to steady Sansa’s shaking knees.

“Cersei doesn’t want us with him,” Sansa said slowly, her thoughts muddied. *Why?* 

_Cersei is screaming too as Joffrey watches Ilyn Payne bear down with Ice. This is madness!_

“He shouldn’t have been taken to the Holdfast,” muttered Arya, “he should have been brought here.”

“Perhaps the King wished to see to your father himself,” murmured Brienne.

“Did she say anything about the King?” asked Sansa, leaning heavily on Arya. “He is uninjured?” She breathed deeply.

_When you find yourself faltering, my love, know that I stand with you._

_You are not alone._

Sansa centered herself for a moment, feeling Brienne and Arya breathing beside her. Searching for the faint pulse of Lady’s heartbeat. She focused on her own breathing, willing it to move in tandem with her father’s wherever he lay.
She thought of her mother and Robb, strong and steady within the walls of Winterfell. Bran and Rickon would be safe in their beds, the wolves at their feet. She hoped they were warm.

*I wonder if there is any god that holds half the strength, the grace, that you do,* Jon had written.

And she would hold true to Jon’s faith. She would bring everyone home to him.

“I will go,” said Sansa, pushing away from Arya. “the guards cannot object if I am tearful and begging.”

“You cannot go alone,” Arya hissed. “We stay together! We promised Father!”

Sansa hesitated, staring at her sister. “Fine,” she said, looking anxiously at Arya and Brienne.

“We need weapons,” said Arya, her hand bouncing to her empty belt.

“I will be armed,” said Brienne, “do not wear anything visible.”

Arya darted away. Sansa felt frozen again, her thoughts sticking as she tried to think of what she wanted.

“My lady?” Brienne question, tentatively.

“Needles,” said Sansa, remembering. “Father may need stitches. I will bring my needles.”

“Fetch them,” said Brienne.

It took them only minutes, but it felt like hours to Sansa. Numbly, she adjusted the straps on Brienne’s leather breastplate so that it sat less noticeable neath her tunic. She examined Arya quickly for visible weapons, finding none.

“The wolves,” Arya said, almost reluctantly. She looked quickly at Sansa, as if waiting for her to collapse again. “Where are they?”

Sansa nodded, closing her eyes and gripping Arya’s hand tightly. “I can feel Lady. I can feel her breathing.”

“I can feel Nymeria,” said Arya softly. “They should have been with Father. What happened?”

“You can ask him when you see him,” Brienne assured her.

“We will,” agreed Sansa. “We will.”

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“No one enters the Holdfast by order of the Queen.”

Sansa stared up at the guard. He was young, with blonde curls poking out from under his helmet. A Lannister cousin no doubt, sent to curry favor with Cersei.

“Please, Ser,” she whimpered, not even needing to conjure up the fear and desperation in her voice. “We were told that our father has been injured. We must see him.”

She knew her eyes were still red and raw from crying earlier. It was easy to allow more to fall. The guard hesitated, glancing at his stoic partner.
“If you could just fetch the Queen,” Sansa tried again. “Or Prince Joffrey. He is my betrothed. I am sure that he would take me to my father.” She hugged Arya to her side, and her sister let out a convincing whimper.

“The Queen is indisposed,” the other guard informed her. “She is attending to King Robert who was injured on the hunt as well.”

Sansa’s gasp of horror was entirely real. “May the mother bring him mercy,” she whispered, feeling Arya’s fingers dig into her stomach. “But please. Please, Ser. A father needs his children by his side. We can ease his mind and his pain.”

The guard’s eyes darted to the tears on her cheeks and the golden lion pendant around her neck. “Godwyn, take Prince Joffrey’s betrothed to see her father.”

“Come, my lady,” the younger guard said at once, offering his arm.

“But my sister,” said Sansa, “and my sworn shield. They are to accompany me.”

“Only you, my lady,” the guard said, his brow creasing in impatience. “Or you may return at a more suitable hour.”

Sansa whirled around, pressing both hands to Arya’s face. Her cheeks were already puffed with anger and indignation.

“Okay?” Sansa whispered.

“No,” Arya retorted. “Not okay.”

She stared at her sister. Arya faltered, gritting her teeth.

“We’ll wait for my sister here,” Arya told the guard, curtly. “You’d best take good care of her.”

“No weapons, my lady?” asked Godwyn with a nervous glance at Arya.

“Only my needles, Ser,” she told him. “I thought my father might be in need of stitches.”

“Come along then,” said the guard, drawing her forward. “Quickly, now. That’s a good girl.”

Sansa glanced back at Brienne and Arya before stepping through the doors of the Holdfast. It seemed she was always splitting herself. Leaving parts of her heart exposed and unprotected.

No one paid them any mind as they walked through the corridors. Servants hovered nervously beside doorways, their arms full of dirty linens and empty bottles of wine.

“Lord Stark is in here, my lady,” Godwyn said. Sansa dimly recognized it as one of the rooms in which Myrcella had her lessons.

She flew through the door when it was opened, thanking the guard over her shoulder.

“Father!” She cried. Ned Stark lay on cushions beside a roaring fire, draped in sheets stained with blood and sweat. She reached for him, running her trembling fingers over his slick forehead.

He was hurt, but wonderfully, gloriously alive. His chest rose and fell in short breaths. She could see his eyes shifting under his lids, and his fingers clenched around hers when she placed her hand in his.
“Sansa.”

She whipped around at the voice, her fingers tightening around her father’s.

Tyrion rose from his place at the other end of the room. He placed a finger to his lips, sweeping the room with cursory glance.

“Every servant is Cersei’s within these walls,’’ Tyrion murmured quickly. “But there are no passages within the walls for little birds to hide in.”

“Tell me of Father,” Sansa demanded at once.

“Fell from his horse in the midst of the King’s attack on the boar,” Tyrion said, speaking quick and low. “His wounds are not as drastic as they look. A head injury that should heal with rest, and a broken leg that arrived in time to be properly set. Milk of the poppy will keep him stable enough to heal in the coming hours. If he makes it through the night, and it seems that he will, there will be nothing to fear.”

Sansa stroked her father’s fingers carefully, willing him to know that she was there and watching over him.

“The King?” Sansa asked, her tone even more hushed.

Tyrion shook his head. “Gored by the boar. Apparently he slew the beast nonetheless, but he will not live long enough to enjoy the feast. It will be a miracle if he makes it to sunrise.”

“Cersei?” Sansa’s voice was barely a whisper.

“A lioness fat and bloody from a kill,” murmured Tyrion. “She has already had Joffrey woken and dressed. Her pleasure will placate her somewhat, but she is no less dangerous. We must tread lightly.”

“On that leg?” Tyrion shook his head. “Riding will be difficult. Maybe impossible.”

“I can sit behind him if we ride,” said Sansa. “Or we will take a carriage. Has Robert named him regent?”

“I cannot say for sure,” said Tyrion. “I only witnessed the King seal his letter, not the words contained within. And Ser Barristan will not relinquish the King’s words until Robert’s last breath. But I think it can safely be assumed. There is truly no other option.”

“Cersei will not like that,” said Sansa, stroking her father’s hair back from his damp brow.

“In theory no,” Tyrion agreed slowly. “But in practice I think even she can recognize the benefit of having a man like your father to temper Joffrey’s ruling. As much as she wished it, even she was not immune to Joffrey’s failings. If she’s being clever, she will try to win your father to her side. If he can give her a convincing performance, you may have some time while he recuperates.”

“And if she’s not being clever?”

Tyrion’s eyes were stormy. “As I said. We must tread lightly.”

“We were going to flee,” said Sansa, her fingers fluttering around Ned’s blankets. “The moment we lost, we were going to leave.”

“An ambitious plan,” Tyrion scolded her. His voice held no malice, only weariness, but it rankled
Sansa nonetheless.

Sansa’s eyes flashed when she looked up at him. “I must be ambitious,” she rebutted “There is no success without ambition. I am no longer a pretty piece in this game, my lord, as you should well know. I was a queen once, and I have not forgotten what it is to rule.”

It was a title she had never wanted nor asked for.

_In Sansa’s dreams, her children looked just like the brothers she had lost. Sometimes there was even a girl who looked like Arya._

It was a title that had been borne of tragedy, and had come at the expense of those she loved.

_A Targaryen is no King of ours, the North had told her. And Sansa accepted the heavy weight of the crown as the wings of dragons had darkened the sky. It was a mantle that both Robb and Jon had bore, yet when she wore it, she had never felt farther from either of them._

_Queen in the North, her people had cried._

_Queen in the North, she had mocked herself. Hadn’t you always wanted this? To be Queen? I didn’t want this, she had whispered to her sister._

_I know, Arya said. I know._

And yet there was a hard spot in Sansa’s heart that told her she had only been given what she deserved. Stupid girl.

_But she had done her duty, as she always had. She stared down an army of dragons. An army of fire led by a conqueror from halfway across the world._

_Daenerys Targaryen’s army had shivered in the icy wind, struggled through the snow drifts._

_“She’s requesting that we send warmer clothing to her camp,” Jon had told her. “They’re ill equipped for this weather.”_

_His face was empty. Sansa thought she would have prefered this to his desperate pleas. She was mistaken_

_“No,” she said. “I am barely equipped to clothe my own men. How am I to provide clothing for a hundred thousand more men?”_

_“Yes,” said Jon, with a short nod. “I will tell her you are unable to produce more.” He turned to leave._

_“No,” said Sansa, stopping him with a touch to his arm. “Tell her - ” Tell her nothing at all. “Tell her I will do what I can.”_

_“Aye,” said Jon. “I will.”_

_“Nor have I forgotten,” Tyrion agreed. “Ruling suited you. You know what it is to survive.”_

There was no humor in the smile that pulled at the corners of Sansa’s mouth. “I didn’t. Survive. I burned the North.”

_“It was a noble thing,” said Tyrion. “The choice of someone who loves her people enough to spare
Sansa sighed, picking up a rag that had been left. She dabbed at the blood on her father’s arm.

“Go,” she told Tyrion. “You should be with your family. You’ll do me far better in your family’s favor than out of it.”

“Aye, my lady,” said Tyrion. He was moving stiffly, but not like someone in his cups. He was utterly sober, she realized. She touched his hand briefly in gratitude.

He smiled crookedly as she did. “Wine for sterilizing the wound,” he said, waving his hand at the bottles in the corner. “Haven’t touched a drop myself, but your father looks in need of it.”

She nodded her thanks and bent to her task. She heated the wine, and dipped her needle and thread in the boiling liquid.

*Gentle Mother, font of mercy*

Sansa pressed the tip of the needle against her father’s torn skin, and began.

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His eyelids felt impossibly weighty as Ned struggled to open his eyes. His tongue was thick in his mouth, and he slurred when he tried to speak.

“*Lyanna*?” He tried. His sister had just been here a moment ago. He was sure of it.

“Father?” A little voice called in his ear. He turned his head toward the sound. His daughter’s beautiful face swam into focus.

“Sansa, sweetling,” he murmured. His eyes drooped in exhaustion once more. There was a warm pressure on his hands.

“Father,” Sansa whispered against his ear. “You were injured in the hunt. King Robert has passed. Do you understand?”

*Passed. “Robert?”*

“The King is dead,” Sansa said quietly, “I’m sorry, Father.”

*Robert was dead.* Ned struggled to rise, but Sansa was there, pushing him back down.

“Don’t try to move,” she commanded, bringing a cup of water to his lips. She tilted his head up, and he drank, trying to clear the fogginess from his head. “Pycelle has given you milk of the poppy. You won’t take anything else he gives you, I’ll ensure it.”

“Arya?”

“She’s fine,” Sansa assured him. “Brienne is with her. They weren’t allowed into the Holdfast with me.”

“The Holdfast?” Ned blinked, looking at the heavy red and gold tapestries that blanketed the room.

“You were brought here last night with the King.” Sansa shifted him so he could sit up slowly. He cried out when the movement jostled his leg. He reached for the blanket, pulling it back so he
could examine his heavily plastered leg.

“Broken from your fall,” Sansa told him. “A clean break. It was set last night, and should heal smoothly.”

*And Ned could remember it, the crying of the wolves and the horses. The screaming of the boar. The terror of falling.*

“Water please,” he begged his daughter. She hurried to fetch more. He drank deeply, and Sansa stroked his hair back from his forehead. He finished the cup, and went to swing his legs to the floor. The resulting pain nearly blinded him, and he fell back on the blankets, panting in shock.

“We must return North at once,” he told Sansa, feeling sweat trickle down his back. “I must tell them to ready the horses.”

“Shh,” Sansa hissed in his ear. “We are not safe here. Speak softly. You are in no fit state to ride, we won’t make it past the city gates.”

*I have trapped us here,* Ned thought with a dull throb of horror.

“You will take your sister and leave at once,” said Ned. *Please.*

Sansa scowled at him. She looked so much like Catelyn it almost brought tears to his eyes.

“Darling, please,” Ned pleaded,

Sansa ignored him, and began unwinding one of his bandages.

“Stubborn as your mother,” Ned whispered, and Sansa gave him a small smile. A watery smile. *You’ve frightened her,* he realized. He caught his daughter’s hand, and kissed it lightly in reassurance.

“I was so afraid,” Sansa said in a hushed tone.


Sansa smiled at him.

*The stain was spreading across their nightdresses, until they were wrapped in red.*

Ned tried to smile back, but he faltered. He could not help but see his dream in which his daughters were drenched in blood.

“Father?”

*Rhaenys Targaryen blew them a kiss.*


She frowned, and fussed with his blankets. “It will be fine,” she told him. “It will heal properly, I promise you. I’ll be here.”

*Promise me, Ned?*

Recognizable dialogue from A Game of Thrones. Betaed by the fabulous @smalltowngirl. Enjoy!

Tommen was sobbing noisily, his shoulders shaking. Myrcella had a tight hold on him. Her beautiful face was pale and drawn, but dry. She wore grief with dignity, Cersei noted approvingly. A true lion.

But it was Joffrey that held her eyes. Her eldest boy stood beside Robert’s stinking body, his eyes narrowed in thought.

“Father was a great hunter,” Joffrey said suddenly. “Why was he killed by a common boar?”

*Because he was a drunken, craven fool, and no father to you.*

“It is not up to us to question the will of the gods,” Cersei reminded her son. She smiled at him fondly. He looked the very picture of a king, so fine and noble with his lovely golden curls and striking tunic.

“Should we not be dressed in black for Father?” Myrcella whispered. Her eyes flicked to Joffrey’s scarlet and gold cape.

“Kings wear what they like,” Joffrey snapped back at her. His eyes skittered back to where Robert lay.

“They do.” Cersei reached out to push back Joffrey’s hair, but he edged away from her.

The door to the chamber creaked open, and several silent sisters flooded the room. They glided across the floor eerily, wrapped in grey robes. The sisters bowed before Joffrey, and then to Cersei, before turning their attention to Robert’s body.

“Come,” Cersei said, opening her arms to Tommen and Myrcella. They pressed against her. Tommen’s cries have been replaced by hiccuping as he watched the sisters in terror. “We must leave them to their work.”

Joffrey lingered, watching the sisters with a faint expression of disgust and interest. “What will they do to him?”

“They will prepare the body and take him to the Sept,” said Cersei. “There they will stand vigil until the funeral proceedings, The King must be laid to rest in the eyes of both gods and men. Come now, darling. We must leave.”

Joffrey left with reluctance. Cersei sent Myrcella and Tommen with Septa Eglantine, instructing her to calm them.

She retired to her bedchamber, alight with the possibilities that lay before her. She poured herself a drink, and sat before her looking glass.
Her flushed cheeks could be mistaken for anguish, she mused. She wound her golden curls around her fingers, and blinked at herself slowly. Her wide, green eyes were bright.

Already several seamstresses were at work on her mourning dress. It would be a stunning thing. Yard after yard of the finest black silk dripping with a hundred dark, red rubies shaped like bloody tears. She imagined how the light would catch her when she stood in the Sept of Baelor, dazzling the sympathetic crowd.

She only wished that Robert could have seen it. He had always hated rubies.

A sharp rap at the door startled her out of her reverie, and she bristled in annoyance.

“Your Grace.” Lance’s weak voice filtered through the door. Quickly, she smoothed the lines of irritation from her face, and drew her dress around her in a more becoming drape.

“Enter.”

He slunk in, his shoulders hunched. She eyed him critically, wishing that Jaime had come in his stead. The stupid boy was far too affected by Robert’s death.

“Come, cousin,” she said, gesturing for him to sit by her. He closed the door tightly behind him, and sat.

“The King -” he began.

“King Robert has passed on,” she interrupted. “The silent sisters tend to his body now, washing him clean of the ills of this world. There is no more that we can do for him now.”

Lancel nodded. His face was ashen, and she noticed that his fingers were still twitching. “I was wondering, if Lord Stark had woken?”

Cersei frowned. “Lord Stark is resting in the Holdfast and being attended to by Maester Pycelle. It seems that he will eventually make a full recovery.”

Lancel gulped, and she could see a drop of sweat drip down from his hairline. Hair that was the color of sand rather than gold.

“Speak, boy,” she commanded, ripe with impatience.

“Lord Stark,” he said, his voice cracking. “Lord Stark - he knows.”

Her thoughts leapt to her children. He knows, another Jon Arryn come to haunt me.

“And what exactly does Lord Stark know?” she demanded.

“He was watching me,” Lance spilled out. “Always watching me. He - he blocked me at every opportunity - stopped me from giving the King his wineskin.”

Of course he does not know of the children. “Lord Stark is well-known as a frugal and ascetic man. No doubt he merely disapproved of the King’s drinking habit on the hunt.”

Lancel faltered. “The way he looked at me. He knew. I did just as you told me, the moment the boar was spotted I offered the King the strongwine satchel. And - and Lord Stark - he took it from me before I could protest. He placed the skin in his own bags and gave the King wine by his own hand.”
“He placed it in his own bags?” Cersei asked, sharply.

Lancel nodded frantically, and placed his head in his hands. “He knows,” whimpered Lancel. “The King’s own Hand knows that I murdered the King. What shall be done to me?”

“You forget yourself,” Cersei snapped. “Robert is no longer the King, and Ned Stark is Hand no longer. Lord Stark has no power here.”

“But the strongwine,” said Lancel. “Lord Stark has the skin. I will be found out.”

“And what would he say if he were to open it?” Cersei reached out, and caressed his knee. “Lord Stark cannot touch you. You have done well by me, and you shall be rewarded. Do you remember what your father said to you when he sent you to me?”

Lancel looked at the carpet. “You must serve the Queen and so all that she wishes.”

“Yes, dear boy,” said Cersei. She bent closer to him, draping her arm across his shoulder. She made sure her hair tumbled across his cheek. “You have done what I asked. You have done well.”

“Yes.” The fear in his eyes had tempered somewhat.

“Good.” She pulled back immediately. “Now go.”

He scrambled through the door and was gone.

There was much to be done. Joff would sit on the throne today, this very morning. He would be crowned in a fortnight, and there would be no one that could question him.

Lord Stark would bend the knee, and be allowed to crawl back North, or be branded a traitor to the realm. All she needed was the girl. Sansa Stark would be the weight that trapped the North under the Crown’s thumb.

No one would dare take Myrcella or Tommen from her side now that Robert was gone.

And I will have my day in the sun.

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“Father!” Arya ran, quick as a cat, and buried her face in Ned’s chest.

He groaned in pain as she collided into him. When she pulled back in fear, he gathered her close and whispered words of comfort into her ear.

“All is well?” Brienne asked her. There were dark circles beneath her eyes, and Sansa eyed them in concern.

“Joffrey has called the council to the throne room,” Sansa murmured. “Father will request that he take his leave after swearing fealty to him. Did you sleep last night?”

