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**Home**

by **RollTodd**

**Summary**

With the threat of the Dead looming over the realm, Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen travel northward to fight for their home, their people, and each other. This story begins after Episode 7 of Season 7 and explores the possibilities for Season 8. It takes place in the world of the show, but contains descriptive and historical elements from the books as well. Told from multiple characters' perspectives but focusing on Jon and Daenerys.

If you're looking for a different take on Season 8, you may enjoy this!
Daenerys I

Chapter Notes

Hello there!

So the first chapter is something I wrote after the Season 7 finale in August 2017. After receiving some positive feedback, I figured "why not?" and kept writing. Do keep in mind that this is the first story I've ever written, so that might show (especially in earlier chapters).

Anyway, this is essentially my take on Season 8 in story form. It is told from multiple perspectives (some ongoing, others appear only once) and follows and builds on the events/plot of the show but contains elements of lore and history the books. There characters themselves are also slight mixes of their respective book and show selves - the most glaring example being Daenerys.

Enjoy!

Daenerys stared into the darkness before her. The small covered brazier they had kept burning at night had gone out hours ago, as had the candles affixed to the walls. The ship's cabin was lit only by the pale moonlight that streamed through the opaque glass windows. Its ghostly glow felt as a cold as the night air around her. Dany wondered about the hour and willed the dawn to come, willed the sun's rays to burn away the eerie white light before her, but even a queen did not have such power. Trying to make herself more comfortable, she pulled the furs higher over her and moved closer to Jon. He slept silently beside her, scarred chest rising and falling slowly. He had warmed her bed these past eight nights. Dany hoped that would continue when they made port. She had seen the looks from Tyrion, Jorah, and others, but she did not care. The hours spent lying in Jon's arms were pleasant, almost as pleasant as their other activities in the cabin. Almost.

She had known other men, of course. Drogo had been her first, when her brother had sold her to the Dothraki horse lord in exchange for the promise of an army. To call her first months with him enjoyable would have been a lie. The Khal had approached lovemaking with the same violent enthusiasm as he did riding and killing. Daenerys had been just another conquest. There was little pleasure in it for her. She still remembered the fear of being taken by Drogo and the pains when mounting her silver mare to ride alongside Ser Jorah the following mornings. It had gotten better over time. She learned to ride her horse as well as her husband and, in time, she had learned to love him as well.

Daario Naharis, the sellsword captain whom she had taken as a lover in Meereen, was more passionate than Drogo. With the Khal it was ride or be ridden. With Daario, every night was an adventure. His roguish charm and experience in bed had kept her pleased. He had shown her things that were better suited to the brothels below Meereen's Great Pyramid than the Queen's bedchambers. Still, something had always seemed wrong. Where Drogo had sought to take his pleasure, Daario was too eager to surrender his needs for hers. Their lovemaking was never between equals. It had always felt off.

Jon Snow was different. The first time he had come to her cabin at night, they had made love with a slow but desperate passion that made her nights with Daario feel empty. Thereafter, when he
called at her door after supper or later in the evening, she had given herself to his touch. He had kissed her on her lips, her neck, and between her thighs. He was a man of few words, but his tongue had made her shudder with pleasure as he tasted her womanhood. Where she had once been focused with her lovers' bodies, Daenerys now found herself lost in Jon Snow's dark grey eyes. *Love comes in at the eyes.* Still, there was something more she felt when she was with him, something even greater than that perfect fullness she felt with him inside her. The words escaped her. *Does this feeling even have a word for it?* She just felt right.

During their first few nights together, Dany had surrendered to Jon's kisses and caresses. It felt good to have him on top of her; to have someone else take charge, to make decisions, to lead. Yet last night had been different. The evening began as a regular affair. They had taken their supper with Ser Davos, Tyrion, and other attendants and advisors in the large cabin adjacent to the captain's quarters. The discussion ranged from production of arms to transporting the necessary winter provisions for the southern armies making their ways north. Both she and Jon had remained cordial, but a knowing glance from Tyrion let the Queen know her façade was a farce.

Perhaps it was the supper's accompanying strong Dornish wine that had so emboldened Dany. Perhaps it was simply a Queen's confidence. It made no matter. When the pair had retired to the Queen's quarters and latched the door behind them, Daenerys took control. Their usually slow and loving ritual of undress was replaced with a frantic pace. She had stripped Jon of his garments, pushed him against the soft tapestry that adorned the cabin's wall, and kissed him with a fiery passion. When Jon had tried to move to the bed she had pushed him back. Last night, he was hers.