“In shifts,” Brienne replied. “Your sister pried the Lannister guards but they were in little mood for chatter. Is he fit to travel?”

Yes, hung on the tip of her tongue, but she feared it was untrue. “He says he is,” Sansa admitted. “But I do not believe so. A boat to White Harbor could be found, but I fear him sickening on the ship. He has not been able to eat anything since the fall.”
“Winterfell is a long ride even on the Kingsroad,” said Brienne anxiously, “Perhaps we should we make for your mother’s house. We could make it much faster to Riverunn and be safe while he fully recovers.”

Sansa nodded in thought. “A true point. Tully banners would house and guard us from harm”

“My lady,” Brienne hesitated. “I am sure that your father and sister will be free to leave, but you? The Queen and the Prince will be quite reluctant to let you leave.”

Brienne’s words aroused the nagging fear in the back of Sansa’s head, but she would not be stalled by fear. “I am needed to nurse my Father on the journey back home,” she replied, her tone steady. “I have not seen my mother or my brothers in many moons. And we are young yet, there is no need for a hasty wedding. I will return to King's Landing in time to rejoin my betrothed.”

“And if you are denied?” Brienne asked quietly.

Sansa glanced at Arya, who had closed her eyes as Ned held her.

“I am in a protected position,” she said speaking quietly and rapidly. “Cersei and Joffrey will not dare kill me. While Margaery Tyrell stands at the side of Renly Baratheon, there is no more suitable or willing bride in the seven kingdoms to serve as Joffrey’s queen. You, Father, and Arya have no such protections. If it comes to it, you will leave and I will stay. Arya and Father will not like this, but it may be what needs to be done.”

“I do not like this, my lady,” said Brienne angrily.

“And yet you will do as I ask you,” said Sansa placing her hand on Brienne’s arm. “I am trusting you with their lives. Once you have exited the city, get to a safe location. Send Arya back for me. It will be easier to remove two than four. I will be waiting.”

“Yes, my lady,” Brienne said after a moment.

A rush of relief flooded through Sansa. “Thank you, Brienne.”

Her and Brienne jerked around at Ned’s cry of pain. They hurried to assist Arya in getting him to his feet. He was gasping and sweating when he stood upright.

“Lord Stark.” Barristan Selmy was at the door, dressed in full armor. His shining white cloak was draped over his shoulder. “I thought you might desire assistance to the throne room.”

“Thank you, Ser Barristan,” said Ned, with difficulty. The old knight crossed to his side and Ned leaned on him heavily.

Brienne held him on his other side, and Sansa watched them with her heart in her throat as her father hobbled forward.

It was a painful procession to the throne room. Sansa politely refused the offer of assistance from the Lannister guards at the Holdfast door. Her father needed strength for what was ahead, and she knew it would shame him to lean on one of these men.

Janos Slynt stood at the door of the throne room, armored in an ornate black-and-gold plate, with a high-crested helm under one arm. The sight of him made Sansa feel sick, and she choked for a moment before continuing forward.

A royal steward was there to guide them in. “All hail His Grace, Joffrey of the Houses Baratheon
and Lannister, the First of his Name, King of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm,” he sang out.

His words on the air tasted like blood in Sansa’s mouth. Ser Barristan guided them to where the rest of the council stood, before taking his leave to solemnly stand by Joffrey. Tyrion stood stiffly by Varys. He looked inscrutable.

She avoided looking at Joffrey during the long walk to the throne, but now she looked up and met his green eyes. He was focused on her, expectant and greedy. Smugness dripped from his smile.

Cersei stood with Tommen and Myrcella, dressed in a gown of sea-green silk, trimmed with Myrish lace as pale as foam. On her finger was a golden ring with an emerald the size of a pigeon’s egg. On her head was a matching tiara. She glanced at Sansa as they approached, but her eyes were on Joffrey.

Behind the throne, twenty Lannister guardsmen waited with longswords hanging from their belts. Crimson cloaks draped their shoulders and steel lions crested their helms. The Kingsguard, misnumbered without Trant, formed a crescent in front of Joffrey.

“Your Grace,” Sansa said, executing a low curtsey. The ends of her hair nearly brushed the floor. “Forgive my father his lateness. He is suffering greatly from his wounds.”

Joffrey smiled at her. “He is forgiven, my lady.” His eyes flicked to Ned.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Ned said hoarsely.

Joffrey stood and clapped his hands together. His green eyes glittered brightly. “I command my council to make all the necessary arrangements for my coronation,” he proclaimed. “I wish to be crowned within the fortnight. Today I shall accept oaths of fealty from my loyal councillors.”

“Your Grace, forgive me, but I have here a letter bearing the King’s last words.” Ser Barristan stepped forward, offering the sealed letter to Joffrey.

Joffrey frowned at him. “I am the king now.”

“Ser Barristan if you would.” Cersei extended one hand to take the letter from him. She broke the seal and scanned the contents.

“The King commanded that Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell serve as regent and protector of the realm, ruling until Prince Joffrey comes of age,” said Ser Barristan.

“Mother!” Sansa recognized the familiar wrath making its way across Joffrey’s features. “I am to be king.”

“You are, my love.” The Queen’s face was cool and tight. She tore the letter in half and then quartered it. The pieces fluttered to the floor.

“Those were the King’s words,” Ser Barristan said, shocked.

“We have a new king,” Cersei replied. “Lord Stark, let me give you some counsel. Bend the knee and swear fealty to my son, and we shall allow you to step down as Hand and live out your days in that grey waste you call home.”

Ned’s breathing was ragged, though from stress or pain, Sansa could not tell.
“Surely,” Cersei continued, her eyes glinting, “you have no reason to refuse.”

“I came to this place as a favor to an old friend.” Ned shifted, and Arya moved to support him. “Now that Robert has passed, I do not wish to linger in this place anymore than you wish me to stay. If you give me leave, I will be glad to take it.”


Joffrey leaned forward in anticipation.

“Father,” Sansa whispered, when Ned made no move. “Do you need help kneeling?”

There was the space of a breath.

“Yes, sweetling,” Ned murmured. “Brienne, if you would. Help me kneel before the King.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Together, they helped Ned kneel before Joffrey. Ned made no sound as they did so, even as Sansa could read the pain of the movement in his eyes.

“I, Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell, Warden of the North, do hereby swear myself and House Stark under me to the protection and preservation of His Grace, Joffrey of the Houses Baratheon and Lannister, the First of his Name, King of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm. On my honor, I will be faithful to my King, and never take any action that will cause him harm. I will observe my homage to him completely against all persons, in good faith. I pray you accept this pledge of fealty, knowing that it will be upheld until the end of my days.”

Accept, Sansa begged in her head, her eyes trained on Ned. With each breath, he slipped downward a little more, pressing on his injured leg.

She looked up at Joffrey beseechingly. His head was tilted, as if in consideration.

Accept.

Joffrey turned to look at his mother. She nodded with the faintest dip of her head.

“I have decided to accept your pledge,” Joffrey announced. “Let it be known that I am a just and generous king. I reward those who pledge themselves to me.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

Sansa closed her eyes. Shamed and alive is better than honorable and dead.

“I will take my leave of King’s Landing at once,” said Ned. With Brienne and Arya, Sansa was able to pull him back into a standing position. “I will take my daughters and go.”

“Daughters?” Cersei’s question was no more than a whisper, but it filled the large room. “Lord Stark, Lady Sansa will stay here in the capital. She and Joffrey will be married when they come of age.”

Quick as a snake, Sansa reached out and gripped Arya’s arm tightly. A warning.

“My daughters have been away from home for far too long,” said Ned. “Sansa will return to the capitol at a more suitable time. I will escort her myself when I am healed.”
“Ladies make new homes,” Cersei replied. “A burden I myself carried. Lady Sansa has flourished in the South, and she will continue to do so.”

“Father - ” Sansa started.

“There has been no formal betrothal,” said Ned. There was a hard edge of desperation in his voice.

“A fact that is easily remedied.” Cersei placed a hand, delicately on Joffrey’s shoulder. “The King is quite pleased with Lady Sansa. He will gladly formalize his intentions. A marriage between the North and South is well needed. Our intention is to stabilize this realm, Lord Stark. Do you not wish the same?”

Ned stared at Cersei, breathing heavily.

Sansa squeezed Arya’s arm tightly before stepping forward. “Please,” she whimpered. “Please, I am loyal to my one true love, King Joffrey. I want to marry the King. It’s all I ever wanted.”

“No,” her father, objected. His face was grey from pain, but his eyes were furious.

“You speak of treason, my lord,” spit Joffrey. “Lady Sansa is to be my bride, you have no right to take her from me.”

“How,” Sansa whispered looking at her father pleadingly. “Please.” She looked up at Joffrey. “I want to marry the King and have his children. I want to eat lemon cakes in the sun, and see the sea from my window. It’s lovely and interesting here, and I won’t go. I won’t. I won’t.” The hysterical pitch of her voice rise higher and higher.

“How, little dove.” Cersei came down and brushed Sansa’s hair back from her neck. “You shall stay here with your love. Your father’s mind is still addled, I’m sure, from his injury. Do not worry yourself.”

Arya’s eyes were narrowed darkly, her face flushed with fury.

Please. Sansa tucked her hair behind her ear. Understand. Wouldn’t you do the same for me? To save Brienne? To bring Father home to Mother?

“You’re tired, Father,” Sansa said softly, turning to her father. She could feel the Queen behind her. “You’ll want to rest before your long journey.”

He made no move to leave.

“Brienne,” said Sansa. “Will you please see my father and my sister back to the Tower of the Hand? Lord Stark is not well.”

“Yes, my lady,” said Brienne. “Lady Arya, if you could take your father’s other arm.”

“Arya, do as Brienne tells you,” Sansa told her sister. “Help father pack his things.”

Sansa watched them leave, her father stumbling between them.

Was it enough?

She turned to face Joffrey. Falling to her knees, he offered her his hand, and she kissed it.

“I would have you by my side, my lady,” Joffrey told her. And Sansa took her place beside him.
“You did very well today, little dove. Joffrey is very pleased with your devotion.”

Once Sansa had thought Cersei’s smile to be as lovely as the break of dawn.

*I thought my song was beginning that day, but it was almost done.*

“I am glad, Your Grace,” said Sansa. She stared at the cup of wine that Cersei had placed before her. “I am devoted to the King.”

“Drink,” Cersei commanded. “It will do you no harm. You are nearly a woman grown. Have you flowered yet?”

*No! No! Sansa is sobbing, and the sticky blood between her legs fills her with such fear she can scarcely draw a breath.*

*She tears at the bedding with the knife. If only she can hide it before it is seen.*

“Give me that,” commands Shae, and she doesn’t understand. Can’t understand what this means for Sansa.

“If the Queen sees I can have Joffrey’s children now…” Sansa can’t finish the thought, can’t bear to say the words aloud.

*Shae freezes for an instant, and then she is there, sliding her arms beneath the mattress. “Help me flip it over.”*

*And Sansa is so grateful for the woman’s kindness that it brings tears to her eyes.*

“No, Your Grace,” said Sansa. She ducked her head like a proper lady.

“No matter,” said Cersei, taking a sip from her own cup. “You are young yet. It will come in time.”

“I hope I will give many fine sons to King Joffrey.” Sansa was tired, but she could not let it show on her face. She took a drink, and Cersei smiled approvingly.

“The day you bring your first child into this world will be the happiest day of your life.” Cersei closed her eyes, as if remembering. “Joffrey was all I had once, before Myrcella was born. I used to spend hours looking at him. His wisps of hair, his tiny little hands and feet. He was such a jolly little fellow. Whenever he was with me, he was happy.” She opened her eyes, and regarded Sansa. “Love no one but your children. The more people you love, the weaker you are. Remember that.”

*You’re wrong.*
“Shouldn’t I love Joffrey, Your Grace?” Sansa asked softly. She knew the answer but waited to hear it.

“You can try, little dove,” said Cersei. Her green eyes were distant.

They sat in silence.

“Your Grace,” said Sansa, drawing her courage. “I wondered if I might ask you a question.”

Cersei waved her hand in agreement.

“My father took our wolves on the hunt. They did not return with him, and he cannot recall the events following his fall. Do you know what happened to them?” Sansa waited with bated breath.

“Wolves are no fit pet for a princess,” Cersei said. Her eyes flitted over Sansa’s face.

“No, Your Grace,” said Sansa. She tilted her head down so that Cersei could not see her eyes. “I do not intend to keep Lady here. I will send her home with my sister.”

“I believe the creatures had to be driven off after the King’s tragic accident.” Cersei drummed her nails on the desk. “The men grew frightened and sent them away with rocks. A more than suitable solution to get rid of the beasts.” She used one finger to tilt Sansa’s chin up. Cersei’s nail bit into her skin. “Don’t you agree?”

Sansa stared into Cersei’s eyes. Green as the end of the world. Sansa shivered. “Yes, Your Grace,” she croaked. “It is for the best.”

Cersei smiled and withdrew her hand. “You will learn to leave your past behind you,” said Cersei, her head tilted in contemplation. “You will be a lady of the Crown. Wife to the King. Quite the prestigious position for one so young."

“I only wish to do my duty, my Queen.” Sansa’s nails bit into her palms, hidden in the folds of her dress. “I will be a dutiful daughter to you, a loving wife to Joffrey, and a devoted sister to Tommen and Myrcella.”

“You will bepleas ant here in the capital so long as you remember that.” Cersei pushed Sansa’s wine glass towards her again. “Drink. You must swallow what you are given, little dove. No matter how bitter you think it.”

Sansa wrapped both hands around her cup, and raised it to her lips. I am full of love. She drank every drop.

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Arya rose at dawn, and stole a horse. The stable boy didn’t stir from his place in the hay as she approached. She studied his sleeping face. He was the one she had slid Needle through all those years ago. The very first one.

She still remembered his accusing eyes, his blood slick on her palms.

She turned away and left him sleeping there, his stomach whole, the skin unbroken. Arya tugged gently at the filly’s reins, and stroked her nose to quiet her as they walked into the courtyard.

One guard bobbed his head up at her as she passed, but she walked without hesitation, and after a moment his chin dropped back down to his chest. Joffrey had ordered only the finest foods and
wines served for three days in honor of King Robert. Arya doubted very much that half the people remembered who they were mourning much past the second day.

Someone roused themselves enough to shout after her as she flew through the Mud Gate, but she paid them no mind. They could not stop her.

The Blackwater Rush swirled below her, tempestuous and angry. It had swelled its banks after a torrential rain, and not a soul dared approach it.

She slowed the filly to a trot as they walked deeper into the woods. Lady and Nymeria were waiting for her somewhere within. Arya closed her eyes, and grasped for the wildness that reared its head inside her.

*I’m here.*

*I’m here.*

Arya smelled snow, felt the wind nip at her nose. The pulse of Nymeria’s heart beat against her own, and they breathed as one.

*Come to me.*

The horse whinnied and pawed the ground as howling rose in the distance. Arya shushed the filly, and stroked her ears.

“I’m here!” she shouted, unable to resist the call of her pack. Her voice echoed amongst the trees, scattering the birds that had been roosting in the bushes.

She swung down to the ground, and looped the filly’s reins tightly around a tree.

“It’s alright,” she told the fearful horse. “They won’t hurt you.”

A branch snapped, and Nymeria burst from the trees, her golden eyes stormy. Arya whooped, and ran to meet her. Nymeria bowled her over, and they tumbled to the ground.

Arya giggled as Nymeria licked her nose. She fist ed her hands in the scruff of her wolf’s neck, and rubbed her face against Nymeria’s snout. Her grey fur was matted with leaves and brambles. Her muddy underside darkened Arya’s clothes with dirt.

There was an insistent pulling at her hair, and she looked up to see Lady staring down at her. Laughing, Arya thought she glimpsed a look of disapproval in her yellow eyes.

“Hello, you,” said Arya, reaching up to pet Lady. Lady pressed her cold nose against Arya’s forehead. Somehow, her sister’s wolf had managed to keep fairly clean. Arya imagined that she had been patiently waiting for Sansa to come and brush out the burrs on her back that she could not reach.

She lay there a long while, running her fingers through Nymeria’s fur, and reaching up to scratch Lady’s neck. If she closed her eyes, she could be in the Wolfswood. Sansa would be snug in the castle, stitching away with Beth and Jeyne before a roaring fire. Bran and Rickon might be watching Robb spar in the practice yard, howling with laughter when Jory knocked him down into the mud. Jon and Ghost might be with her in the woods. Perhaps Jon would give her his bow and arrow to practice on treacherous trees. She could almost feel his hand in her hair, mussing it up and calling her ‘little sister.’
Mother would cluck at her when she came home drenched in mud and sweat, but Arya would sit very still as Catelyn combed out every tangle in her hair. Father would frown disapprovingly at her when he saw the state of her clothes, but there would be a smile in his eyes.

There would be no dragons, not wildfyre, not monsters of the Long Night lurking on the horizon.

She longed to go home, and eat at the high table next to Sansa with Nymeria at her feet. Her hands and heart would be clean. How many little pleasures there were to be had. Things she had never taken notice of that she would not give anything to have.

_It could happen again._

_Would. It would happen again._

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“I cannot recommend travel on this leg,” Pycelle’s heavy chains swung from his neck as he examined her father’s leg. “A few days is not enough time to heal a break like this. You risk permanent damage, Lord Stark.”

“I understand,” said Ned. “But I will not indispose the King any further with my presence. I will be leaving today, and my mind will not be changed.”

Arya tracked the Maester’s every movement, her body lit with tension. When Pycelle pulled back and clasped his hands together, she allowed her shoulders to relax fractionally.

“Are you quite sure you will not take milk of the poppy with you?” Pycelle asked, stroking his beard. “I have mixed a few draughts in preparation.”

“No,” said her father. “I will deal with the pain. It can be beared.”

Pycelle’s milky eyes drifted to Ned’s leg in disbelief. “As you wish. May the gods be with you on your travels.”

“Are you ready, Father?” Arya asked when Pycelle had gone.

“Yes, darling.” His face was too pale for her liking, but he was determined to stand. She came around, and supported him.

“Brienne has ordered the stewards to take our bags to the horses,” Arya murmured. “She is waiting to take us downstairs.”

Ned clung to the stone walls of the tower as he hopped and limped from the room.

“My lord,” said Brienne, appearing to offer her arm.

“Where is Sansa?” Ned demanded as they made their way down the spiraling stairs.

“She took tea with the Queen this morning,” said Arya. Bitterness burned in her stomach.

“Look at me and tell me that you would not do the same for me,” Sansa had asked her. “You must let me do this. You can see as clearly as I that this is the safest path.”

“It does not matter,” Arya had fumed. “I will not leave you here.”

_She squirmed away when Sansa tried to touch her cheek. Her sister gave up after a moment with a_


huff of frustration.

“You must trust me,” Sansa insisted. “Trust that I can do this. I have survived trials before, and this is but a little one.”

“I promised you that you would never again feel pain or fear so long as I lived,” Arya told her sister.

“A well-intentioned but foolish promise,” Sansa said gently. “Sometimes a little pain must be sacrificed for the greater good. You know this is true.”

“I do not like it.” It cut Arya like a knife to admit this defeat.

“No,” said Sansa. “Nor do I.”

Nymeria nosed at her leg, and Arya bent to kiss her head. Lady pressed up against her, and Arya stroked her ears.

“Lord Stark.”

Varys puttered towards them. Fresh powder settled in the corners of his smile.

“I thought to see you out, my lord,” he continued. “Such a sad day, to see you go.”

“Is it?” Ned asked through his teeth. “I should think you would not care to see the last of my, Lord Varys. I have nothing left of which to offer you.”

“The loss of an honest man is fair cause for sorrow,” Varys told him. “However you may remember me, my lord, I shall pray for your safe passage home.” He bowed, and slipped away.

“Spiders cannot spin webs in the snow,” Arya whispered into her father’s ear. Ned gave her a fragile smile.

Sansa was waiting for them in the courtyard. Already, she was dressed in a gown that mimicked the Queen’s. Her hair was piled high, a heavy crown. Arya was struck by the memory of her screaming on the steps of Baelor. She pushed the thought from mind before she was made sick by it.

Lady ran to Sansa when she saw her, and Sansa bent down and kissed her ears tenderly.

There was no sign of the Queen, or of Joffrey. The Imp had come to see them off. He stood to the side next to a solemn Ser Barristan. Behind them were several Lannister guards draped in red traveling cloaks.

Sansa came to her father first. She reached up to kiss him, and he embraced her tightly. He murmured something into her hair, and then rubbed her cheek roughly with his thumb. Her sister’s eyes were a touch red, but there were no tears.

“My lady.” Brienne dropped to her knee as Sansa approached her. She clasped her hands on her sword, and bowed her head. “I will do everything in my power to keep your loved ones safe from harm. I swear this to you on the old gods and the new.”

Sansa placed her own hands around Brienne’s, and kissed her sworn shield’s white knuckles. “I have every faith in you Brienne. Do not forget yourself. I order you to keep yourself from harm as well.”
“Aye, my lady,” murmured Brienne.

Arya dreaded the moment when Sansa turned to her. She was not ready for what was to come.

“How will you not wish me goodbye, sister?” Sansa’s tone was half-playful, half-sorrowful.

Arya launched herself at her sister, and Sansa caught her.

“I love you,” Arya said into the high collar of Sansa’s dress.

“I love you too,” her sister replied. She pressed her lips against Arya’s ear, and whispered impossibly softly. “You’ll come back for me?”

“Always,” Arya promised.

“Good.” Sansa released her and pushed her towards the horses. “Go now. You must take care of Father.”

Lady whined, and Sansa spoke to her very seriously. “You must follow your sisters. It is not safe for you to stay here. Arya and Nymeria will protect you.”

Lady stepped back nervously, and Arya stroked her back to calm her.

“Lord Stark.” Ser Barristan nodded as they approached the horses. He offered his hand, and Ned took it.

“I will have to ride with my daughter behind me,” Ned told him. “I fear I cannot stay atop a horse.”

“Not to worry, Lord Stark,” said Tyrion, smoothly. “I have had the stable master complete come alterations on my own saddle. It will hold your legs and support your back as you ride to prevent any further misfortune from befalling you.”

“My deepest gratitude, my lord,” said Ned, his eyebrows rising in surprise.

Ser Barristan and Brienne helped Ned into the saddle.

“Here and here, the straps will stabilize your legs,” said Tyrion. “It will also prevent unnecessary jostling to the healing bones. I cannot make promises but I believe this will assist in a more comfortable journey.”

“Thank you, Lord Tyrion,” said Ned. He looked at where Sansa stood beside him. “My lord, I am entrusting you with the care of my precious daughter. I implore you to ensure that she is treated with all the kindness and respect that she deserves. I cannot bear to leave thinking that she may fall to harm.”


“As King Joffrey’s betrothed, Lady Sansa is now under my protection as well,” Ser Barristan offered. “I will watch over her as if she was a child of my own blood.”

Arya climbed up onto her horse. Sansa fussed, checking their saddlebags and adjusting Ned’s leg in his straps. She kissed them all a final time and stepped back.

Lady and Nymeria took their places beside the horses, their ears pricked.
The gates are open,” Tyrion told them. “Best to leave now, while the sun sits high in the sky.”

Behind them trailed the Lannister guards. They could not refuse the escort that the Queen had offered them. Already, Arya was watching them, learning them. With her father incapacitated, her and Brienne would have to take care of the men on their own.

Arya twisted her head around as they left. She waved until Sansa disappeared. Lady let out a mournful howl as they rode away.

I’m coming back.

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“Lady Sansa, I thought I might escort you to the Holdfast,” Tyrion said after she could see her family no more. “Myrcella has been asking for you. She plans to enjoy a restful afternoon of embroidery. These last few days have taken a toll on the princess.”

“Thank you, Lord Tyrion,” said Sansa. She roughly wiped away the tear that had slid down her face, and placed her arm in his.

“Well?” he prompted quietly as they walked. Sansa did not look down at him, alert to every passing servant.

“I am delighted to be staying in the South,” she said. Her head ached from the weight of the braids and jewels piled atop it. “Nothing would make me happier than being betrothed to my true love, King Joffrey.”

“Indeed,” said Tyrion with a tight smile. “I’m glad you’ve found such happiness.”

“I have, my lord,” said Sansa, meeting his eyes briefly. “Before she departed, my sister reminded me that I am to have every happiness in the world.”

Tyrion’s mouth twitched. “Did she?”

“Happiness has many faces, Lord Tyrion,” said Sansa. “And happiness is on my horizon. I am quite sure of it.”

“I will not stand in your way.” They crossed the drawbridge into the Holdfast. “If there is anything I can do…”

“I’m quite worried about the children,” said Sansa. “Tommen was inconsolable at the funeral. And Myrcella has been so pale.”

“They will be glad to see you.” Tyrion slowed as they approached the door. Jaime lounged outside, and he tilted his head in interest when he spotted them.

Tyrion cleared his throat, and released her arm. “The children adore you, Lady Sansa. If you can raise their spirits I would be indebted to you.”

“Thank you, Lord Tyrion.” Sansa swept a curtsey. She could feel Jaime’s eyes on her as she stepped through the door.

She spotted Tommen lying on a cushion in a patch of sunlight. A tiny black kitten sat purring on his chest.

“Lady Sansa!” he whispered when he saw her. She smiled at him, and he pointed at Septa
Eglantine who was snoring over the embroidery pillow on her lap.

Sansa sat beside him, and rubbed her fingers over the kitten’s pink nose.

“Myrcella had the butcher’s boy catch her in the kitchens for me,” Tommen told her.

“Oh?” said Sansa. “Have you given her a name?”

Tommen thought for a moment. “Lady Cat!” he declared.

Sansa couldn’t hold back the laughter that tumbled through her. It soothed the ache in her throat.

“Is that not a good name?” The little prince looked put out by her reaction, his bottom lip jutting out.

“No, my prince, it is a wonderful name.” Sansa giggled. “But Lady Cat is my mother’s name.”

“Truly?”

“Yes, truly. Her name is Lady Catelyn Stark. My father calls her Cat. But I do not think she would mind too much to have the royal kitten as her namesake.”

“It shall be then,” Tommen announced. “And perhaps you could come hold Lady Cat when you miss your mother.”

Sansa smiled tenderly at him. “Thank you, my prince. That is a lovely offer.”

She watched Tommen play with the kitten. Lady Cat pounced on a loose thread from his tunic, and worried it with her sharp teeth.

“Myrcella was crying today,” Tommen said suddenly. His face screwed up briefly. “She didn’t want Mother to see.”

Sansa nodded. “Where is your sister?”

“In her bedchamber,” said Tommen. “Perhaps she is sleeping.”

“I will see to her,” said Sansa, gathering her gown as she stood up.

Myrcella was sitting at her vanity, running a brush through her golden hair. Her emerald eyes were red and raw/

“May I?”

Myrcella nodded, and handed the brush to Sansa.

“When Arya was very little she would sit still long enough for me to brush her hair,” Myrcella leaned against her, and Sansa continued. “I used to brush her hair and pretend to be my Mother. It was what she did for me every night before bed. Of course once Arya was old enough to protest she did. ‘Why brush my hair if it’s just going to tangle again?’ she asked me. She didn’t believe me when I told her it’s just how things are done.”

“Mother said your father and sister were to leave this morning. Are you terribly sad?”

“Yes,” Sansa told her. “I am. But I am consoled by the fact that they are safe and headed North. If we are to be parted, at least I will know that they will soon be in the comfort of our family and
friends.”

“We won’t be going to Winterfell either,” Myrcella twisted her dress in her fingers. “Mother says I am to stay here with her. And you will marry Joffrey. At least we will be together.”

Sansa nodded. She did not trust herself to speak.

“Who will your brother marry now?” Myrcella asked.

“I do not know.” Sansa put the brush down, and smoothed Myrcella’s tresses. “But I do not think her hair will be half as beautiful as yours, my lady.”

Myrcella giggled.

“Turn around,” said Sansa. “I have something for you.”

Myrcella spun around, and looked at her expectantly.

“I was saving it for your nameday,” said Sansa. “But I thought that you might like to have it now.”

“Oh, yes.” Myrcella held out her hands in delight, and Sansa placed the gift in her hands.

Myrcella parted her lips in surprise. “It’s beautiful,” she breathed. Sansa had embroidered a starched white handkerchief with little grey direwolves running through twisting vines of winter roses.

Open it,” Sanas urged her.

The princess unfolded the handkerchief, and gasped. A shining direwolf clasp was clutched in her fingers. Two glittering emeralds made the eyes.

“I don’t understand,” Myrcella said after a moment. “It’s lovely, but I’m not to go North any longer.”

“This is to remind you that you always have a friend in the North,” Sansa told her, pressing her hand against Myrcella’s. “If you should ever need our help, House Stark is at your command. If you should ever need safe haven, Winterfell shall be your refuge.”

“Oh,” said Myrcella. She cradled the pin to her chest. “I will treasure it always.” She bent and kissed Sansa’s cheek before running to place it in the chest at the foot of her bed.

It was not much, Sansa reflected. A pin wouldn’t shield her from the trials that were to come, but perhaps it would bring some comfort in dark times.

A little kindness makes all things bearable.
Bittersweet

Chapter Notes

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sun was high in the clear sky by the time the walls of Winterfell came into view. Gendry pulled hard on the reins to slow his horse. Beside him, Lommy and Hot Pie slumped over their horses as they came to a stop.

Gendry tilted his head back, breathing in the cold, crisp air. The wind whipped against his red cheeks. If he closed his eyes he could almost imagine that it was a stiff breeze carried off the sea. He remembered being very small, the mud from the banks of the Blackwater Rush slick under his bare feet. His mother was there, her yellow hair clouding a face he could not picture. He could only recall how it felt to press his face into the warm place under her chin, the ends of her loose hair tickling his nose.

He opened his eyes. But this place did not smell like the sea. It smelled like cold, if such a thing had a scent. Gendry had never known such quiet, such emptiness. He hadn’t known the world was this wide.

“That’s it then?” Lommy’s bluster vanished at the sight of Winterfell.

“It’s like the edge of the world,” huffed Hot Pie. He shook his head, and buried his nose in the matter fur around his collar.

They stood there for so long, wry and watchful, that Gendry feared they might freeze that way. Three sorry, scrawny statues on a hill.

“Come,” Gendry said, urging his horse forward. “We’ve made it this far. We might as well see it through.”

There was smoke rising from the houses in the little town before the gates of the castle. Gendry felt the eyes that followed them as they rose through. The children that stopped playing to gaze at them were sturdy, warmly dressed little things. There had been no such rosy cheeks in Fleabottom. Lommy drew himself up stiffly as they passed like a puffed up tomcat. Gendry grinned when he saw two of the children giggling behind their hands.

The gates of the castle were open when they approached. Gendry’s eyes traced the crest of House Stark carved into the stone, lingering on the teeth of the wolf. He dismounted, and took the horse’s reins in hand as they crossed under the stone arch.

It was almost disarming to see such a flurry of activity after the endless expanse of the moors. The courtyard was full of chatter and activity, humming with a pleasant sense of purpose beneath the fluttering Stark banners. Gendry’s palms itched as he caught the smell of smoke on the wind and he longed to feel the heat of the forge and the weight of steel in his hand.

Lommy and Hot Pie crowded behind him, hovering close. Gendry tried to make himself a bit
“What business do you have here?”

Gendry almost came out of his skin when he was addressed by a tall, lean man with an armful of scrolls. He opened his mouth, but the words stuck in his throat.

The man frowned. “You. boy.” he said painfully, slowly. “What business do you have here?”

“I…” stammered Gendry. “We… we’re here to see Lord Stark. Lord Robb Stark, I mean, m’lord.”

Gendry felt himself being appraised, and was affronted when the man’s lips turned down in distaste. Lommy and Hot Pie stood so they were partly hidden behind him.

“I am his lord’s steward,” said the man. “Lord Stark has many matters to attend to. What business do you have with him?”

Gendry fumbled with Master Mott’s letter, extracting it from his breast pocket, and handing it to the steward. “We’ve been sent to see Lord Robb, it’s all here, in the letter from my master.”

The steward took the letter, and smoothed it out to read. A frown creased his brow. Gendry felt Lommy kick him, and he swatted at the boy. “I was told to tell you, m’lord,” said Gendry. “We’ve been sent by Lady… Lady Arya Stark.”

The steward looked up sharply. “Arya?”

Gendry’s heart thumped. The man appeared baffled. “Yes,” Gendry said, shifting on his feet. Perhaps he’d gotten the name wrong. “Arya Stark sent us.”

The steward folded the letter briskly, and tucked it into his pocket. “You will wait until someone attends to you,” he instructed. He then left without another word.

Gendry sank back awkwardly onto the edge of a wagon loaded with stone. His horse whickered softly, and he patted her nose, and traced the diamond shape on her forehead.

“Starks feed their prisoners to the wolves,” Lommy muttered to Hot Pie. “Nothing left of the in the end but bones and teeth. They sell those bits to the cannibals that live up in the Northlands. They’ll wear bits of us as crowns.”

Hot Pie’s mouth drew down in disgust, and faint puzzlement. “Wouldn’t the cannibals want us with all our meat attached to our bones?”

“No.” Lommy scowled. “They’ve got plenty eating from Southern raids. But they like to have bones.” He poked Hot Pie in the side. “But maybe they’ll save you for a treat.”

Hot Pie whimpered, and Gendry cuffed Lommy hard on the back of the head. Lommy shouted in response, and tried to swing back.

“I’ll smack you again if you don’t behave,” said Gendry angrily.

Lommy glared at him, and pinched Hot Pie so hard he yelped.

“Where are they?”
The voice that cut through the din made every head in the courtyard rise. The hush held for a moment, before the crowd bent back to their work.

The man striding towards them couldn’t have been much older than Gendry himself, but he exuded a lord’s air. This man might not shit in a sapphire pot, but Gendry knew with one look that this man had been born and raised to rule.

Beside him was a finely dressed noblewoman with the same red curls and blue eyes as the lord. He ducked his head when her eyes met his.

Gendry dropped into the mud on one knee as they approached, and felt Lommy and Hot Pie hasten to do the same.

“On your feet,” the lord said. “I am Lord Robb Stark of Winterfell, and Warden to the North. I command you to speak truthfully. What are your names?”

“Gendry, m’lord,” Gendry said quickly. He gestured behind him. “These here are my companions, Lommy and Hot Pie. We’ve come a long way to see you, m’lord.”

Robb Stark cast his eyes over them. “I can see you have. Tell me, who sent you?”

“Arya Stark sent us.”

The noblewoman stepped forward, her hands clasped together as if in prayer. “Did you see my daughter? Was she well?”

Gendry’s cheeks darkened slightly at addressing her. “No, m’lady. I did not see her. Only the kingsguard that carried her message and coin for our travels.” He wished he had more to offer her.

“The Kingsguard,” repeated Lord Stark. He and his mother glanced at each other.

Gendry felt a terrible sinking feeling in his stomach. Perhaps he had not been meant to say who brought the message.

Lord Stark exhaled. “My sister wrote to tell us you were coming. We’ve been awaiting your arrival with some impatience. Have you any news of King’s Landing?”

Gendry tried to imagine what a lord’s daughter might have written her brother about them. He could not begin to say.

“Robb,” said his mother with a touch of weariness. “They’ll not know anything of what’s happened. They’ll have been on the road for some time.”

The lord’s mouth turned down with grief.

“We’ve been traveling for weeks, m’lord,” said Gendry. “I’ve nothing to offer you except the word of your father and sister. We’ve come seeking refuge… from… from the queen.”

He regretted the words as he spoke them. Lord Stark and his mother seemed to freeze where they stood.

“House Stark is loyal to the crown,” said the Lord stiffly. “We serve the realm in the name of House Baratheon and King Robert, may the gods grant him peace.”

“M’lord?” Something in the lord’s words nagged at Gendry.
“King Robert was killed while on the hunt for a boar,” said the lady. Her lips were pressed together tightly, and Gendry thought he saw a touch of fear in her eyes. “May the seven be with us all. His son now sits upon the throne.”

*His son.*

*The Queen wants you dead.*

*You have the Baratheon look.*

“Aye,” said Lord Stark striking Gendry from his thoughts. “King Joffrey first of his name.” He looked back at them. “But you have nothing to fear. Winterfell is a place a refuge for you. And you must be in need of food and rest.”

“Thank you, m’lord,” said Gendry the words thick on his tongue.

Lord Stark smiled slightly. “A blacksmith, a baker, and a dyer. We’re in sore need of your skills, once you’ve rested we’ll see about finding you work. Winter is coming.”

*Winter is coming.*

The wind picked up and buffeted them all about for a moment. Lord Stark called for a steward to show them to beds. His mother had one hand on his arm, and the other pressing the edges of her cloak down in the wind. She stared at Gendry, and Gendry wondered wildly for a moment if she had known King Robert, and if the Kingsguard had spoken truly when he said there was no mistaking his bastards.

*His son now sits upon the throne.* Gendry wished fervently that she would see nothing at all of the dead king’s face in his own.

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“Watch closely,” Maester Luwin had told Bran. “This little doll shall bear your fate so that you do not have to.”

And Catelyn had watched, heart in her throat as Maester Luwin threw the little clay doll over the ramparts. For a breath it had arched through the air so gracefully it might have taken wing. Until it hit the ground and shattered.

*Bran had peered down at the mess of it, his little face pinched.*

“This is what will happen to you should you slip and fall,” Maester Luwin had told him severely.

“But I will not fall!” Bran had argued. “I never fall!”

“Even great men may fall,” Maester Luwin told him. “That is not weakness, that is life.”

Catelyn’s breath quickened as she crossed to the window. Her palms were slick with sweat, but she forced herself to grip the stone sill and lean out into the empty air.

The sky was still painted with the faintest touch of pink from the dawn. The Rising sun cast a golden glow over the landscape, and although she faced South, the moors of the North rolled out before here seemingly unending in their breadth.

She looked down, and the distance to the stone below made her recoil in terror. Hot tears gathered in her eyes, and she pulled back from the window, terrified that if she looked any longer she’d see a
She’d wanted the broken tower leveled at first, torn down stone by stone until it was left to the dust of the ages. But Winter was coming, and she was nothing if not a pragmatic woman. She had overseen the stonemasons as they repaired the structure, and ordered everything cleaned and made ready for storage.

“M’lady wanted to see me.”

Catelyn turned. The wildling woman Osha stood in the doorway, regarding her with open curiosity. Catelyn was pleased to see that some of the haggardness had left her. She had come upon Bran and Rickon the other day sitting rapt as Osha told them of ice giants that crawled through the Frostfang mountains. And although the woman had snorted when the boys jumped back in fear, there was a softness in her teasing that Catelyn recognized.

“I thought you might offer some suggestion on our preparations for Winter,” said Catelyn. She beckoned the woman forward, and bent to open one of the chests on the floor. From within, she withdrew several garments. She had requested that the seamstresses begin working on clothing that might withstand a Winter’s war.