Jon seemed to melt in response to her touch. Dany felt his muscles tense and breath quicken as she pressed herself against him, kissing his neck, then the curved scar over his heart, then the deep scars on his abdomen. She made her way down between his legs and slowly looked up into his dark grey eyes, giving him a devious smile before taking him in her mouth. Jon gasped in surprise and let out a slow moan of pleasure.

She had learned the proper techniques with Drogo and Daario, but seemed to perfect them here. Jon lost his composure as Dany pleasured him. She watched with satisfaction as his knees began to buckle and he started frantically thrusting and breathing raggedly. His moans grew louder and she quickened the pace. Then, suddenly, she pulled away and rose from her position between his legs. Jon had exhaled quickly, visibly frustrated by the interruption, but Dany did not let it last. She pulled him away from the wall, pushed him onto the furs of the bed, and mounted him. The rest was a blur. Dany lost herself in his eyes as she climaxed and felt Jon's release inside her.

Afterwards, they lay in each other's arms, enjoying a moment of blissful silence while listening to the creaking timbers of the ship and the faint footsteps of the crew on the deck above. The burning candles cast them in a soft, warm light. Dany rested her head on his chest, her undone silver hair falling across his bare skin and her fingers tracing small circles on his breast. Soon enough, felt his breathing slow. *I must have tired him out.* She smiled softly as she turned over and tried to get some rest herself.

Only sleep did not come. She remained next to Jon, watching the pale moonlight break through the clouds outside and begin to cast soft shadows across the cabin. The silence from the decks above told her most of the crew had gone to bed as well. *It must be later than I thought.* Sleep had not come easy since her venture beyond The Wall. In truth, it had not come easy to her for years. Dark rooms in foreign lands had brought a loneliness that never seemed to leave her side, even with Drogo or Daario sharing her bed. She often found herself staring into the night, just as she was doing now, thinking of somewhere else. Thinking of home.

Daenerys had never known any one place as home. Not truly. As children, she and Viserys had
lived in Braavos in a house with a red door. When the servants had stolen their remaining gold, they had wandered the Free Cities and stayed as guests of princes and magisters. Magister Illyrio had hosted them in Pentos for a time, before her marriage to Drogo. She had accepted her fate and even learned to enjoy the open sky and vast plains of the Dothraki Sea, but she lacked the copper skin and dark hair of her adopted people. She would never be a true Khaleesi in the eyes of the Khalassar. She had been a foreigner among the Dothraki, a foreigner in Qarth, and a foreigner in Meereen. She was of Westeros and would always be foreign to the people she ruled as Queen. Some small part of her hoped arriving at Dragonstone would fill that longing at last, but she had been wrong even then. Tearing down the Baratheon banners and replacing them with the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen had not suddenly made her feel at home. If home wasn't a place, what was it? Her Targaryen ancestors may have built the fortress, but the Targaryens were gone. Her family was gone. Or will be, once I am no more.

Dany knew she was barren. Her nights spent with Daario had proven that to be true. The Lhazareen witch's curse had stripped her family of a future. The dragons are my children. That's what she always told herself. She loved them dearly. She had hatched them, fed them, and watched them grow, but they were not of her body. The son she might have had with Drogo was stolen from her. What would he look like now? Sometimes, on sleepless nights like these, Dany would think about her family, not the mother or older brother she had never known, but of the husband and children she could never have. Laying there, Dany watched as the streams of pale moonlight and long shadows of the cabin seemed to dissolve around her. The darkness was gone. The ship was gone. Warm sunlight filled the room.

And then she saw herself standing in the middle of a large room with small but ornate columns wrapped in intricately wrought metal vines. One on side, she glimpsed a large window of colored glass through which sunlight shone in a variety of bright hues. Across from the window she saw a heavy oak door painted in a deep red. She did not recognize the setting, but it felt familiar. Dany looked at the women before her, recognizing herself not as she was but as she would never be. She wore a stunning gown of deep violet that brushed the white marble floors. In her arms she held an infant boy. He looked up at his mother with bright amethyst eyes. My son?