They had sewn linen underthings to be covered with thick wool shirts, and quilted gambesons to sit under chainmail lined with boiled leather. Catelyn watched as Osha reached out and rubbed the deerskin cloak between her fingertips.

“These will dress your people for Winter?”

“Yes,” said Catelyn, creasing her brow. “I’ve spoken to men of the Night’s Watch. These are modeled after the dress of the men.”

Osha laughed then, a harsh noise of derision. “Crows are no more fit for Winter than newborn babes. There’s a reason they don’t last long.”

Catelyn swallowed her ire at the woman’s callous tone. “We will be prepared when Winter comes. Tell me, what would you suggest?”

Osha regarded her for a moment, her dark eyes critical. She squatted down, and pulled the gambeson towards her. “These will be too heavy on a man,” she said. “It will cause him to sweat, and that will make him freeze.” She tapped the chain mail. “It is not wise to wear metal armor in the North, it will burn the flesh in the cold.”

“We cannot slaughter enough wolves to dress the entire North,” insisted Catelyn.

“No,” said Osha. “You will use the skins of wolves to line the hoods of your cloaks. You will make shirts of caribou. One to point inward and one outward. This will keep your people warm and dry for the caribou are meant to live in the cold.”

Catelyn absorbed this. “The Northern lords will not well like their men dressed as wildlings.”

Osha met her eyes. “It will not matter,” she said calmly. “For they will be frozen stiff in their fine
southern clothes. Then they will be burned and no one will know their manner of dress when it has all been left to ash.”

Catelyn nodded then, stiff but sure. “We will need boots too,” she said. “Men only goes so far as their feet will carry them.”

“You will make them of seal skin,” said Osha. “And stuff the toes with moss…”

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_Father grant them protection._

_Mother grant them mercy._

_Warrior grant them strength._

_Smith grant them peace._

_Maiden grant them courage._

_Crone grant them wisdom._

Catelyn hesitated before lighting the last candle. Her eyes darted to the door of the sept.

_Stranger grant them justice._

Seven flames danced in the sept, the crystal glimmering as they caught the light. They lit the solemn, carved faces of the Seven.

Catelyn realized her hands were shaking as she brought them together, and bowed her head. You must be strong.

“Mother.”

Robb laid his hand on her shoulder, and she placed her own on top of his. He was trembling too, so very slightly.

“I’ve called counsel to Father’s solar,” Robb said. “We must decide how to move forward.”

“What you her letter?”

Robb pulled the letter from his pocket and handed it to her. Catelyn pressed it against her breast, as if she could feel her daughter’s heartbeat through her curling script.

Robb, I write to you with a heavy heart. Our good King Robert is dead, killed from wounds he took in a boar hunt...

She took her son’s arm, and pressed both hands against his. Had it been so long ago that he had been small enough to tuck under her chin? Now he stood a head taller than she, almost a man grown.

Robb’s council was waiting when they stepped through the doors to Ned’s solar. Catelyn’s hackles rose when she spotted Theon leaning back carelessly next to Jory. They stood when she entered, but she waved them down. Ser Rodrik sat down heavily, and Maester Luwin adjusted the collar
around his neck.

Robb closed the door and bolted it as Catelyn took the seat beside the head of the table.

“You are all here as valued members of my household and trusted advisors,” said Robb heavily, taking a seat beside Catelyn. “There are things that must be brought to light, the safety of the North depends upon our actions.”

The men were silent. Even Theon’s smirk had faded to a look of intrigue.

“We received a raven from King’s Landing last night,” said Robb.

Catelyn withdrew the letter and handed it to Maester Luwin who sat beside her. He opened it with trembling fingers.

“As you know we’ve received no word from Father since the news of the King’s death reached us,” continued Robb. “It seems he was injured in the hunt as well, and has been under the care of maesters.”

Catelyn’s heartbeat faster as the dreadful thought of Ned injured rolled through her like a wave.

... Father was injured on the hunt as well. My beloved Joffrey and the Queen have ensured that he has only the finest maesters attending to his wounds....

“Father has been granted leave to return to Winterfell as his injuries have made it difficult for him to serve. They will leave as soon as Father is fit for traveling.” Robb looked up. “He returns with Arya and the lady Brienne. Sansa... will stay.”

“Joffrey said that a king should never strike his lady,” Sansa had whispered to her. Her daughter did not flinch as she spoke the words. “So he bade his kingsguard to bloody me in his stead.”

Catelyn’s lips parted as if to cry in grief but the sound was strangled in her throat.

“Father has sworn loyalty to the new king, and Sansa begs me to do the same. To ensure peace between the great houses of Stark and Lannister.” Robb’s lips curled up in bitterness at the last.

... Your faithful sister, Sansa.

Ser Rodrik stroked his whiskers. “Lord Stark should have never left without a guard,” he said gruffly. “Jory and I would have seen him and Lady Arya home rather than a Crown’s retinue.”

Robb glanced at Catelyn. She nodded, her lips pursed tightly.

“Father did not take a guard nor a household because he wished to travel lightly in the event that he would need to flee King’s Landing,” said Robb finally.

“Flee?” asked Maester Luwin in bewilderment. “He is the King’s Hand.”

“That King is dead,” said Catelyn. “Killed by the Lannisters to further their own ambitions.”

Ser Rodrik sputtered. “Killed by the Lannisters?”

“Aye,” said Robb harshly. “Father went South to investigate the death of Jon Arryn, and to forestall the Queen’s intent to kill the King.”

“How did he know this?” asked Jory.
“I received a letter written in code from my sister,” said Catelyn the words slipping smoothly through her teeth. “She claimed the Lannisters had poisoned Jon Arryn after he discovered the Queen’s secret. Ned knew that Cersei had no love for Robert, and would do anything to protect her children.”

“The Queen’s children are not trueborn,” said Robb. “They are her brother’s bastards, and she intends to sit the eldest on the throne in place of a true king.”

“This is madness,” said Maester Luwin. His trembling hands twined in the fabric of his sleeves.

“What of Sansa?” Jory urged. “She’s set the marry the Lannister bastard. Surely Lord Stark would not leave her behind in their hands if he knew them to be false!”

Robb looked down. “If Father is returning home,” he said slowly. “Then I must assume that my sister has been left to ensure the loyalty of the North. So long as the Lannisters hold my sister, they assume us complacent.”

“And will we be complacent?” asked Theon, with a mocking smile.

Robb’s hands gripped the edge of the table, his knuckles white from the pressure. “Winter is coming. I will not start a war I am not sure we can win. The Lannisters hold vast wealth and power in addition to the throne. I must think of the North.”

Catelyn’s throat constricted, and she looked past Robb. For a moment, she thought she caught a glimpse the Kingslayer winking at her, standing just behind her son. She did not have to search for what would have compelled her to disobey her son and king and set the Kingslayer free from his shackles. If the man sat before her, the key to her daughters’ safety, she would do it in a heartbeat.

“You’re going to wait for them to dishonor your sister?” demanded Theon. “Married to a bastard usurper born of incest? She’ll be ruined.”

“You will not speak of my sister in such a way,” Robb chided swiftly. He took a deep breath, his cheeks red with anger. “We will wait until Father arrives safety. Only when he and Arya are safe within Winterfell’s walls may we choose to take action. Until then we shall give no indication to the Crown that we are anything less than loyal servants.”

“If I may offer you counsel, my lord,” said Ser Rodrik. “The Northern lords will not be pleased if we show our bellies to a false boy king.”

“I intend to seek their counsel as well,” said Robb, his brown creasing. “They will gather soon enough for the harvest festival clamoring to know what has happened.” He shifted. “And I know there have been whispers about our preparations. They’ll want explanation for our increase in training and supplies. And I must give them some answer. If the South begins to fracture, we will need to pose a united front.” He met the eyes of the men at the table. “As united as we must be.”

Ser Rodrik thumped his fist on the table. “For the North.”

“For the North,” echoed Jory and Theon. Maester Luwin nodded solemnly.

“For the North,” murmured Catelyn. It was bittersweet on her tongue.

Chapter End Notes
Osha's designs are modeled on traditional Inuit clothing. I was reading that when white Europeans invaded their lands, they refused to wear furs because it looked too 'uncivilized.' And you know the men of the Night's Watch would sit there and freeze to death because they didn't want to look like the wildlings. There's also a Captain Picard shoutout in this chapter, see if you catch it!
Enjoy! The rest of the first book is all finished, I'm just going to go through and edit before posting. Plus I'm done my Master's thesis so I'll have more free time! Thank you again for all your lovely comments <3

“*The Crone is very wise and old, and sees our fates as they unfold*…”

Sam paused. Little Sam’s eyes that had been slowly falling shut popped open when he stopped singing.

“I know you’re tired,” Sam told him sternly. Little Sam stared back, chewing on his sleeve.

“… She lifts her lamp of shining gold,” Sam continued gently. “To lead the little children.”

Little Sam’s eyelids drooped.

“The Seven Gods who made us all, are listening if we should call. So close your eyes, you shall not fall, they see you little children,” Sam finished.

“Gods bless the little children,” whispered Gilly sleepily. She reached out and stroked little Sam’s cheek with her finger.

“Don’t wake him,” Sam chided. “I’ll have to run through all seven verses again if he opens his eyes.”

*Gilly grinned, her eyes soft in the firelight. “I like to hear you sing.”*

Sam’s hand curled in the empty sheets as he awoke. He laid still for a moment, clinging to the last bit of warmth from the dream.

He sat up from the narrow bunk and hurried to dress. Maester Aemon would be waiting. Before leaving his room, he stuck a hand into his pocket to feel for his mother’s thimble. He was satisfied when his fingers found the cool metal.

Dawn was just breaking as Sam reached the top of the rookery, wheezing slightly. He hushed the birds as he untied their scrolls. They squawked angrily until he threw fistfuls of bloody meat into their cages.

Then it was down to the kitchens to fetch Maester Aemon’s breakfast, and he balanced the tray and the scrolls as he climbed down into the Maester’s keep. The old man was still sleeping soundly, his pale hands fluttering as if he was dreaming. Sam bent to stoke the fire which had been allowed to burn too low in the night.

Maester Aemon mumbled in his sleep, and Sam crossed to wake him gently with a hand on his shoulder.

“It’s Sam, Maester,” said Sam, when Aemon’s eyes opened. “I’ve come to wake you.”
“Ah, thank you Sam,” said Aemon, leaning heavily on Sam as he stood. Sam stood still for a moment, letting the old maester find his balance. He then helped him dress, and Aemon made his way to the writing desk.

Sam placed the bread and cheese before the maester, before attending to the ravens’ scrolls.

“Cotter Pyke requests that we send more builders to Eastwatch-by-the-Sea,” said Sam. “One of the tunnels is caving in, and needs to be repaired.”

Maester Aemon nodded. “Lord Commander Mormont shall send men. Yarwyck will have to spare some of the new brothers”

“Lord Penrose is sending several boys to take the black,” Sam continued, setting that letter to the side. His hand hesitated over the next, stamped with the golden seal of the Crown

“What is it boy?”

Sam unfurled the scroll, and flattened it to the desk. “Word from King’s Landing.” He ran a thumb across the letters, smearing the ink slightly as if to wipe the news away. “The King is... dead.”

Where are the others?

They’ve gone to stall the war. To keep Robert alive as long as possible.

“King Robert is dead,” Sam said again, the words thick on his tongue. “Killed in a boar hunt. His son Joffrey now sits on the throne.” He reached for the remaining letters, and ripped them open, but they offered nothing of interest.

“I heard King Robert was an avid hunter,” mused Aemon. “May the gods grant him peace.”

Sam couldn’t help the nervous laughter that tittered from his throat. “May the gods grant us peace if Joffrey now sits upon the throne.”

Maester Aemon turned his cloudy eyes on Sam. “Do you know the boy?”

Sam thought of Jon taking flight in the night when they heard of Eddard Stark’s head rolling down the steps of Baelor. “Move aside Sam or I’ll ride you down.”

“Lord Stark’s eldest daughter is betrothed to marry him,” Sam said, wiping at the cold sweat on his brow. “Jon says he is a cruel sort, vicious and heartless. I’d sooner not see him sit on the Iron Throne. Excuse me, maester, I must go to Jon at once at tell him.”

Maester Aemon touched the chain hanging around his thin neck. “And what shall Jon Snow do with these words?”

Sam fell silent. “Naught, for Jon means to ride beside us on the ranging,” he said finally.

“Jon Snow will learn of the King’s fate in time,” said Maester Aemon. “You have duties to attend to. Bring this letter to Lord Commander Mormont, and then return here. We must send an acknowledgement to Maester Pycelle.”

And though Sam ran, it seemed that Maester Aemon meant to keep him busy until nightfall. It was only when Maester Aemon finished his supper, that he started to edge with the dishes in the direction of the door. He was interrupted by a sharp knock, and opened the door to find Pyp.

“Maester Aemon,” Pyp said respectfully, before sticking his tongue out at Sam. “Lord Commander
Mormont has called a meeting for the ranging. He’s asked that you and Samwell attend.”

“I was just about to run down to the kitchens,” Sam trailed off thinking he might catch Jon.

“I’ll take it,” said Pyp gamely, grabbing the tray. “If you’ll promise to tell me how many times Dywen brings up his fear of giant bears. Grenn says he keeps insisting that they’re the real threat beyond the Wall.”

Sam shoved away Pyp as he laughed, and closed the door. He draped Maester Aemon’s thick cloak around his frail shoulders, and together they made their way up the steep stairs to Mormont’s Keep.

Mormont was there, his raven perched atop his shoulder. Benjen sat to his one side, and Sam helped Maester Aemon to the seat on the other side. The other brothers sat scattered about the table. Sam took the seat between Jon and Grenn. When Jon looked at him questioningly, Sam gave a slight shake of his head.

Mormont cast his eyes over the table. “Before we begin, there has been news from King’s Landing.”

Sam heard Jon’s sharp intake of breath.

“Grievous news,” continued Mormont. “The King has been killed in a hunting accident”

“Killed, killed,” squawked the raven.

Jon was stiff beside him. Sam could see the tendons standing out in his hands.

“I never thought to see another king at my age,” Mormont continued, “with Robert half my years and strong as a bull. His son has taken the Iron Throne, and will be coronated in the coming weeks.”

“Has there been any news of my brother?” asked Benjen. “Will he stay on as Hand of the King?”

“It would be foolhardy of the boy to send away his father’s advisors,” grunted Mormont. He sighed. “Winter at our gates, and a boy now sits upon the Iron Throne. If ever the realm needed a strong king… there will be dark days and cold nights ahead of us.”

“There is no time to be wasted then,” said Benjen. “The ranging must leave on the morrow. We cannot afford be vulnerable on both sides of the Wall.”

Matt and Toad paled slightly at the words, although they stayed put.

“Ranger Stark will lead the ranging party,” said Lord Mormont. “He will be accompanied by our finest. Brother Othor, Brother Jafer, Brother Dywen, Brother Bedwyck.” He nodded to each as he said their name. “And our new brothers. “Brother Grenn, Brother Todder, Brother Matthar, and Brother Samwell.” He paused for a moment. “Jon Snow will also be joining the ranging as a envoy of the Northern Lords.”

The men turned to fix their eyes on Jon. Sam searched Jon’s strained features, but finally Jon nodded sharply. “Aye, I will accompany the ranging. I am grateful for this. I know I am not a brother of the Night’s Watch, I have sworn no vows.”

“We are all brothers beyond the Wall,” said Mormont grimly. “Will you swear a vow, now before us, Jon Snow, that you hold the lives of the brothers and the safety of the Watch above all else?”
That you will journey North not as the son of a Lord, but just as man of the Watch?"

Jon unbuckled the longsword at his hip, and laid it across the table. “I swear it by all the gods. I swear to hold the lives of the brothers, and the safety of the Watch above all else. From here, I act a man of the Watch.”

“I accept your pledge,” said Lord Mormont. He looked around. “Brothers, do you accept this man’s pledge?”

“I accept his pledge,” said Benjen. Sam echoed him, followed by Grenn, Toad, and Matt.

“Aye, the boy may come,” said Bedwyck. “Gods know we could use the ears and eyes of the Northern Lords.”

“If it comes between him and a brother, I know my choice,” said Othor, looking at Benjen. He turned back to Jon. “Do you understand this, boy?”

“I do,” said Jon, flexing his hand. Sam wondered if he was thinking of the burns that had scarred him. Of Othor’s eyes dark eyes turned blue in a face of death.

“Could always use another bastard boy,” grunted Jafer. “No use in leaving a strong swordhand behind.”

“That’s a fine sword you bring too, boy” said Dywen. “I’ve heard you carry the twin to Benjen’s Valyrian steel.”

“Aye,” said Jon, buckling the sword at his hip. “An unnatural weapon for unnatural enemies.”

There was a space of a breath as Dywen assessed Jon with narrowed eyes. “What exactly have you been sent to seek beyond the Wall?”

“The truth.” Jon was unrepentant.

“Wildlings are flesh and bone, boy” sneered Othor. “No matter what your nursemaid might have told you. They’ll fall beneath caste-forged steel just as well.”

“Of that I have not doubt,” said Jon grimly.

“The Wildings have been running from something other than themselves,” said Benjen. “I won’t say it’s the Others at our doorstep, but I intend to find out.”

“Sightings from the fisherfolk,” muttered Bedwyck, “I won’t believe it until I’ve seen the beasts with mine own two eyes.”

“*The Others*?” asked Toad, his voice rising in pitch. “I thought we were going to track wildlings!”

“You are being sent to find out the reason for the wildling’s erratic movements,” said Mormont. “Of what you will find I cannot say, but the lands beyond the Wall are strange places. They are no longer the realms of men.”

“Mother have mercy.” Matt’s face had gone white.

“No southern gods where we’re going,” said Jafer bitterly. “Just bloody faces glaring at you from every tree.”
“Only the old gods still linger beyond the Wall,” said Mormont. “They will only watch, their words are the signs of the winds and the rustle of the leaves.” He paused. “But I will give you more than words.” He bent the chest placed beside the fire, and withdrew daggers of dragonglass. They gleamed in the light of the flames. “You will carry these daggers on your person. May they only be used to pierce living flesh.”

“What madness is this?” growled Othor, turning the dagger over in his hands.

Maester Aemon picked up one of the daggers, and ran his thumb along the handle. “I can see it now. It gleams black in the darkness even when there is no light. Frozen fire the Valyrians called it. The children of the forest were said to hunt with blades of obsidian in the place of metal.”

“And now the children are all dead,” Mormont reminded him.

“Yes,” said Maester Aemon. “And we are naught but the children of men.” Though he spoke softly, every man around the table leaned to catch his words. “But we may use their knowledge, and knowledge’s a weapon. We must arm ourselves well if we are to ride towards the unknown.”

And though their faces were split between skepticism and fear, every man sheathed the dagger at his hip. Sam did the same. He could feel it’s cool touch through his tunic, burning like a promise.

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In the cold hour before dawn, they dressed and readied the horses. The ravens screeched as Sam tied down their cage, trying futilely to quiet them.

Septon Cellador greeted them promising to light a candle for their safe return, and to keep the seven close on their journey. Sam thought privately that the Septon’s solemn manner was indicative of the man’s apparent understanding that they would all soon be dead.

Jon looked weary as he mounted his horse. Sam knew he had spent half the night scanning the skies for ravens, hoping that perhaps one might carry words from King’s Landing.

He kept craning his head back South as if there was a tether attached to his neck tugging him back. Even as his brother turned South, Sam was looking North to Gilly. He wondered if she had realized she was with child yet, if the fear and dread had already clouded her mind.

Sam wouldn’t just give her a promise this time. This time he’d tell her yes, not maybe or later like the craven boy he had been.