She watched as she rocked the babe to sleep while softly humming a sweet tune. Her son's eyes began to close slowly, soothed by his mother's music, but opened again in shock as a playful shriek echoed through the room. She watched herself turn to the door as a young girl ran into the room, laughing and running from some unseen pursuer. She was barefoot and garbed in a simple black dress that matched her jet-black hair. She clutched at the ends of her mother's gown, demanding attention or perhaps an ally to defend her in the chase at hand. Her mother laughed softly. Dany laughed too. The vision seemed to shimmer before her as the girl turned and looked at Daenerys. She had dark grey eyes. Jon's eyes. Daenerys blinked and looked back, but the vision had disappeared before her, leaving her back in the darkness of the ship's cabin.

No. It was a fantasy. A lie. They are the children I can never have. She had told Jon as much, yet here he was, sleeping beside her. Does he truly understand? It was strange. That lingering loneliness she had always felt was not present in this cabin. She looked at him, an odd tightness seizing her chest. Her throat felt dry and her hands weak. What had she just seen? Those grey eyes... Those were his eyes. Her mind raced. Here, beside him, could this be home? She felt vulnerable around him as she had around no one else. No. It was something different. Something more, like that feeling she had when staring at herself in that vision just now. Here she lay, naked in body and spirit, but she felt no fear. She felt comfortable. She felt safe. She felt loved.

Thinking about this won't help you sleep. Dany swept the thoughts from her mind, turned on her side, and closed her eyes. It did not do any good. Taking care not to disturb Jon, Dany rose from the bed and walked to the small table near the window. A glass of wine will set me right. She
poured herself a generous measure from the flagon, the Arbor wine glowed a pale shade of gold in the winter moonlight. Taking a sip, she looked out the window, hoping for the dawn. She opened the closest pane slightly. The sky remained black, but the air outside smelled clean. Fresh air might help too. She set her silver cup down for a moment and dressed herself one of the thin silken nightdresses she had brought from the east. Lovely, but not suitable for a Westerosi winter. She looked around for one of her woolen winter dresses, but her eyes stopped Jon's thick fur cape, emblazoned with the direwolf of House Stark. She picked it up and wrapped it around herself. It was heavier than she expected. This will do. No one will be awake to see me anyway. The fur smelled of earth and pinewood. It smelled like him.

She carefully unlatched the door and, wine in hand, made her way through the narrow halls to the top deck of the ship. She and Jon enjoyed spending time on ship's bow, looking out over the prow. That's where she went. One of her Unsullied stood sentry by the stairs, illuminated by a lantern shining dimly beside him. Ever vigilant, he looked up at the sound of her soft footsteps. He gave a curt bow and stepped aside for his Queen. The upper deck was empty. She inhaled deeply, enjoying the smell of the sea and the cold evening air.

"Beautiful night," a voice proclaimed behind her. She turned and saw Tyrion lowering himself from the crate where he had sat with a wineskin clutched in his left hand. She had neither seen nor heard him on her way up. The subtle light from the lantern by the stairs cast her Hand in shadow. "I see you've adopted the northern garb." She could not see his smirk but knew it was there. Perhaps it was not proper for the Queen to walk about the ship dressed as she was, but it was late and the cloak kept her warm. And keeps him close.

"Better winter furs than a wineskin to keep me warm" Dany retorted, annoyed. She enjoyed sparring wits with Tyrion under the right circumstances. Right now was not among them. She had come up here to find some peace of mind.

"I would have thought Jon provided enough warmth without need of his cloak." Tyrion stepped out of the shadows and looked up at her. His left eye drifted slightly and he hiccupped between breathes. Drunk again. Daenerys swallowed her rising temper. She had tried to limit the man's proclivity for wine, but he always seemed to find a way.

"I couldn't sleep," she responded in a muted tone, looking off to the side.

"Nor me," Tyrion said, "it would seem that sailing to the edge of the world to battle an army of dead men troubles the mind with thoughts so dark even a Dornish sour cannot dispel them." He raised his wineskin in a sort of mock salute before drinking deeply. Playing along, Dany raised her silver cup and took a sip as well. "Still, here we are. Three armies. Four if you count my sister's, two dragons, a fleet of ships, and a 700-foot-high wall of ice to hide behind. I like our chances."

Dany starred at him. She understood. Even after seeing the wight uncaged in the capital, Tyrion was reluctant to abandon the south to his sister. He did not trust her. Truth be told, she did not either. Yet, with Tyrion's counsel, the Lannister queen had pledged herself and her men to the task at hand. Dany had seen what was out there and had flown beyond The Wall, rescued Jon and Jorah, and watched her child sink beneath the ice. She had seen the true threat. She had sacrificed Viserion for her kingdom, for her people, for him. Sacrifice. Isn't that what a queen needs to do?