And he’d sing. Every time she asked.

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Jon had thought a thousand things since hearing of the king’s death, each more wild than the last. But the truth ground him down, there was no way forward but to stay.

“The King is dead.”

The letter said nothing of treason, nothing of conspiracy. Sam had filched the scroll while helping Maester Aemon to bed, and Jon read it over and over.

“His son Joffrey has taken the throne.”

His father would take Sansa and Arya at once and leave for Winterfell, Jon told himself. Brienne’s
shield would guard their backs, and the wolves would run beside them. He looked down at Ghost who paced silently beside the nervous horses. The wolf offered him no insight, just gazed back, his red eyes bright in the dusky morning light.

“It hurts, boy,” Maester Aemon had said to him all those years ago. When Mormont had promised that Ned Stark would be sent to the Wall, that Sansa and Arya would be treated gently.

“Oh yes,” the old maester had sighed. “Choosing, it has always hurt. And it always will. I know.”

“You don’t know,” Jon had raged at him. “No one knows.”

He could only imagine the pity that had swamped the old man as he bent to address Jon’s childish claims, the benevolence as he told Jon of his own trials.

“Three times the gods saw fit to test my vows. Once when I was a boy, once in the fullness of my manhood, and once when I had grown old. By then my strength was fled, my eyes grown dim, yet that last choice was as cruel as the first. My ravens would bring the news from the south, words darker than their wings, the ruin of my House, the death of my kin, disgrace and desolation. What could I have done, old, blind, frail? I was helpless as a suckling babe, yet still it grieved me to sit forgotten as they cut down my brother’s poor grandson, and his son, and even the little children…"

Maester Aemon’s grief was the same grief he saw mirrored in Ned Stark’s eyes when he told Jon how he had taken him from Lyanna’s arms.

“Robert would have cut you down with the same fury that killed Rhaegar,” Ned had told him.

“And you were but a babe, and I could not bear to see you wear the bloody shrouds that swaddled Elia’s children.”

The grinding of the chains to raise the gates, spurred the men to begin to cheering. The dark tunnel loomed before them, black and still.

Jon turned to look at the rangers. The young ones were drenched in fear, and Jon thought they might bolt. But then Grenn set his jaw and kicked his horse to spur the animal forward. And they followed him, one by one.

“Sometimes I think everyone is just pretending to be brave, and none of us really are,” Grenn had confessed once.

“Ghost, to me,” called Jon.

Everyone is pretending. Jon wished he had told him. Every brave man who ever was, was pretending.

The final gate grumbled open, the weight of the door straining the screaming hinges. The blast of wind and snow washed over them with a finality. There was no turning back.
“More Ser Dake?” Arya smiled as winningly as Lana had once smiled to coax the sailors of the Braavosi canals to drop their coin for oysters. It worked then, and it worked now.

“I’ve told you, girl, there’s no need for titles. I’m no knight.” But the Lannister guard took the bottle that Arya offered, and took a long drink. “Good ale.” He grunted, and passed it to Lum.

Arya settled next to the fire, and stirred the stew she was cooking.

Brienne was seated beside her, sharpening a hunting knife against a whetstone with quick strikes. The youngest guard, a lanky boy named Hoke, watched her out of the corner of his eye.

Her father had fallen asleep sometime ago, exhausted by the effort of the ride. Though the Imp’s saddle held him tight, the strain of the horse’s gait on his wound showed clearly across Ned’s face.

Nymeria and Lady were curled beside Ned, their golden eyes half-closed as if on the verge of sleep. Nymeria laid with her head on Lady’s stomach as if to comfort her.

The guards had been quite wary of the direwolves at first. Red Lester had shrieked like a babe whenever Nymeria had come bursting out of the bushes, her muzzle bloody from eating. Arya had told them with a grin that the color red made them cross. Lum had ridden with his scarlet cloak turned inside out for the next day and a half.

Arya handed Brienne a bowl of stew, and refilled the men’s cups.

“Thank you, m’lady!” bellowed Lester.

“You’re not quite the proper lady now are you?” asked Lum, peering at Arya’s tunic and britches, dusty from the road.

“Only when I want to be,” Arya told him.

“Watch your mouth,” Lester scolded Lum. “That girl’s to be the King’s sister one day.”

“Pretty girl your sister is,” Dake to Arya, his words sloppy and slurred. “Like the bloody maiden come to be. She’ll make a fine Queen.”

“To the Queen,” shouted Lum.

“My sister is clever as she is beautiful,” Arya agreed with a sharp smile. And she’ll never be your queen.

“A maiden fair,” called Hoke sleepily.
“Give us a song then,” Dake called suddenly, lurching to his feet. He slapped Lester on the back, and the man spit out his drink.

For a moment, Arya thought they might fight, but Lester only laughed, the ale spilling down into his red beard. They were a happy, sluggish pair.

“From there, to here!” Lester called out.

“From here! To there!” Lum roared.

Hoke had already fallen over, ale spilled in the dirt. Dake threw a rabbit bone at him, but he didn’t move. “All black and brown and covered in hair!”

“He smelled that girl on the summer air,” Hoke mumbled into the grass.

“Who?” brayed Lester.

“The bear! The bear!” They chorused. “The maiden fair!”

Her father stirred at their shouts, blinking blearily at the drunken, stumbling men. Arya crouched over him, and tucked her cloak behind his head.

“What have you given them?” Ned murmured, his face pale.

Arya smiled, and placed a finger to her lips.

In less than an hour, every man had fallen over.

“My bear so fair,” slurred Lum. He hiccuped, and his head thudded heavily into the dirt.

“Dreadful song,” Brienne muttered. She passed a hand over her weary face, and stood.

“They’ll sleep for a long time,” said Arya, prodding Lester with the toe of her boot. “When they wake they’ll expel either their stomach or their bowels. Both if they’re especially unlucky.”

“What did you give them?”

Arya pulled a handful of dark, purple berries from her pocket. “Luna Berries. The smallfolk in the Riverlands use them to relieve cramps during moonblood. They dull the pain, and ease sleeping. Taken in excess will produce… rather unfortunate symptoms.”

“Good,” said Brienne, a smile playing on her lips. “We’ll make good time riding South while they’re incapacitated. Shall I wake your father?”

“No, not yet,” said Arya. “Let him sleep while we prepare.”

Together they dragged the men into seated positions against the trees, and bound them.

“Take their boots,” Arya instructed. “We’ll hide them nearby. Weapons too. We’ll take those with us.”

Arya went to where the guard’s horses were dozing, and undid their bridles. “Shoo!” she hissed at the nervous horses. “Lady! Nymeria!”

The wolves shook themselves awake, and prowled towards the horses, growling. They looked fearsome in the golden light from the flickering fire. The horses fled in terror.
“Father you must wake.” Arya knelt before Ned and shook him gently. He groaned as he awoke.

“What have you done to them?” Ned asked woozily, seeing the men drunk and tied.

“Made less trouble for us,” Arya replied. She thought for a moment, and then crossed to the men. “We’ll leave them a bit of food and water. The bonds are not so tight. They will free themselves eventually.”

“We will far outstrip them in the time it takes them to recover,” said Brienne.

“Exactly,” said Arya. “Now come, Father. You and Brienne will conceal yourselves while I ride for King’s Landing.”

With difficulty, they seated Ned back onto his horse. His head bobbed, and Arya feared he might fall, but he shook his head vigorously and assured her he was fit to ride.

“I do not know how quickly I will return,” said Arya. “Keep hidden. Let Father rest his leg. I will take Nymeria with me. Lady will stay with you. Wherever you are, we will find you.”

“Aye,” said Brienne. “We shall head in the direction of Riverrun. We will await you and Lady Sansa.”

“Take care my darling,” said Ned. Arya caught his outstretched hand, and gripped it hard. “I am sorry I cannot accompany you.”

“Rest as much as you can,” she told her father. “And heal. We shall have a long journey yet when Sansa and I return. Now go. We must all be far from this place when these men regain their senses.”

Arya kicked ash over the fire, and mounted her horse. With Nymeria by her side, she turned South.

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Tyrion placed Stannis Baratheon’s letter into his sister’s hand as delicately as he had once poured wildfyre into the Blackwater Bay.

Her breathing became laboured as she absorbed the contents. The parchment began to twist and tear where she gripped it in her fist. She was as lovely as ever even as her face reddened and twisted in rage.

“This means nothing,” she seethed. Tyrion was reminded absurdly of the hiss of a dragon’s steaming breath. She crumpled the letter, and crossed to the fire. They watched it burn in silence, Stannis’ words turning ash.

Tyrion cleared his throat.

“Lies,” Cersei hissed, thin and sharp as a Braavosi blade. “How dare he call himself King! He is nothing but an embittered fool. May all the gods smite him for his insolence, his arrogance.”

“He is no fool, as you well know,” Tyrion interrupted her. “Many in Westeros have not forgotten his capabilities, even as he has spent these last twenty years stewing atop his dismal rock.”

“It will not matter how clever you think he is,” Cersei snapped. “When Jaime takes an army of men and shows him what happens to those who treat with treachery.”

“With what ships?” demanded Tyrion. “Stannis took most of the royal fleet when he fled to
Dragonstone. We have scarcely enough ships to maintain a perimeter around the bay as it is. You leave us vulnerable if you send Jaime.”

“So you advise me to wait, and let the infestation grow?”

“Waiting dear sister is a blessed virtue.” Tyrion smiled crookedly up at her. “There is worth in biding our time. Stannis may find his path to victory a trifle more difficult than expected. And we needn’t even lift a finger.”

Cersei watched beneath hooded eyes. “What is it you think you know?”

Tyrion poured them both glasses of wine, filling his just a touch and hers to the brim. She snatched it when he offered it to her.

“Stannis believes he is the rightful heir to the Iron throne,” said Tyrion. “And as the Crown’s official position is… denial on that fact, it would not serve us to panicked by the spreading of such a falsehood. It is simply a foolish grab for power by a overlooked younger brother. As long as we hold the throne, our truth is law. But now is the time to be benevolent with that law, to breed friends rather than enemies. We hand in precipitous times. Your son holds the throne not two decades from a bloody civil war that left every acre of this realm aching. And do not think the Crown’s proclivity for nepotism has gone unnoticed.”

“A fact to which you owe your very presence here.”

In this position or on this earth? thought Tyrion wryly.

“You seem to have forgotten this as you sit here, judgement dripping from that hideous face of yours,” Cersei continued. “Let Stannis rise up, I will crush him as he does. The seven kingdoms will learn what it is to have a lion on the Iron Throne. A lion does not cower before an enemy. This is what ruling is. Lying on a bed of weeds, ripping them out by the root, one by one, before they strangle you in your sleep. Robert never understood what it was to be a true ruler. He should have scoured the Iron Isles after Balon Greyjoy rose against him, but did he? No, once they were on their knees, he let them up again. He should have made another island of their skulls. I will not make his mistakes.”

“I’m no King,” said Tyrion, his words falling faster than he could catch them. “But I think there is more to ruling than that.”


Keep your mouth shut.

“As has Jaime, repeatedly, according to Stannis Baratheon.” He could not even blame the loosening of his tongue on the wine. He watched the words fly as if arrows, saw the fury that rose in Cersei’s eyes when she registered them.

“You’re funny.” Cersei’s voice was deadly, fire that had iced over. “A funny little man. But none of your jokes will ever match the first one will they? You remember don’t you? Back when you ripped my mother to pieces on your way out of her and she bled to death.”

The anticipation of the barb did not lesser the pain as much as he expected. “She was my mother too,” he reminded her.

Cersei tilted her head. “Mother gone for the sake of you,” she said softly. “There’s no bigger joke
in the world than that.”

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“I need you to speak sense to our sister.”

“Speak it to her yourself if it is so important,” said Jaime with disinterest. “Though I am a trifle surprised, to say the least. You have not been known for your sensibility in the past, brother.”

“She was rather unforthcoming on my last attempt,” Tyrion pressed him. “I recall it was something about me being a vicious little half-man who committed the vile, hateful act of being born.”

Jaime’s mouth twisted slightly, an expression Tyrion well remembered from his youth. He understood at once that Jaime was far more upset that Tyrion had brought Cersei’s words to his attention, than the fact that they had been said at all. Loving Cersei did require a certain amount of deliberate disregard on Jaime’s part.

“And what exactly is it that you wished to speak of?” Jaime asked.

“The ruling of this kingdom,” Tyrion growled impatiently.

“A terrible tedious affair ruling is,”

“Jaime!” barked Tyrion. “We stand on a precarious edge. Stannis Baratheon has just sent a letter to every lord in the Kingdom declaring Joffrey to be a bastard born of incest, and insinuating that Cersei murdered his brother.” Jaime flinched almost imperceptibly when Tyrion said the last. You cannot throw Stannis Baratheon from a tower, brother.

“You told me when I arrived here that we were in the midst of uncertain times. Well the times have surely become uncertain. The King is dead and the realm could be soon launched into chaos.”

He was breaking the rules, Tyrion realized, when a look of displeasure crossed Jaime’s face. He had not softened his words with banter, nor left room for Jaime to pass him a wry and careless reply.

“Robert,” Jaime said coolly. “Was a drunkard who died in an overzealous hunting accident. As for Joffrey, there is no evidence that he is anything but Robert’s trueborn son. When Father receives word of Stannis’ actions, he will call our banners. We will deal with Stannis swiftly and quickly. The stormlords have no love for him. I would be surprised if he were able to raise and army of three thousand men.”

“It is not strictly Stannis who concerns me,” Tyrion bit back. “A concern I attempted to raise with Cersei before she refused to heed it. The Stormlords will not rise for Stannis, but they will raise their banner for Renly.”

“Renly?” Jaime repeated. “Renly is a fool and a coward. He was gone from the capital before his brother’s body was cold. He does not concern me.”

“Oh?” Tyrion shook his head. “How about a man who rides at the head of a combined force of the Stormlords and the Reach? A hundred thousand strong at least, if not more, and in full command of the Redwyne fleet.”

“The boy doesn’t have the nerve to dare counter Stannis’ claim,” said Jaime softly. “He would not dream to do such a thing.”

“I have sat next to Renly Baratheon through countless small council meetings,” said Tyrion. “I
have watched him, and I have listened. He harbors a bitter animosity towards Cersei, one that I am sure has been stoked by Robert’s death. He has become embolden after all of these years of being Lord of Storm’s End and Master of Laws while Stannis rotted on his rock. Renly will not be the first reckless fool to think himself ripe for kingship.”

This had given Jaime pause. A crease appeared between his eyes as he considered Tyrion’s words. “And you think Mace Tyrell will join his forces to Renly’s should he declared against Joffrey?”

“Robert may have turned a blind eye to Mace’s loyalties during the rebellion, but you know as well as I do that Stannis will do no such thing. Stannis Baratheon has not forgotten the taste of dust and death that festered on his tongue as Mace feasted outside the walls of Storm’s End. Mace has everything to gain if Renly were to ascend the throne. It is evident that Renly has grown… close to the Tyrells. I’m told he carries a miniature of Mace’s daughter inside a locket. What would Joffrey offer Mace that would match his daughter being Queen of the Seven Kingdoms? Certainly he cannot offer marriage. Not only have suspicions of bastardy been cast upon him, he also risks the wrath of both the North and the Riverlands if Sansa Stark is cast aside.”

Jaime stared at him before throwing his golden head back and laughing. “I do not speak in jest,” Tyrion snapped.

“I confess, little brother, I did not fully believe you when you said you had come to help the family,” said Jaime. “I think Father would be intrigued despite himself to hear you speak of preparations to secure our hold on the throne.”

“I’m sure he would still say I’ve fallen short of his expectations as a Lannister,” Tyrion responded dryly.

Jaime smiled widely. “Go on then,” he said waving a hand. “What would you have us do to stay the chaos?”

Tyrion grimaced at the note of mocking in Jaime’s voice, but continued. “If the gods are good, then our enemies will tear at each other’s bellies before turning to us. Stannis is as unyielding as iron. He will be enraged when he discovers the disloyalty of Renly and the Stormlords. I would bet all the gold in the Westerlands that Stannis and Renly will clash before either sets foot in the Crownlands.”

Jaime rubbed his chin. “Cersei will order me to attack Stannis.”

“She will,” said Tyrion. “She has already spoken of it. And in doing so, you will make Renly’s claim even stronger. He will gather his forces and ride unencumbered for King’s Landing. You must stall her until Father arrives. I believe that Renly will have declared his intentions by then.”

_Listen to me Jaime. For once in your life, unwind a knot before you rend it in two with your sword._

“I am a sworn member of the Kingsguard,” said Jaime, finally. “My place is at the side of the King, not at the head of an army.” There was the faintest touch of disappointment in his eyes.

Tyrion ignored it. “In the meantime, efforts must be made for the defense of the city and plans for a siege must be drawn up. If the Reach chooses to cut the food lines, we will be facing a shortage. And it is not like Joffrey to go hungry so his people may eat. Speaking of which, the boy must start attending council meetings. If there is to be a war to keep him on the throne, he should have some notion of what it means to be there.”

“When Father comes, I shall advise him to put you at the head of our armies,” said Jaime, drolly.
Tyrion smiled. “I shall hold you to that. If only to see the expression on our dear sister’s face.”

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The city was restless. Whispers of “bastard” and “treasonous” rustled in the air like leaves in the wind, but when Arya looked around the smallfolk’s lips were tightly sealed.

Dusk was on the horizon as Arya darted through the busy, shadow-drenched streets. The Sept of Baelor loomed in the setting sun. Arya spat on its marble steps as she passed, and fled when a goldcloak bellowed and gave her chase.

Nobody gave her a passing glance as she tied her boots around her neck, and rolled her trousers to her knees. Her feet sank into the soft mud as she crossed to the sewer pipe pouring into the Blackwater Rush.

Arya grinned to herself as she plodded through the muck. She couldn’t wait to tell Bran and Rickon the story of the brave knight who waded through the contents of a castle’s privy to rescue the princess in the tower.

She stole up the tunnel as it turned to earth and then to wood beneath her feet. Finally she found stone, and crept through the heavy door.

Arya trailed her fingers across the dragon skulls as she passed them, imagining they burned hot beneath her fingertips instead of ice cold. She kept one hand on the wall as she approached the prison cells. The smell of urine and sick was so strong that it made her eyes water. It was lighter here, the moonlight peeking through the small barred windows of the cells. She could hear men rolling fitfully inside.

“Water, water,” one was calling.

“Boy, lovely boy.”

Arya shivered as Jaqen H’ghar’s voice danced in her ears.

“A man could use a taste of beer. A man has a thirst, wearing these heavy bracelets.”

But Jaqen H’ghar was far from here, perhaps in Yoren’s rattling carriage, perhaps he had escaped and was far across the sea, far as the House of Black and White.

And she was no faceless man. She was Arya Stark of Winterfell, and she was here to rescue her sister.

Arya continued. There was a turnkey passed out with his head thrown back at the end of the hall. An empty cup lay abandoned by his feet dripping ale onto the stones. She passed him soundlessly thanking the gods for men’s love of drink.

She found was she was looking for down a long narrow passage. The stones were uneven here, giving her the impression as she walked that she was falling sideways. At the end of the hall was a door that had fallen halfway off its rusty hinges. There were no torches lit here. Even the moonlight did not see this place.

Better for her work. A girl is Arya Stark of Winterfell, Arya reminded herself once more. A girl, a girl of Winterfell. Arya moved her lips soundlessly around the words as she wrapped her fingers around Needle’s hilt. She stepped forward into the darkness.
How long must I be blind?

Until darkness is as sweet to you as light.

Sweeter still was it when she had slid Needle through the Waif’s belly.

The door emitted a low moan when she pushed it open. She stilled for a moment, tracking the ragged breathing of her target. The stench of death and decay was already thick in this room. She crept to the man who lay in the bed, listening to him sleep in the darkness.

Slowly, she withdrew Needle from her sheath. Arya slid the blade through the blackness until it hovered an inch from the man’s throat.

“My name is Arya Stark of Winterfell,” Arya said softly into the darkness. “You killed my father. For that I have sentenced you to die.”

With a quick thrust, she plunged the sword into Ilyn Payne’s throat. Her aim had been true. He did not scream. She did not know if he could have had she not slit his throat. It mattered not now. A strange guttural cry was the only sound that rattled from his throat as he died.

She wiped a splatter of blood from her cheek as he writhed on the bed and fell onto the stone floor. He tried to cough, tried to staunch his wound, but it only forced more blood to gush from the gash in his neck.

It did not take him long to die. When it was finished, she lit a lone candle that lay on the dirty floor to survey her work. It illuminated the slick blood that drenched the bedding and the dry straw that was strewn across the stone.

Carefully, Arya wiped Needle clean before selecting the dagger strapped against her leg.

Finally, a girl is no one.

A girl is Arya Stark of Winterfell and I’m going home.

In the light of the candle she offered a prayer to the Stranger and began.

Chapter End Notes

Arya takes Ilyn Payne’s face while thinking about her work for the House of Black and White.
Sansa shook her sleeve down over the purple fingerprints marring her skin. She had been clumsy the other day, tripping when she went to walk down the stairs. She had fallen into Joffrey, and his embarrassment at the tittering of the maids caused him to dig his fingers painfully into her arm.

“I’m so sorry, Your Grace,” she had whispered to him with a trembling smile.

To her horror, it hadn’t lifted the ugly expression on his face.

“Proper ladies aren’t clumsy,” he had snapped at her.

He had smiled again when he saw her at dinner, a gallant prince once more. But Sansa knew better now than to hold her breath.

Some things couldn’t be changed.

She stepped gingerly into the throne room. The entire court had been summoned for Joffrey’s first official proclamations as King. The walls had been stripped bare of the hunting tapestries that Robert had loved so much, and stacked in the corner in an untidy heap.

Sansa slipped into the crowd, watching the lords and ladies mill about restlessly. Stannis had moved quickly after Robert’s death, sending ravens to every great house in the realm declaring himself the true King of the Seven Kingdoms, and denouncing Joffrey, Myrcella, and Tommen to be bastards born of incest. Joffrey’s rage had been fearful when he heard of what his uncle had done.

In the south, she sure Renly was moving his pieces into place. He would have already begun to gather his armies, ignoring his brother’s call for fealty. Margaery would be at his side as well, her handmaidens working furiously on her maiden cloak of golden roses.

Tyrion sat at the long council table looking stiff and peevied, drumming his fingers erratically on the papers in front of him. Beside him, Pycelle seemed to have fallen asleep, his hands clasped atop his long beard. Varys fluttered into the hall smiling in that secret way of his. The Spider’s feet were soundless on the stone.

A herald’s voice rang out. “All hail His Grace, Joffrey of the Houses Baratheon and Lannister, the First of his Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, and Lord of the Seven Kingdoms. All hail his lady mother, Cersei of House Lannister, Queen Regent, Light of the West, and Protector of the Realm.”

Barristan Selmy led the way into the hall. Cersei looked as if her golden slippers scarcely brushed the ground as she floated in on Jaime’s arm. Boros Blount walked beside Joffrey, who took the steps two at a time up to be seated on the Iron Throne. Cersei seated herself at the council table, a lovely smile on her painted lips.
When Joffrey turned to look out over the hall, his eyes caught Sansa’s. He smiled and spoke. “It is a king’s duty to punish the disloyal and reward those who are true. Grand Maester Pycelle, I command you to read my decrees.”

Pycelle shook himself awake and clambered to his feet. He was clad in a magnificent robe of thick red velvet, with an ermine collar and shiny gold fastenings. From a drooping sleeve, heavy with gilded scrollwork, he drew a parchment, unrolled it, and began to read a long list of names, commanding each in the name of king and council to present themselves and swear their fealty to Joffrey. Failing that, they would be adjudged traitors, their lands and titles forfeit to the throne.

When he was done, Pycelle rolled up the list, tucked it up his left sleeve, and pulled another parchment from his right. He cleared his throat and resumed. “In the place of Eddard Stark, it is the wish of His Grace that Tywin Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock and Warden of the West, take up the office of Hand of the King, to speak with his voice, lead his armies against his enemies, and carry out his royal will. So the king has decreed. The small council consents.”

“In the place of the traitor Stannis Baratheon, it is the wish of His Grace that his lady mother, the Queen Regent Cersei Lannister, who has ever been his staunchest support, be seated upon his small council, that she may help him rule wisely and with justice. So the king has decreed. The small council consents.”

Sansa heard a soft murmuring from the lords and ladies around her, but it was quickly stilled. Pycelle continued.

“It is also the wish of His Grace that his loyal servant, Janos Slynt, Commander of the City Watch of King’s Landing, be at once raised to the rank of lord and granted the ancient seat of Harrenhal with all its attendant lands and incomes, and that his sons and grandsons shall hold these honors after him until the end of time. It is moreover his command that Lord Slynt be seated immediately upon his small council in the place of the traitor Renly Baratheon, to assist in the governance of the realm. So the king has decreed. The small council consents.”

Sansa watched in disgust as Janos Slynt strutted towards the council table.

She stared hard at Janos Slynt’s ugly face, remembering how he had thrown down her father for Ilyn Payne to behead. She wished she could hurt him, wished that some hero would throw him down and cut off his head.

That day, a little voice inside her had whispered, there are no heroes.

But now, she imagined Jon throwing him down and taking his head. That brought a smile to her face.

When he finally took his place, Pycelle resumed. “Lastly, in these times of treason and turmoil, with our beloved Robert so lately dead, it is the view of the council that the life and safety of King Joffrey is of paramount importance . . . ” He looked to the queen.

Cersei stood. “Ser Barristan Selmy, stand forth.”

Sansa’s lips parted in horror. She had forgotten the shame of Ser Barristan, but remembered it well now.

Ser Barristan had been standing at the foot of the Iron Throne, as still as any statue, but now he went to one knee and bowed his head. “Your Grace, I am yours to command.”

“Rise, Ser Barristan,” Cersei said. “You may remove your helm.”
“My lady?” Standing, the old knight took off his high white helm, though he did not seem to understand why.

“You have served the realm long and faithfully, good ser, and every man and woman in the Seven Kingdoms owes you thanks. Yet now I fear your service is at an end. It is the wish of king and council that you lay down your heavy burden.”

“My . . . burden? I fear I . . . I do not . . .”

Janos Slynt spoke cruelly and bluntly. “Her Grace is trying to tell you that you are relieved as Lord Commander of the Kingsguard.”

Ser Barristan seemed to shrink at his words. “Your Grace,” he said at last. “The Kingsguard is a Sworn Brotherhood. Our vows are taken for life. Only death may relieve the Lord Commander of his sacred trust.”

“Whose death, Ser Barristan?” The queen’s voice was soft as silk, but her words carried the whole length of the hall. “Yours, or your king’s?”

“You let my father die,” Joffrey said accusingly from atop the Iron Throne. “You’re too old to protect anybody.”

“Your Grace,” Ser Barristan said, still bewildered. “I was chosen for the White Swords in my twenty-third year. It was all I had ever dreamed, from the moment I first took sword in hand. I gave up all claim to my ancestral keep. The girl I was to wed married my cousin in my place, I had no need of land or sons, my life would be lived for the realm. Ser Gerold Hightower himself heard my vows . . . to ward the king with all my strength . . . to give my blood for his . . . I fought beside the White Bull and Prince Lewyn of Dorne . . . beside Ser Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning. Before I served your father, I helped shield King Aerys, and his father Jaehaerys before him . . . three kings . . .

“Three Kings, all three dead, Ser Barristan,” said Tyrion with a cruel smile. “Quite the record.”

_He thinks to send Ser Barristan straight to his Queen._

“Your time is done,” Cersei Lannister announced. “Joffrey requires men around him who are young and strong. The council has determined that Ser Jaime Lannister will take your place as the Lord Commander of Sworn Brothers of the White Swords.”

“The Kingslayer,” Ser Barristan said. He gave Jaime a look of utter contempt. “The false knight who profaned his blade with the blood of the king he had sworn to defend.”

Jaime smiled lazily at him, as if in jest, but Cersei reared forward. “Have a care for your words, Ser,” she warned. “You are speaking of our beloved brother, your king’s own blood.”

Lord Varys spoke, his words slick with false sympathy. “We are not unmindful of your service, good ser. Lord Tywin Lannister has generously agreed to grant you a handsome tract of land north of Lannisport, beside the sea, with gold and men sufficient to build you a stout keep, and servants to see to your every need.”

Ser Barristan looked up sharply. “A hall to die in, and men to bury me. I thank you, my lords . . . but I spit upon your pity.” He reached up and undid the clasps that held his cloak in place, and the heavy white garment slithered from his shoulders to fall in a heap on the floor. His helmet dropped with a clang. “I am a knight,” he told them. He opened the silver fastenings of his breastplate and let that fall as well. “I shall die a knight.”
“Come now, Ser,” Tyrion called out. “I’ll even throw in a whore or two with the lot. On the Crown’s coin of course. I’m sure they’ll be quite gentle with a man of your age and… inexperience.”

The hall filled with laughter, the loudest it seemed, from the men who had been his brothers until a moment ago. Ser Barristan stood shamed and red-faced, too angry to speak. Finally he drew his sword.

There was a gasp throughout the hall. Boros and Moore stepped forward as if to confront him, but Ser Barristan froze them in place with a look that dripped contempt. “Have no fear, sers, your king is safe . . . no thanks to you. Even now, I could cut through the five of you as easy as a dagger cuts cheese. If you would serve under the Kingslayer, not a one of you is fit to wear the white.” He flung his sword at the foot of the Iron Throne. “Here, boy. Melt it down and add it to the others, if you like. It will do you more good than the swords in the hands of these five. Perhaps Lord Stannis will chance to sit on it when he takes your throne.”

He took the long way out, his steps ringing loud against the floor and echoing off the bare stone walls. Lords and ladies parted to let him pass. Not until the pages had closed the great oak-and-bronze doors behind him did Sansa hear sounds again: soft voices, uneasy stirrings, the shuffle of papers from the council table.

“He called me boy,” Joffrey said peevishly. “He talked about my uncle Stannis too.”


“He could be making plots with my uncle. I want him seized and questioned.” No one moved. Joffrey raised his voice. “I said, I want him seized!”

Janos Slynt rose from the council table. “My gold cloaks will see to it, Your Grace.”

“Good,” said Joffrey.

“The King and council have also determined that two men be selected to join the Kingsguard,” said Cersei after the commotion had settled. “The first, is Ser Balon Swann.”

Sansa watched as the young knight blanched in surprise. “Your Grace,” he called to Joffrey over the balcony. “You do me a great honor.”

“Rise, Ser Balon, and pay fealty to your King,” Cersei instructed him. With only the faintest touch of hesitation, Ser Balon descended to stand before Joffrey, and then took to one knee.

“Rise,” Joffrey ordered when the man had said his words. “And take your rightful place at my side.” Ser Balon joined the other members of the Kingsguard, looking strange and naked next to the men in their shining white armor.

“Finally,” said Cersei. “There is no man in the Seven Kingdoms more fit to guard and protect His Grace than his sworn shield, Sandor Clegane.”

“How do you like that, dog?” Joffrey asked, leaning forward.

The Hound considered for a long moment.

“Why not? I have no lands nor wife to forsake, and who’d care if I did?” The burned side of his mouth twisted. “But I warn you, I’ll say no knight’s vows.”
“The Sworn Brothers of the Kingsguard have always been knights,” Boros said firmly.

“Until now,” the Hound said in his deep rasp, and Boros fell silent.

Joffrey’s herald moved forward. “If any man in this hall has other matters to set before His Grace, let him speak now or go forth and hold his silence.”

No one spoke. Despite the space of so many years, Sansa was flung back to that frightened, trembling child who had gathered her courage and stood before the throne to beg for her father’s life.

“The Lady Sansa of House Stark!”

“Do you have some business for the king and council, Sansa” Cersei had asked, her words as innocent and light as a kiss.

“I do,” Sansa had answered, so sure that they would listen. “As it please Your Grace, I ask mercy for my father, Lord Eddard Stark, who was the Hand of the King.”

“Mercy,” Sansa whispered softly. Though for who she asked, she could not say.

Joffrey rocked restlessly on the throne as silence settled upon the hall. “Court is dismissed,” he announced at last, and stood.

All at once the crowd began to chatter and whisper amongst themselves. They began to filter out, certainly to pass words better said behind closed doors. Sansa lingered, watching the council speak in low voices.

Her face prickled, and goosebumps rose on her skin. She looked up, certain that someone was watching her. Her eyes drifted over the faces, noting each of them as she did. But fear almost choked her when she locked eyes with Ilyn Payne. His pale, dead eyes bored into hers, unflinching in their regard. Dread trickled down her spine, but she was unable to look away. Just as she felt brave enough to turn away, she saw him raise his hand and brush his nose with his thumb.

Alright?

The motion stopped her cold. When she didn’t react, he did it again. He tilted his head, as if asking a question.

Alright?

Shakily, she lifted her hand to play with the hair tucked behind her ear.

Fine.

Sansa could have sworn a trace of a smile touched his gruesome mouth when she did. Her heart stuttered in her chest, and she felt wildly delighted and terribly sickened all at once.

Desperate to move closer, she hurried down to the gallery. She flicked her eyes up to check as she approached the throne. He was still watching her.

“Lady Sansa!”

Sansa whipped around to see one of Cersei’s maids scurrying towards her. The woman dropped a slight curtsy, the line of her mouth taut. “Her Majesty would like you to join her in the royal chambers at once.”
“Yes,” said Sansa. “Yes. Of course.” The words tasted like blood in her mouth.

The maid clucked her tongue impatiently when Sansa did not move to leave. She turned to look once more at Ilyn Payne, but he had vanished.

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Joffrey lounging on a chaise when Sansa passed through to attend to Cersei.

“My King,” she said. Her eyes tracked the loose set of his shoulders, the softness in his features. He was safe for now. She curtsied low.

He smiled at her, pleased, and offered his hands hung heavy with ugly rings. Sansa kissed them.

“I have a surprise for my lady,” he announced grandly.

Sansa’s heart stuttered nervously. She ignored it, and draped herself delicately at his feet.

*She was a good girl, and always remembered her courtesies.*

“For me, Your Grace?”

“I have ordered a feast thrown in my honor tonight,” Joffrey announced. “All of my loyal subjects shall attend and will witness the announcement of our betrothal.”

“How wonderful,” said Sansa forcing a beaming smile.

“You shouldn’t be crying all the time,” Joffrey sneered. “You’re more pretty when you smile and laugh. Wipe off the blood you’re all messy”

“I am honored by your kindness, My King,” said Sansa with a breathy giggle of delight.

He leaned forward, and toyed with the golden pendant around her neck. “I’ve instructed Mother to find you something proper to wear. You’re to be my Queen someday, and you must be dressed accordingly. I want everyone to look upon you tonight at my side.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.” Sansa said. “Nothing in the world would make me happier.”

He tugged sharply on the pendant, so that she was forced to bring her head towards him. Then Joffrey grinned, and dropped it so the lion thudded against her chest.

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Sansa fought to keep her features placid and unassuming as Cersei watched her dress. The gown was layer after layer of pink silk, pale as the underside of a rose. A thousand tiny pearls had been sewn around the collar and the hem. More pearls had been painstaking sewn into the braids that had been piled high atop her head.

Cersei reached forward and held her chin when they had finished. The Queen examined her, and nodded after a moment. Sansa wished she had chosen a darker color. She feared that the trickle of cold sweat down her neck would noticeably stain the silk.

“Your Grace,” Sansa interjected when she saw the maids lay out Cersei’s own dress on the bed. “Might I retire to my chambers before the banquet?” She placed a hand on her chest. “I think I should rest, my head feels quite heavy from all of this excitement.”
“Of course, little dove,” said Cersei, reaching out to tuck a curl behind Sansa’s ear. “But you must take care not to muss your dress or your hair. The King would be most displeased to see you disheveled.”

“You truly are a stupid girl aren’t you? My mother says so.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.” Sansa touched the bodice of the dress lightly. “I am honored by the King’s love. I want only to please him.”

“She worries about our children, whether they’ll be stupid like you, but I told her not to trouble herself. I’ll get you with child as soon as you’re able. If the first one is stupid, I’ll chop your head off and find a smarter wife.”

Cersei glanced over her as if she were particularly pleasing pet. “Quite so, little dove.”

A maid escorted Sansa to her chambers in the highest tower of Maegor’s Holdfast. Sansa begged for solitude, promising that she would not put a single wrinkle in the gown.

When she was alone she was paralyzed for a moment. How many endless days and night she’d languished here, staining the silk of her bedspread with blood and tears?

Then it passed, and she flung her chest of drawers open to retrieve her needles and thread. She thrust them deep into her pockets with a few pieces of jewelry and silver stags. She found her brush and placed that in dress too with several ribbons.

Quickly, she hiked up her gown and yanked on warmer stockings. She hesitated over shoes. Cersei had presented her with a delicate pair of pink slippers that matched the dress. Her boots were hidden in the bottom of her wardrobe…

The dress was long enough to sweep the floor. Sansa slipped her feet into the boots, and laced them tightly. The slippers she shoved between the mattress and the bed. She thought longingly of the traveling cloak that still lay in the bottom her chest, but she would not dare bring it.

Finally, she unlaced the stays that held the side of the mattress together. From within, she withdrew Jon’s letter and tucked it tightly within her shift.

She straightened the bed, and closed the chest. Taking a deep breath, she crossed to the window and let the sea breeze wash over her. It smelled like salt and brine, but it the cool kiss of its touch reminded her of standing on the ramparts of Winterfell.

The maids found her like that. They took her arms, and Sansa thought of how Arya moved when she sparred, like she was gliding over water. She tried to mimic her sister’s light steps, and offered a prayer to the Mother that her boots would not show beneath the sway of her dress.

The absence of those who had already fled the court following Robert’s death was even more apparent when they stepped into the Great Hall. Thankfully did not seem to notice or care as he led Sansa to the High Table.

She searched the crowd. Though there were many guards stationed along the wall, she did not see Ilyn Payne. The idea that she had been mistaken nagged insistently in her head, but she pushed the thoughts away.

Joffrey stood, raising his arms to quiet the crowd. His golden crown of rubies and black diamonds glittered in the torchlight. He smiled smugly as silence fell immediately.
Joffrey’s herald cleared his throat. “His Grace, Joffrey of the Houses Baratheon and Lannister, the First of his Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, and Lord of the Seven Kingdoms is pleased to present Lady Sansa Stark, his intended betrothed, and future Queen of the Seven Kingdoms!”

The hall broke into applause, and Joffrey offered a hand to Sansa. “Rise, my lady,” he told her grandly. “The people wish to look upon their future queen.”

Sansa took his hand, and smiled out at the lords and ladies.

“A gift for my Queen!” Joffrey called out, and a steward hurried forward. In his hands, a gold tiara rested on a red velvet pillow. The steward dropped to his knees, and Joffrey took the ornament. He held it high to show the crowd, and they shouted in approval.

“Bow your head, my lady,” Joffrey told her. Sansa did as he asked, conscious of the way the movement exposed her unprotected neck. He placed the tiara on the mass of braids that adorned her head. There were more applause, and Joffrey called for the feast to commence in honor of his betrothal.