As if reading her thoughts, Tyrion stated "you love him, don't you."

Did she? She sighed softly, looking up at the moon. They had discussed this before, in the council chambers at Dragonstone. She had thought Jon harbored no feelings for her when he had wished her good fortune before leaving for the North; but, when he had grasped her hand on their way south, she knew. She could not say when she had first felt something for him. In that cave? When
he announced his intentions to go beyond The Wall? When he left? She was not sure of the exact moment, only that when the raven had arrived begging for aid she had stormed off to find Drogon before she had even finished reading the scroll. He needed help and she needed to help him. *Is that what love is?*

Of course, by now her association with Jon was obvious. He had spent near every night in her bed. And here she was, wrapped in his cloak. She looked as Tyrion, her amethyst eyes meeting his mismatched pair. "I…" The words escaped her. "I don't know," she responded meekly. She was a queen, her queen, yet at the moment she felt like a shy child.

Tyrion took a long pull from the skin and looked at her. "He's a good man. Brave, smart… handsome," the shadow of a grin crossed his face, "a fine match for the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms." *Was it the wine speaking or her Hand?* It would be a lie to say the thought had not crossed her mind. *Had she not intended to make a marriage alliance when she sailed for Westeros? What better way to unite the North and South? What better way to keep him safe and by her side? "And he loves you." Dany nodded. Silence loomed over the pair for a moment before Tyrion spoke again, the grin sliding from his face, "still… it's dangerous." The words almost sounded like a threat.

"What is?" Dany asked. *What is he talking about now?*

"Love." The man stated darkly. Their eyes met again. *Speak your mind Tyrion. I won't play these games with you, not now. "One way or another, it ends in disappointment. Death or desertion or betrayal."* He lifted the wineskin to his lips and took another drink, wringing the soft leather pouch in order to squeeze every last drop of sour red. *Enough.* Swift as a dragon in flight, Dany stepped forward and ripped the empty wineskin from Tyrion's hands and threw it aside. He looked at her, his face contorted in a mix of shock and confusion.

"I know," she said, feeling a fire rising in her chest once again. "I burned Drogo's body. I lost my first child. I saw Viserion slain beyond The Wall. I know what it feels like. I know the risks." *What was it? What does he know of love? Why should he care who shares my bed?*

"Do you?" The words came softly, cautiously. "You love him. An imbecile could see as much. And you two are more alike than you care to admit. It makes sense. It does. But…" he let the word linger in the cold night air, "if the day should come when you have to choose between your king and your kingdom, what will you do?"

"I am the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. I will fight to protect those kingdoms and the people in them. *All of them.*" She proclaimed. The words rang hollow in her ears and, seeing the look on Tyrion's face, she could tell he was not swayed either. Her Hand was a clever man and challenged her in almost every conversation. *How did it always come to this?*

"You already made that choice once. You took three dragons north to aid Jon and returned with two." Tyrion had not spoken of Viserion's death, not to her at least. The wine had emboldened him.

"You should get some rest, Tyrion. We'll need you with a clear head in the coming days," her response was curt and formal as she turned away from him.

"Your Grace" he bowed slowly, retrieved the wineskin, and waddled away toward his cabin. She exhaled slowly as she heard his footsteps fade. She could see her breath in the air. A chill wind had picked up, coming in from the north, making the night air colder than Dany would have liked. She wrapped herself ever more tightly in Jon's cloak and looked out over the sea, resolved to stand sentry for the dawn. Yet the winds would not abate and the sun would not rise for hours to come. The days were too short now. As she thought of Jon and her warm bed below deck, her resolve
faltered. *There will be other sunrises to watch.*

Dany made her way down the steps and through the dimly lit corridors of the ship, her fingers brushing the dark wood of the hull beside her for guidance. She reached the entrance to her quarters, undid the latch, and stepped over the threshold, softly closing the door behind her. Her eyes adjusted quickly to the lack of light in the room. Jon had not moved. She smiled softly at the sight while taking off his cloak and draping it over a chair. Taking care to make no noise, Dany slipped out of her silken dress and slipped into bed beside her lover. Thoughts swirled in her head. The half-dream of a family. Her conversation with Tyrion. What awaited them in the North…

As her thoughts drifted, she felt herself grow warm. A soft and subtle tingling sensation that delightfully crept from her fingers up her arms to her heart. Her eyes grew heavy and she yawned. The pale colors of the cabin began to fade before her as she reached out and softly grasped Jon's hand, giving it a weak squeeze. Her breathing slowed, chest rising slowly in tandem with Jon's. She glimpsed him through half shut eyes, and for that brief moment before sleep at last overtook her, Daenerys Targaryen was home.
Chapter Summary

Tyrion tests a theory and drinks some wine.

Chapter Notes

A few notes before we begin.

I have posted this story elsewhere before joining this website. The chapter below brings us up to speed and I am currently working on the third bit. All further updates will be near simultaneous.

Thank you all for the kind words and reviews. I haven’t really done this fan-fiction thing before so any and all feedback is helpful.

Someone asked what Dany’s vision of her family was in Chapter I. In my head, it was similar to that vision Arwen has of her son by Aragorn. Hopefully that came across in the writing.

Dany’s chapter was more a reflection on and exploration of her character. I’ve decided to make this into an ongoing project so the chapter posted below will feature the beginnings of a plot.

Finally, a note on Tyrion Lannister, who’s POV I will explore below. The Tyrion of the show has suffered in recent seasons because our man George has not provided book-based dialogue. I have tried to stay true to the character’s essence. What does that mean? Well, “Tyrion is Tywin’s son”, to an extent. He is clever and cynical and politically savvy. His military planning skills, however, are lackluster; but then again so were his father’s. Tywin sat out Robert’s Rebellion and got his ass handed to him by Robb Stark. I think Tyrion military failures this season reflect his weaknesses, but also show a chance for character development. The Tyrion you will read of below reflects these observations. He is a mix of the book and show.

The days passed slowly on the journey north. There was not a lot to do on the ship, so Tyrion spent his time drinking, thinking, and reading. His thoughts were endless, but his wine stores were running low. Luckily, he had brought plenty of books to balance out the other two. Information would be important in the war to come. Understanding that fact, he had plundered the library at Dragonstone before they set sail for White Harbor. He laughed to himself as he recalled the scene and saw it in his mind’s eye. There he stood, a dwarf with lantern in hand, wiping away the cobwebs from a thousand dusty tomes. It had taken him hours to find the right books. Swift Spear, the Unsullied he had asked to help him in the task, had stood by silently as Tyrion piled books into his arms.
He had unceremoniously dumped them on desk tucked away in the corner of his cabin. It was a shame really. The small table was made from the rich mahogany of the Summer Isles. The sides were delicately carved and depicted scenes of natural splendor. Rainbows and waterfalls and naked women… I won’t be seeing any of that in the North. The desk’s top had carvings as well, but it was covered in the books and scrolls he had taken from Dragonstone. He squinted, trying to read the printed names on the spines in the dim candlelight. Watchers on the Wall: A History of the Night’s Watch, he read on one book’s spine. A tedious title and truly massive tome, it was no doubt the work of some long dead arch-maester. It would seem the man dedicated an entire page to every Lord Commander. Atop the text, Tyrion had placed other works in various states of disrepair: Tales of the Long Night, Myths and Legends of the North and, of course, The Wines of Westeros.

Will any of these help? Will I? The Hand of the Queen had his doubts. Tyrion knew the Seven Kingdoms. He could predict the actions of the Great Lords and draw an enemy into a trap, as he did to Stannis and Ser Davos upon the Blackwater Rush some years ago. He could negotiate alliances and seal them with marriage. But Beyond the Wall? How do you rout an army that knows no fear? How do you reason with ice demons and dead men? Before, he had counseled Daenerys against embodying her family’s words, yet now they seemed entirely appropriate. How do you fight the cold? With fire. Fire and Blood. If the dead even bleed, that is. No. Daenerys had already flown her dragons north and lost one. An aggressive approach would not work. I suppose it’s time to find out what will.

The queen had requested a council meeting that evening, after supper and sundown. Tyrion rose from his seat and made his way out of his quarters and down toward the captain’s auxiliary chambers where they held their meetings. He was first to arrive and took his time exploring the finer details of the chamber. The room was spacious as ships’ cabins go. A large oak table occupied the center space with three simple chairs on either side and an ornate chair at the head, facing the aft windows and moonlit sea beyond. The walls were covered in maps of various regions of the world and star charts to aid in navigation. Tyrion noted the exposed wood between a detailed map of The Bite and another of the lower reaches of The Mander. The map that should have been there had been taken down and laid before them on the table. Tyrion looked it over. The North is almost as large as I am. He sat back in his chair, examining the faded sheepskin map. His eyes started on the Neck and followed the thin ink of the Kingsroad to Winterfell, then Last Hearth, then to Castle Black and the Wall. Perhaps another piss from the top will drive off the dead, he mused.