Although her stomach recoiled at the thought, Sansa forced herself to eat. It would do no good to be running on an empty stomach. Joffrey’s face soon became red with wine, and he called for fools to entertain them.

The crowd roared as the dancing fools were brought out. Soon lords and ladies joined them on the floor, twirling like a flock of birds to the jaunty southern songs.

Sansa shivered with nervous energy. “Your Grace,” she said, turning to Joffrey. “Would you like to dance?”

Joffrey blinked at her irritably, his eyes red and bleary. He waved her off, and Sansa nodded gratefully. She slipped from the High Table and joined the swirling crowd.

She was caught by Jalabhar Xho, who spun her in dizzying circles as he explained that he was confident that King Joffrey would look favorably on his quest to regain the Summer Isles.

He passed her to Ser Dontos who tried to make her smile with silly jokes, but she could not look upon his face without seeing it open-mouthed in death.

Just as Horas Redwyne took her hand and placed it on his shoulder, she caught sight of Ilyn Payne standing against the wall. His face was grim in the low light, but Sansa thought his ugly features seemed to soften when she caught his eye.

She glanced at the High Table. Joffrey was laughing at the antics of the fool, and Cersei was watching him and smiling. Myrcella had dragged a sleepy Tommen out to dance, and they were spinning in front of the dessert table.

Sansa sent a silent prayer towards them. *Forgive me.* She excused herself just as the younger Redwyne twin was reaching for her, and cut through the crowd.

She slipped through the double doors. The Lannister guards standing on either side jerked to attention when she crossed the doorway. They mumbled at her as she passed, and she smelled the stink of ale wafting from them.

Sansa crept slowly through the hall, and leaned down, looking at the empty courtyard, silent as the grave. The torches were burning low, and Sansa shivered in the thin silk of the gown.
“Cold?”

Sansa restrained her shriek and whipped around to see her sister grinning at her. Arya was dressed in filthy grey chainmail over a boiled leather coat that was so overly large that it swamped her. Despite this, Sansa threw herself into Arya’s arms, and Arya hugged her tightly.

“Nervous,” Sansa gasped out, fearful if she said anything else she would begin to weep. She cupped Arya’s cheek, and Arya stuck her tongue out teasingly.

“Want to go home?” Arya asked her.

Sansa nodded fervently.

“Come,” said Arya, taking Sansa’s hand. She bit her lip, and eyed Sansa critically. “You’ve picked an absolutely dreadful dress to run away in.”

Sansa was not in the frame of mind to snipe back. “Joffrey announced our betrothal tonight.”

Arya bared her teeth in a terrifying smile. “Perhaps he’ll have a stroke when he finds you gone.”

“How are we leaving?” Sansa whispered. “Through the sewers?”

Arya shook her head. “I know of a faster way.”

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Arya had expected somewhat of a fuss from Sansa when Arya had instructed her to crawl into the burlap sack that Arya was carrying over her shoulder. Instead her sister had done as she asked without a second thought, and Arya had slipped faces once more.

Arya kept one arm wrapped tightly around Sansa’s legs as she walked through the quiet halls of the Red Keep. The few servants she saw fled the moment that they caught sight of her face. Ilyn Payne was not a man to be questioned. Perhaps they feared being dragged away one day in a sack across his shoulder.

The stable boy squeaked in terror when Arya approached him and grunted a warning. It was a horrible sound, and Arya fought not to flinch away from herself. The boy scrambled to fetch a saddle, and ran when Arya waved him away.

Carefully, she placed Sansa down in the hay, and opened the sack so that she could breath. Her sister’s face was scarlet from being upside down, and her hair was coming loose.

“Fine,” croaked Sansa.

Arya saddled a horse quickly, and patted it to calm the creature even as it edge away from her in fear. Arya hoisted Sansa over the horse, and swung up behind her. She placed a hand on Sansa’s back to check in and heard a muffled response.

The gold cloaks that guarded the gates of the Red Keep pulled them open immediately when Arya growled in their direction. Their unease was writ plain on their face as they glanced at Sansa’s still body.

Arya took them through the streets, riding past the Sept of Baelor and the Hall of Alchemists. The Lion Gate was swung open at Arya’s command, and they sped through. Faster and faster Arya rode, Aegon’s high hill becoming smaller and smaller in the distance.
She crossed off the Kingsroad and plunged deeper into the forest. When they were hidden in the trees, she dismounted, and pulled Sansa from the horse.

Sansa coughed and rubbed her stomach as she crawled from the bag. All of her lovely braids had come undone, pearls falling to the ground. Her gold tiara hung askew, barely clinging to her head.

Arya pulled Ilyn Payne’s face from hers, and stuffed it into the bag she carried. The air suddenly smelled so much fresher and sweeter. She threw her head back and breathed deeply in relief.

Sansa started to giggle where she lay on the ground, a hysterical sound that startled some sparrows out of the bush. Arya crawled over to her, and Sansa laughed harder. Tears squeezed out her sister’s eyes, and spilled down her flushed cheeks.

“What?” asked Arya, baffled. “What is it?”

Sansa hiccuped. “I’m so happy,” she gasped. “I’m so happy.” She pulled Arya down, and they huddled there on the ground, laughing and crying.

“We’re not far from Nymeria,” Arya said finally. She tugged at Sansa’s hands, helping her to her feet.

It had begun to rain lightly as they rode deeper into the woods. Nymeria ran to them happily when they rode up, and the horses greeted each other with soft whinnies.

Arya pulled her bags from the tree where she had hidden them, and withdrew clothes. She gratefully stripped out of Ilyn Payne’s clothes, and handed Sansa a warmer dress. Sansa fumbled with the silk monstrosity that she was swathed in.

“Can I cut it?”

Sansa paused. “Yes,” she said. “Cut it.”

Arya gleefully cut through the lacings of the dress, and helped Sansa out of it. Sansa sighed in she pulled the warmer dress on.

Arya tossed Ilyn Payne’s chainmail to the side, and buried the blade of his greatsword in the mud. Sansa took the golden lion pendant from around her neck, and the tiara from her head, and hung them on the hilt of the sword.

They mounted their horses, and Nymeria took her place at the head, her ears pricked in anticipation.

“Find Lady,” Arya told her wolf. “We’re going home.”

Nymeria plunged into the brush, and Arya ordered the horses forward. She looked back at Sansa. Her sister had her face tilted up, her features calm and serene. Raindrops trickled down her cheeks.

“What are you thinking of?” Arya asked.

Sansa opened her eyes dreamily, and smiled. “The rain. If I close my eyes… it almost feels like snow.”

Chapter End Notes
Lol sorry to everyone who was looking for an Arya rampage but the girls are hellbent on self preservation which means getting out quickly and safely without fanfare.

Plus honestly what’s the fun in taking everyone out in the beginning \_(_卭_\_/¯

Next chapter is the last one... the seventh person will be revealed!
The Mermaid

Chapter Notes

So here it is, the last chapter of this book! Honestly I’m ridiculously proud of myself for sticking with this story and taking the time to share it with everyone. Thank you, thank you to everyone who read this story, and left their thoughts or kudos. I definitely wouldn’t have made it this far if not for everyone’s support. I love hearing your thoughts, and I love knowing that y’all love these characters as much as I do. So enjoy this last chapter! I’m so excited to share it! Recognizable dialogue from A Game of Thrones., A Clash of Kings, and “Mother’s Mercy.” Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The scarlet comet split the dawn. Shireen thought the gods themselves must have taken a knife to the heavens. It reminded her of a dripping wound, hanging high above the crags of Dragonstone in the pink and purple sky.

She leaned out her window, the stone rough and solid beneath her stomach. The sea frothed below her. It crashed against the black stone like a restless creature, desiring to swallow the ocean whole.

In her dreams, Shireen slipped into the ocean as quick as the silvery fish that darted through the grey waters of Dragonstone. No one swam in those waters, but if Shireen squinted she could see where the ocean turned blue on the horizon. All sorts of lovely creatures might swim in blue waters such as those. Merwives and selkies and nymphs.

*It was said that the Baratheons were descended from the gods themselves. Elenei, daughter of the wind and sea had fallen in love with the first Storm King, Durran Godsgrief, and he took her as his queen.*

When the sea crashed against the walls of the castle, Shireen dreamed that the waves were coming to sweep her away, to cradle her in their cool embrace and bring her to the home of the mermaids.

It was only when she was awake that she was plagued by terror. The fear of flames licking at her feet twisted in her stomach, stopping her breath. She would cry then, terrified she would burn in her bed.

Maester Cressen fretted over her, thinking it was the nightmares of dragons that had so unnerved her as a child.

*“Dragons cannot come to life,” Maester Cressen had soothed her. “They are carved of stone, child. In olden days, our island was the westernmost outpost of the great Freehold of Valyria. It was the Valyrians who raised this citadel, and they had ways of shaping stone since lost to us. A castle must have towers wherever two walls meet at an angle, for defense. The Valyrians fashioned these towers in the shape of dragons to make their fortress seem more fearsome, just as they crowned their walls with a thousand gargoyles instead of simple crenellations. There is nothing to fear.”*

She didn’t fear dragons anymore. The statues of Dragonstone had lost their fire thousands of years ago when the island’s fury had cooled. Shireen imagined that the molten rock had curled back in
despair when it met the cool, grey kiss of the sea.

But she told her maester none of this. He didn’t know that her dreams were sweet relief compared to the horror that tormented her waking mind. Shireen would not burden the kindly old man with what it was to burn alive.

Her nails dug into the rough, black stone of the window sill when she spotted Ser Davos’ ship bobbing in the harbor. Its pale flags whipped in the salty wind.

She ran from her room, ducking the few servants who trickled through the halls of the castle. Worse it would be if her mother spotted her.

Shireen paused in the gallery, rising on her tiptoes to peer between the tall, arched windows. In the yard below, archers fired at practice targets. Their arrows made a sound like a flock of birds taking wind, and Shireen imagined the arrows transforming into white swans that would soar high into the clouds.

Guardsmen strode the wall walks, dipping their heads between the fearsome gargoyles that lined the stones. The early morning air was already thick with the smoke of cookfires as three thousand men sat down to break their fasts beneath the banners of their lords. Past the sprawl of the camp, the anchorage was crowded with ships. No vessel that had come within sight of Dragonstone in the past year had been allowed to leave again, save Ser Davos’ ships.

Her father’s guards stood outside the stairs that led up the Stone Drum. They blocked her as she went to ascend.

“Princess Shireen,” Ser Blake said with a slight nod. “The King is speaking with his advisors at the moment. He has requested that no one disturb him.”

Shireen stared back at him. Ser Blake could not keep his eyes from drifting to the ruined side of her face. It made Shireen feel very small and ashamed.

“What would someone very brave say?” she began. **What would someone very brave say?** “I am Princess of the Seven Kingdoms. I am my father’s one true heir. I would witness his council.” **She was no longer just a small and frightened girl. She was Queen Nymeria who had taken ten thousand ships to sea to save her people.**

The guardsmen looked surprised at her words. They glanced at each other, and Shireen’s throat tied up.

“Yes, Princess,” said Ser Edd.

Her breath left her all at once in relief as they parted to allow her past. She climbed the dizzying stairs to the Chamber of the Painted Table. She stopped before the door, her fist hanging in the air. **Princess Rhaenys The-Queen-Who-Never-Was rode the dragon Meleys into the battle to fight for her Queen Rhaenyra. She would not cower from a door.**

Shireen knocked on the door before she could give in and scurry back down the stairs.

“Enter.” Her father’s voice held little warmth. It seldom did.

She pushed the heavy door open. Stannis was seated in a single chair that had been positioned to sit in the space that Dragonstone would have occupied. Ser Davos stood behind him, his hands tightly clasped. Shireen searched her onion knight’s face, and the upset she saw there frightened her.
There was no shift in her father’s features when he spotted her, but she sensed that he was taken aback by her presence.

“Princess,” Ser Davos greeted her. “The dawn has just broken, m’lady. You should still be abed.”

“Was it a nightmare, child?” her father asked. “A maester can be called to attend to you.”

“No, Father.” Shireen tugged at the ends of her hair as she spoke. “I spotted Ser Davos’ ship in the harbor. I wished to hear the news of our banners.”

“Quite the eye, m’lady,” Ser Davos said with a sad smile. “I returned only in the black of the morning.” He glanced at Stannis. “With news that is perhaps not fit for the ears of little girls.”

Shireen held her breath.

“Speak freely, Ser Davos,” Stannis said gruffly. “Princess Shireen is mine own true heir. I would rather her ears not be stuffed with wool.”

“It was a bitter affair, Princess,” Davos said, weighing his words. “The Stormlords will not rise for your father.”

And although Shireen knew well that Davos spoke the truth, she did not relish the look on her father’s face when the blow landed.

“What did they say when they refused us?” Shireen asked.

Davos fiddled with the glove on his left hand. “Some gave soft words, some blunt. Some made excuses, some promises, and some only lied. In the end, words are just wind.”

Shireen glanced at her father. “How shall we sail for King’s Landing?”

“We do not have the numbers,” said Davos almost sorrowfully. “If we sail there it will only be to die.”

“Enough,” Stannis snapped. “Ser Davos, if that is all you have to offer me then you may leave.”

Davos looked as if he wished to stay, but he did not argue. He bowed to them and left.

Shireen circled the table, tracing the uneven edges of Westeros. Her father’s anger filled the room, choking the room like smoke. She stopped at the opposite side of the table near Highgarden, and reached out to pick up the stone rose of the Tyrell family.

“My brother has risen against me,” said Stannis, his knuckles white on the edge of the table. “He calls himself the rightful King. The Stormlords will not rise for the eldest, it seems they do not like me, my just cause means nothing to them. The cravenly ones will sit behind their walls, waiting to see how the wind rises and who is likely to triumph. The bold ones have already declared for Renly! For Renly!” Her father spat the name like it was a poison on his tongue.

Shireen stared at the stone rose in her hand. Renly was so much a mystery to her. Maester Cressen spoke lovingly of him, an energetic little boy with curls as dark as coal who loved to play king of the castle. Shireen had tried to draw an image of Renly from her father’s face, but all she ended up with was a muddied picture of laughing eyes and roses.

“What shall be done? Ser Davos is right. We cannot sail against the Lannisters with only three thousand men.”
“I shall not sit here while my right is stolen from me,” growled her father. “While your right is stolen. If I am to perish in this war, I will expect every effort be made to sit you upon the throne in my stead.”

Shireen placed the rose back on the map. “I would rather you lived than be King.”

“It does not matter what we want,” her father dismissed.

The door creaked open, and Maester Cressen hobbled in. The old man looked unsteady from the long climb up the stairs, and Shireen ran to take his arm.

“I knew you would come, old man, whether I summoned you or not.”

Shireen flinched at the harshness in her father’s words.

“Thank you, child.” Maester Cressen patted her back, and leaned on her slightly. He looked up at Stannis. “Once you might have woken me.”

“Once you were young,” said Stannis. “Now you are old and sick, and need your sleep. I knew you’d learn what Davos had to say soon enough. You always do, don’t you?”

“I would be no help to you if I did not,” Cressen said. “I met Davos on the stairs.”

“And he told you all, I suppose? I should have had the man’s tongue shortened along with his fingers.”

“He would make you a poor envoy then,” said Cressen with a weak smile.

“Maester Cressen,” said Shireen, desperate for his counsel. “The Stormlords have declared for my uncle. They will not raise their banners for us.”

“Oh, child,” said Cressen. “Renly has been the Lord of Storm’s End for near two decades. Those lords are his sworn bannermen - ”

“His,” Stannis broke in with a snarl. “His, when by all rights they should be mine. I never asked for Dragonstone. I never wanted it. I took it because Robert’s enemies were here, and he commanded me to root them out. I built his fleet and did his work, as beautiful as a younger brother should be to an elder, as Renly should be to me. And what was Robert’s thanks? He named me Lord of Dragonstone, and gives Storm’s End and its incomes to Renly. Storm’s End belonged to House Baratheon for three hundred years. By rights it should have passed to me when Robert took the Iron Throne.”

Though her father’s face was still as stone, his fury seemed to rattle Shireen’s bones. Do not tremble.

“Robert did you an injustice,” Maester Cressen replied carefully. “Yet he had sound reasons. Dragonstone has long been the seat of House Targaryen. He needed a man’s strength to rule here, and Renly was but a child.”

“He is a child still,” Stannis declared, his words ringing throughout the room. “

A thieving child who thinks to snatch the crown from my brow. What has Renly ever done to earn a throne? He sits in council and jests with Littlefinger, and at tourneys he dons his splendid suit of armor and allows himself to be knocked off his horse by a better man. That is the sum of my brother Renly, who thinks he ought to be a king. I ask you, why did the gods inflict me with
brothers?"

“I cannot answer for the gods,” said Cressen, his tone grieved.

“You seldom answer at all these days, it seems to me. Who maesters for Renly? Perchance I should send for him; I might like his counsel better. What do you think this maester said when my brother decided to steal my crown? What counsel did your colleague offer to this traitor blood of mine?”

“Father, you speak cruelly to Maester Cressen,” said Shireen in a tremulous voice.

“I speak truthfully,” Stannis ground out.

“It would surprise me if Lord Renly sought counsel, Your Grace.” Maester Cressen laid a wrinkly hand on Shireen’s shoulder, to soothe her.

“Your Grace,” Stannis repeated bitterly. “You mock me with a king’s style, yet what am I king of? Dragonstone and a few rocks in the narrow sea, there is my kingdom. Tonight I am to sup with my lords bannermen, such as they are. Celtigar, Velaryon, Bar Emmon, the whole paltry lot of them. A poor crop, if truth be told, but they are what my brothers have left me. That Lysene pirate Salladhor Saan will be there with the latest tally of what I owe him, and Morosh the Myrman will caution me with talk of tides and autumn gales, while Lord Sunglass mutters piously of the will of the Seven. Celtigar will want to know which storm lords are joining us. Velaryon will threaten to take his levies home unless we strike at once. What am I to tell them? What must I do now?”

“Your true enemies are the Lannisters, my lord,” Maester Cressen answered. “If you and your brother were to make common cause against them - ”

“I will not treat with Renly,” Stannis answered in a tone that brooked no argument. “Not while he calls himself a king.”

“Not Renly, then,” the maester yielded. “Others might serve your needs as well. Eddard Stark is a just man. He might be convinced to bring the North to your aid. His lady wife is the daughter of Hoster Tully. With Winterfell and Riverrun behind you defeat of the Lannisters would be possible.”

“No,” said Stannis, and the suggestion seemed to inflame him. “Lord Stark has pledged himself and the North to the bastard usurper. His daughter is betrothed to the false king. Lord Stark has made his decision, I will not beg him to change it.”

Shireen felt a flicker of unease. *Is Lord Stark not dead?* She was sure she remembered that the Lannisters had taken his head.

“Lord Stark loved your brother - ” Maester Cressen began.

“Oh and Robert loved him, to be sure,” her father interrupted. “Loved him as a brother, how often did I hear that? I was his brother, not Ned Stark, but you would never have known it by the way he treated me. I held Storm’s End for him, watching good men starve while Mace Tyrell and Paxter Redwyne feasted within sight of my walls. Did Robert thank me? No. He thanked Stark, for lifting the siege when we were down to rats and radishes. I built a fleet at Robert’s command, took Dragonstone in his name. Did he take my hand and say, Well done, brother, whatever should I do without you? No, he blamed me for letting Willem Darry steal away Viserys and the babe, as if I could have stopped it. I sat on his council for nigh twenty years helping Jon Arryn rule his realm while Robert drank and whored, but when Jon died, did my brother name me his Hand? No, he went galloping off to his dear friend Ned Stark, and offered him the honor.”
“Great wrongs have been done to you,” said Maester Cressen gently. “But the past is dust. There are others you may sound out. What of Lady Arryn? If the queen murdered her husband, surely she will want justice for him. She has a young son, Jon Arryn’s heir.” He glanced at Shireen. “Perhaps a betrothal could be arranged.”