Tyrion looked up as the other advisors and counselors entered the room. Ser Jorah was first, looking grim as always and followed by Ser Davos, Varys, and Jon. One by one, the men nodded to Tyrion and took their seats around the table. They sat in silence as multiple pairs of eyes scanned the map laid out before them. No doubt each man was singlehandedly planning the realm’s defense.

Eyes, ears and rears all shot upward as Daenerys entered the room, attended by Missandei. Tyrion watched her gaze meet Jon’s for but an instant before finding her chair and sitting down as well. Her advisors resumed their seats only after she had taken hers. The queen looked at Jon expectantly. He stood, motioning at the edge of the map closest to the windows. “Nineteen castles guard the Wall,” Jon stated. Tyrion noted the subtle blue painted across the sheepskin. “Some have been unmanned for centuries, but between the northern and southern armies we will have enough men to garrison the forts. Ships can bring fresh supplies to Eastwatch or by the Shadow Tower,” he instructed as he pointed to either end of the map.

“They’ll have a hard time making it to Eastwatch,” Davos said. “The northern reaches of the Narrow Sea are treacherous in any season. One winter storm could destroy our fleet and the food it
“Indeed,” interjected Tyrion as he rose to his feet. *Now they’ll surely be intimidated.* “Hunger may defeat us before the dead do. We will not have the supplies at the Wall to feed eight thousand Unsullied, half as many Dothraki, their horses, and the Northmen. If we’re to properly prepare the North for this war, we cannot concentrate our forces around Winterfell when good lands are still available.” All eyes turned to the dwarf. *I may be of little use in battle, but I prepared King’s Landing for a siege. Now I must prepare the realm for one as well.* “We cannot garrison the Wall with all our strength. Should the dead find a way past, our armies could be a hundred leagues away while the enemy marches south on unguarded towns and keeps. We’re not here to defend the North. We’re here to defend its people, everyone one of whom will become a soldier in our enemy’s army should we fail.”


Tyrion acknowledged the knight but addressed Daenerys directly, “the Dothraki should remain encamped at White Harbor. Lord Manderly can adequately supply the riders and the coastal pastures are still clear enough for grazing. They will be well fed and able to ride hard at a raven’s word should we require their aid. We can leave a man behind for translation purposes.”

“I’m sure Wyman Manderly will appreciate a Dothraki *khalasar* camped outside his gates, devouring his people’s winter stores,” Davos noted from his seat across from Tyrion.

“Unless his people intend to eat grass, the impact will be minimal. And his Queen’s *khalasar*, Ser, camped outside his gates so that the dead do not make it inside his gates,” Tyrion retorted. *There is a time for politics and this is not it.* “Meanwhile, the Unsullied will take up residence in the Dreadfort.” His gaze traveled north from the painted port city to the seat of House Bolton.

“The Dreadfort—” Jon began.

“-is Lady Sansa’s by rights. The Bastard of Bolton left no heirs save his widow,” realization dawned on Jon’s face. *Perhaps he had dealt with the heirs to the other houses that betrayed him, but the unspoiled lands of the extinguished Boltons could help save the kingdom they had once betrayed.*

“That much is true,” Varys lent his aid, adding “Ramsay Snow-called-Bolton was the last of his father’s house.” Tyrion nodded in appreciation.

“The Knights of the Vale and some of the Northmen shall remain in Winterfell, while others must march to the Umber lands. When my sweet sister’s armies arrive, they shall garrison Deepwood Motte and Karhold. From White Harbor to the Wolfswood,” Tyrion gestured at the map with a sweeping hand motion, “the North’s keeps will be defended and able to aid one another. Meanwhile,” he paused for effect, “the Warden of the North must ride to each keep and castle, every hovel and holdfast, to rally the spirits of his people.” *A useless gesture, but I must know…*

“That…” Jon seemed lost in the thought that was currently slipping through his lips.