“No!” Shireen said in alarm, just as her father spoke.

“The boy is weak and sickly,” Stannis objected. “Even his father saw how it was, when he asked me to foster him on Dragonstone. Service as a page might have done him good, but that damnable Lannister woman had Lord Arryn poisoned before it could be done, and now Lysa hides him in the Eyrie. She’ll never part with the boy, I promise you that.”

“Then send Shireen to the Eyrie,” Maester Cressen urged. “This is such a grim place for a child. Let her spend time in the mountain air, and play with other children.”

“I won’t!” said Shireen, stepping away from Maester Cressen. “I want to stay here, I will stay here!”

“Child,” Maester Cressen said softly.

“It is perhaps worth trying,” said her father gruffly.

“No!” said Shireen. She was ashamed to be already on the verge of tears. “If I am to be your heir, you will treat me as such. I would stay here with you and - ”

“Must the rightful Lord of the Seven Kingdoms beg for help from widow women and usurpers?” Shireen turned. She had not heard her mother enter. Selyse pursed her lips when she spotted Shireen, and crossed to put a hand on her shoulder.

Her father scowled. “I do not beg. Of anyone. Mind you remember that, woman.”

“I am pleased to hear it, my lord.” Selyse stroked Shireen’s hair, absently. “Lady Arryn owes you her allegiance, as do the Starks, your brother Renly, and all the rest. You are their one true king. It would not be fitting to plead and bargain with them for what is rightfully yours by the grace of god.”

“Your god can keep his grace,” said Stannis. It’s swords I need, not blessings. Do you have an army hidden somewhere that you’ve not told me of?”

“Maester,” said Selyse, ignoring Stannis. “Take the princess back to her chambers.”

“She is my heir,” Stannis repeated. “She will stay.”

Selyse’s nails contracted in Shireen’s hair. “Your heir. Of course.” Shireen could feel her mother’s shame and anger, it dripped from her voice. She did not think her father had meant it as a slight, but her mother took it as such.

Finally, her mother spoke. “My brothers and uncles and cousins have armies,” she told Stannis. “House Florent will rally to your banner.”

Her father shook his head. “House Florent can field two thousand swords at best. And you have a deal more faith in your brothers and uncles than I do, my lady. The Florent lands lie too close to Highgarden for your lord uncle to risk Mace Tyrell’s wrath.”
Shireen cast her eyes over the table. The Tyrells will join with the Lannisters after Renly’s death… they will come to Joffrey’s aid when Father attacks the city… it will go terribly… Ser Davos will lose Dale, Allard, Matthos, and Maric. The Tyrells can raise the most men of any kingdom, whoever they support shall be victorious. But there are only three kings yet, where is the King in the North? Robb, his name was. Robb of Winterfell.

“There is another way.” Her mother spoke in a fervent tone that struck fear into Shireen’s heart. “Look out your windows, my lord. There is the sign you have waited for, blazoned on the sky. Red, it is, the red of flame, red for the fiery heart of the true god. It is his banner - and yours! See how it unfurls across the heavens like a dragon’s hot breath, and you the Lord of Dragonstone. It means your time has come, Your Grace. Nothing is more certain. You are meant to sail from this desolate rock as Aegon the Conqueror once sailed, to sweep all before you as he did. Only say the word, and embrace the power of the Lord of Light.”

It’s what the Lord wants.

Please! Let go! No, please!

Mother! Mother don’t let them do this!

Shireen shuddered. It was all she could do not to curl up in a ball and cry.

“All you need,” Selyse promised. “The swords of Storm’s End and Highgarden for a start, and all their lords’ bannermen.”

“Davos would tell you different,” her father said. “Those swords are sworn the Renly. They love my charming younger brother, as they once loved Robert… and they have never loved me.”

“Yes,” said her mother, “but if Renly should die…”

Shireen closed her eyes in terror. Had it been her mother who convinced her father? She had heard the whispers after, of how it was claimed that Renly was killed by a shadow. Was it Melisandre’s shadow that bore down on him? Did it feel like he was burning?

Dimly she heard Maester Cressen speak. “It is not to be thought. Your Grace, whatever follies Renly has committed - ”

“Follies?” Her father’s voice was cold. “I call them treasons.” He turned to her mother. “My brother is young and strong, and he has a vast host around him, and these rainbow knights of his.”

“Melisandre has gazed into the flames, and seen him dead.”

Cressen voiced the horror that Shireen felt. “Fratricide… my lord, this is evil, unthinkable… please, listen to me.”

“And what will you tell him Maester?” Selyse’s voice was measured. “How he might win if he goes to the Starks on his knees, and sells our daughter to Lysa Arryn?”

“I have heard your counsel, Cressen,” said Stannis. “Now I will hear hers. You are dismissed.”

The old Maester was sorrowful and shamed, as he bent his stiff knees. Shireen longed to take his hand as he had taken hers when she was a little girl. She worried about him making it down the endless stairs of the stone drum. And she feared the death she knew was coming for him, though how she would stop it, she did not know.
She hesitated, torn between the maester and her parents. She had no wish to stay in this oppressive room.

“May I take my leave, Father?” Shireen asked.

“Yes, child,” said Stannis, and Shireen fled.

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Shireen walked to the high table on her mother’s arm. Selyse had chosen a beautiful gown for her to wear, black velvet draped over long yellow sleeves, and a collar of ermine fur. But she knew that even the most lovely dress could not distract from the crackled stone that covered her face. She could feel the lords’ eyes on her, and she ducked her head under the weight of their stares.

She was seated at the table next to her mother. Here, it was easier to fade into the background, and watch her father’s bannermen.

She saw Ser Davos enter beside a man dressed in a scarlet satin doublet that was crisscrossed with golden chains inlaid with jewels. Shireen wished she could sit beside them instead, she would feel warm and safe. Davos would let her hid her face beneath his cloak.

She was surprised to see Maester Pylos enter without Maester Cressen by her side. She was sick with fear. Had it already happened? She should have stayed with him after walking him to his chambers.

“Mother,” she whispered. Selyse turned from her silent contemplation. “Where is Maester Cressen? Should he not be here?”

“He has grown too old and useless,” her mother replied. “Maester Pylos will fulfill his duties from now on.”

Shireen felt like crying. So Maester Cressen had not come to harm, but she could only imagine the old man’s grief when he discovered that he was no longer asked for. *What did a maester do when his lord had no more use for him? They had no children to care for them, no family to return to.*

She did not feel like eating as the banquet dragged on. Every shadow that the torchlight cast over the hall made her jump, as if it knew her thoughts and waited to drag her back to the fire. The chair next to her father sat empty, and Shireen feared that he meant to sit Melisandre beside him.

Perhaps she should have not begged to come to the feast. She had been searching through Dragonstone’s library for the oldest tomes, hoping to find something that spoke of children of the forest, or of the North.

Her skin prickled with heat, and she looked up to see Melisandre striding towards the High Table. The red silk she wore was as bright as the comet that had spit the sky this morning, and it hurt Shireen’s eyes.

There was a crash that silenced the murmuring din of speech, and Shireen craned her head to see Maester Cressen. He had lost his cane and been knocked to the floor. She half-rose to go to him, but her mother caught her arm. Instead, Melisandre had turned and pulled the Maester to his feet.

Melisandre’s voice carried through the hall. “Maester, you ought to take more care.”

Shireen could not hear Cressen’s mumbled response.
“A man your age must look where he steps,” said Melisandre. “The night is dark and full of terrors.”

“Only children fear the dark,” Maester Cressen told her. His voice wavered from the pain.

“Perhaps they know the truth,” said Melisandre, “there are truths in this world, Maester, that are not taught at Oldtown.” She turned to make her way to the High Table, and her eyes met Shireen’s for an instant. It was like looking into an open flame.

Shireen looked to Maester Cressen, and saw the look that befell his face when he spotted Maester Pylos in his place.

“Maester Pylos,” Cressen said in a trembling voice. “You.. you did not wake me.”

Pylos had the grace to blush slightly. “His Grace commanded me to let you rest. He told me you were not needed here.”

Silence swept the hall. Maester Cressen looked about the hall, but the lords turned their heads.

“You are too ill and too confused to be of use to me, old man.” Her father did not speak gently. “Pylos will counsel me henceforth. Already he works with the ravens, since you can no longer climb to the rookery. I will not have you kill yourself in my service.”

Maester Cressen blinked. Shireen remembered how he used to tell her stories of her father when he was young, how he had been so sad and sullen, yet Maester Cressen had loved him despite it. She wondered if Maester Cressen saw that boy sitting before him now.

“As you command, my lord, but… I am hungry. Might I have a place at your table?”

And Shireen did cry then with a soft gasp, tears dripping down her cheeks. It was too much to bear, to hear him beg.

Ser Davos rose before Cressen’s words could hang unanswered in the dismal air. “I should be honored if the maester would sit here beside me, Your Grace.”

“As you will,” said Stannis. He did not look at Maester Cressen, only turned to speak to Melisandre who had taken the seat beside him.

Shireen watched Maester Cressen sit stiffly beside Ser Davos. Ser Davos bent to speak to the maester, but Cressen was not looking at him. His eyes stayed on Stannis at the High Table.

“Let me take Maester Cressen to bed,” Shireen begged her father. “He must be in pain from his fall.”

Her father’s mouth was grim. “Maester Cressen says he is hungry. He will sup at my table, and then return to his chambers.”

“Lord Stannis.” Her father’s name burst from Maester Cressen’s lips as if he could not contain himself.

Her father turned, but it was her mother who answered. “King Stannis. You forget yourself, Maester.”

“He is old, his mind wanders,” said Stannis gruffly. “What is it, Cressen? Speak your mind.”

“As you intend to sail, it is vital that you attempt to make common cause with allies. Lord Stark,
and Lady Arryn…"

“I make common cause with no one,” Stannis said. His hands had wrapped themselves into fists.

“No more than the light makes common cause with darkness,” said her mother. Selyse reached out and placed her hand on top of her father’s fist.

“The Starks have sworn themselves to a usurper, the Lannisters have stolen my throne, and my own sweet brother has stolen the swords and service and strongholds that are mine by rights. They are all my enemies.”

Cressen slid his hands inside his sleeves for warmth. He looked so fragile in the light from the torches. “You are the rightful heir to your brother Robert, the true Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First men. But even so, you cannot hope to triumph without allies.”

“He has an ally,” said her mother. “R’hllor, the Lord of Light, the Heart of Fire, the God of Flame and Shadow.”

“Gods make uncertain allies at best,” the old man insisted, “and that one has no power here.”

_Poor maester. How can you be so right and so wrong at once?_

“You think not?” Melisandre’s voice was as soft and deadly as a serpent. “You speak a fool’s words, perhaps you ought to replace your chain with motley.”

“Yes,” agreed her mother. “Fetch the old man a fool’s hat and mayhaps he will dance better than he speaks.

“No,” Shireen cried, but her voice came out very small. “Please don’t.”

Her father’s eyes were shadowed beneath his heavy brow, his mouth tight as his jaw worked silently. “As my lady wife commands.”

Melisandre stepped from behind the high table, and fetched a wooden bucket that the servants had left behind. She placed it on Maester Cressen’s head as the hall jeered their approval. The bucket tipped forward, catching on Maester Cressen’s ears, but covering his eyes. He bowed his head.

“Perhaps he could sing his counsel for us, henceforth,” said Selyse.

“You go too far.” Shireen thought she heard the slightest bit of remorse in her father’s voice, but it did not matter to her, he had already let it happen. “He is an old man and he’s served me well.”

“Mayhaps I have been a fool,” Maester Cressen said, in a voice of such sorrow. He stood with a cup of wine in his hand. “Lady Melisandre, will you share a cup of wine with me? A cup in honor of your god, your Lord of Light? A cup to toast his power?”

Shireen did not understand as Melisandre smiled and met the Maester beneath the High Table. She did not understand as she watched Melisandre place her hand over the cup, and whisper to Maester Cressen. He shook his head and offered the wine again to her.

She took the cup and held it to her lips. “As you wish.” She drank long and deep, the eyes of the hall, watching. When she had finished, she tilted the cup back towards Maester Cressen.

Shireen saw his hand shake as went to accept the cup, knew that something terrible and deadly was
coming. The wine dripped from the corners of his mouth and he dropped the cup. It shattered on the floor.

“He does have power here, my lord.” The ruby at Melisandre’s throat shone so brightly, Shireen could not help but look. “And fire cleanses.”

Maester Cressen tried to reply, but he was choking and coughing. Shireen began screaming.

There was a terrible, thin whistling as Maester Cressen tried to suck in air. He sank to his knees, his face a deep purple.

Shireen covered her face, and stumbled backwards into the wall. She crouched there, sobbing, as the strangled gasping slowed and slowed until it stopped.

She screamed to fill the silence, and choked as fire and ash rushed in to clog her throat. The flames were licking at her feet, and Melisandre’s ruby was glowing, blood and fire.

“Hush!” Her mother’s voice cracked like a whip. Selyse seized her, and yanked her to her feet. “Stop it.” She pressed Shireen’s face into her stomach with a hard hand against the back of her head.

Shireen fought to push her mother away, and ran down the back of the hall, far from where Maester Cressen lay silent on the floor. She had almost reached the door, when she was caught and held close.

“There, there, child,” Ser Davos murmured. He wrapped his green wool cloak around her and picked her up. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and sobbed into his shoulder.

Distantly, Shireen could hear talking and murmuring, but pressed closer to Ser Davos to block out the noise.

“... Princess back to her rooms.”

And then Ser Davos was walking, taking her away from her mother, her father, the terrible red woman, all the men who had laughed, and poor Maester Cressen lying on the floor. He carried her to her bedchamber, and sat her on the side of her bed, and wiped away the tears on her cheeks.

Shireen shivered miserably.

“I can ask the maid the light a fire, Princess.” Ser Davos made to stand.

“No!” burst out Shireen. He stopped. “Only... only a candle.”

“Yes, my lady.”

She watched as Ser Davos lit a single candle on her table. Carefully, he picked up the books she had been reading and moved them away from the flame. She pulled his cloak tighter around her.

He sat next to her on the bed, rubbing his left hand. “I’ve not had the pleasure of hearing one of your stories since I’ve been gone,” he told her gently. “Perhaps you’d like to tell me one. Oh... one about merwives and such under the sea.”

It was said that Elenei loved her Storm King so much that she sheltered him in her embrace from the storm the gods wrought. Seven times the gods sent their storms, and seven times Elenei withstood their rage and Durran built their walls higher and higher as a testament to their love.
How it must have felt to slip her scales and curl her toes into the cool sand? To run far from her parents wrath while the wind and sea battered the castle that Durran raised to protect them.

Shireen thought perhaps a touch of the sea still lived her blood. Mayhaps it had been the souls of mermaids who gathered her up in their arms when the heat of the fire had grown too terrible to bear. Shireen closed her eyes. She rubbed her feet together, and imagined them growing together making a beautiful, silvery tail that would take her far, far away from here.

Did Elenei let her children dip their toes in the sea? Did she put pearls around their neck and seaweed in their hair? Did she ever wonder what it would be like to take them to her kingdom under the waves?

Shireen curled her toes. Nothing.

Under the sea, the birds have scales for feathers

I know, I know, oh, oh, oh

It’s always summer under the sea

The merwives wear nennymoans in their hair and weave gowns of silver

I know, I know, oh, oh, oh

“Ser Davos,” Shireen whispered. Her voice was rough and raw. “If I told you a story. A terrible story. Would you believe me?”

He smiled at her, fondly, but troubled. “Aye my lady. I’ve seen many strange things in my time. I would believe most things. What is it you wish to tell me?”

“It’s a long story,” Shireen told him. Tears trickled down her cheeks. “About Kings and queens and princesses and… and monsters… and ice. And fire. How both burn.”

“Tell me,” said Ser Davos, gently.

Shireen imagined that she was looking up through the waves, slanted with sunshine. Each word was a bubble, that slipped past her lips and rose towards surface. And she let them go.

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She heard a crack the sound of shattering stone. The platform of wood and brush and grass began to shift and collapse in upon itself. Bits of burning wood slid down at her, and she was showered with ash and cinders. Something else came crashing down, bouncing and rolling to land at her feet; a chunk of curved rock, pale and veined with gold, broken and smoking. The roaring filled the world, and yet dimly through the firefall she heard shrieks and cries of wonder.

Only death can pay for life.

And there came a second crack, loud and sharp as thunder, and the smoke stirred and whirled around her and the pyre shifted, the logs exploding as the fire touched their secret hearts. She heard the screams of frightened horses, and the voices of the Dothraki people raised in shouts of fear and terror. Ser Jorah was calling her name and cursing. No, she wanted to shout to him. No, my good knight, do not fear for me. The fire is mine. I am Daenerys Stormborn, daughter of dragons, bride of dragons, mother of dragons, don’t you see? Don’t you see? With a belch of flame and smoke that reached thirty feet into the sky, the pyre collapsed and came down around her.
Unafraid, she stepped forward into the firestorm, calling to her children.

The third crack was as loud and sharp as the breaking of the world.

When the fire died at last and the ground became cool enough to walk upon, Ser Jorah found her amidst the ashes, surrounded by blackened logs and bits of glowing ember and the burnt bones of man and woman and stallion. She was naked, covered in soot, her clothes turned to ash, all her beautiful hair crisped away… yet she was unhurt.

The cream-and-gold dragon was suckling at her left breast, the green-and-bronze at the right. Her arms cradled them close. The black-and-scarlet beast was draped across her shoulders, its long sinuous neck coiled under her chin. When it saw Jorah, it raised its head and looked at him with eyes as red as coals.

Wordless, the knight fell to his knees. The men of her khas came up behind him. Jhogo was the first to lay his arakh at her feet. “Blood of my blood,” he murmured, pushing his face to the smoking earth. “Blood of my blood,” she heard Aggo echo. “Blood of my blood,” Rakharo shouted.

And after them came her handmaids, and then the others, all the Dothraki, men and women and children, and she had only to look at their eyes to know that they were hers now, today and tomorrow and forever, hers as they had never been Drogo’s.

As she rose to her feet, her black hissed, pale smoke venting from its mouth and nostrils. The other two pulled away from her breasts and added their voices to the call, translucent wings unfolding and stirring the air.

For the first time in hundreds of years, the night came alive with the music of dragons.

Chapter End Notes

Shireen is 1000% amazing and I’ve been absolutely dying to make this reveal! So with that, the official stats are:

The Mother: Sansa
The Stranger: Arya
The Father: Jon
The Warrior: Brienne
The Smith: Tyrion
The Crone: Sam
The Maiden: Shireen

All of them have multiple traits of the Seven, but for the purposes of this format, this is who I envisioned them representing.

Also Daenerys’ part is pulled straight from the end of A Game of Thrones. Since her story’s not changing yet, she’s a bit of a barometer for the original timeline.

Another note, I’m changing the title of this book to “As High as Honor.” The next book will be titled “Ours is the Fury.” Lots of Shireen, and Margaery too next book! The series will still be under the title By Her Hand. You can subscribe to the series to be alerted when the first chapter of the next book is posted. I’ll also post an update on
this book to let everyone know.

Thank you all again!

Lots of love,

CalistaBista
The first chapter of *Ours is the Fury* has been posted!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!