“No,” Daenerys offered a firmer response and looked at Tyrion with an icy stare. *There it is.* “I will not have Jon running through the countryside. We need every man preparing for war. We need Jon in Winterfell.” *We, is it?*

“Every man, woman, and child.” Tyrion challenged his queen. “If the Northern people are to survive then we must have them all as soldiers in this fight. What better way to lift their spirits than a rallying cry from their liege lord, the very man who has fought the dead Beyond the Wall?” It
was a fool’s errand of course. Tyrion knew that when he concocted the plan. But what will he do?

“Aye,” Jon said solemnly as he briefly looked at Daenerys, “Lord Tyrion is right. I can rally the common folk before riding for Winterfell. We’ll need every sword and spear in the war to come.” Jon stared at Daenerys. The queen looked frustrated and shot Tyrion another angry glance. And there it is again.

“You all agree with this plan?” she questioned the room at large. The half-nods and weak murmurs of assent seemed to exacerbate the tensions. “Very well.” She said, clearly not pleased with the situation, “then I leave it to you to see it through.” She turned and exited the room. One by one, the men rose and followed their queen out the door. Tyrion remained standing by his chair, gazing at the faded map as the room emptied. He noticed a lingering figure at the edge of his vision.

“Jon,” Tyrion called as the man stood over the threshold, “a moment?” He turned to face him, his grey eyes concealing his thoughts.

“Of course,” Jon replied.

Tyrion stepped forward and looked up at the man. “Our queen… She listens to you,” Tyrion said. And you listen to me, as we just saw plainly. He left that part unspoken.

“Daenerys listens to reason,” Jon corrected him. “I hate to leave the Wall undermanned, but your strategy is the right course,” he admitted, exhaling slowly as if letting go of a heavy burden.

“I hope so. We must be careful. Cautious. The dragons are our best chance to defeat our foe. We need them alive. We need her alive.” Tyrion let the statement sit, watching the reaction in Jon’s eyes. Inscrutable as always… and yet, Tyrion saw hints of the maelstrom of emotion swirling behind the man’s brooding exterior. Love may make men irrational, but sometimes irrational is precisely what’s required. I remember what it is like, with Stannis at the gates or my father in the city… and Shae in my bed. He won’t want to put her in danger either.

“Aye…” Jon still seemed lost in thought.

“Think on it,” Tyrion advised. Jon met his gaze and nodded before turning and walking left out of the room down a long, cramped corridor. And here I thought his quarters were to the right. Tyrion followed suite a few moments later. The closeness of the ship’s interior may have seemed insufferable to some, but from Tyrion’s perspective it was cavernous. One of the true joys of dwarfhood.

He opened the door to his quarters and found Varys sitting on one of the parlor stools in the corner opposite the bed. The eunuch took a sip from the silver goblet in his hand before putting it down and regarding Tyrion for a moment. “Please, come in,” he said with a smirk. Tyrion walked toward the empty stool next to his companion and grabbed a goblet to match Varys’ own. Staring straight into the man’s eyes, Tyrion poured himself a generous measure from the flagon resting on the small table beside them.

“I wonder why it is I’ve found you here. My quarters are small enough as it is. There are other lodgings available on this ship. Perhaps you could take up Jon’s bed instead? I believe it currently unoccupied.”

“Hmmm….” The man’s ponderous tone had a musical quality to it. “The Lord of Winterfell does seem quite taken with our Queen,” he said softly.

“They’re in love,” Tyrion stated plainly.
“An astute observation, my Lord Hand. Did you reach your conclusion before or after the tenth night he spent in her chambers?” Tyrion ignored the remark, instead taking a long sip from his goblet. The wine was a sweet red, similar to those Tyrion had enjoyed during his time as Hand in King’s Landing. There had been a number of fine barrels he had procured from the Reach before Mace Tyrell had closed the Rose Road during his short-lived support for Renly Baratheon. Afterwards he had made do with what merchants sold off their ships, but he always enjoyed a good red. He sipped the wine again, savoring the taste. This might be my last sweet red for years, with winter come, the Reach ransacked and my sailing North…

“Ninth, I think. But it makes no matter. What they do in her chambers is not my concern,” he replied.

“Nor is it mine, but it should be. She loves him. Her insistence in that meeting proves as much,” Varys tilted his head ever so slightly, regarding Tyrion, “Desire can be dangerous.” Dangerous. Like a crossbow bolt to the heart… or a golden chain round the neck. Tyrion mustered his thoughts and regained his composure.

“I told her as much not two nights ago. I asked her what she would do if forced to choose between her king and her kingdom.” It would have surprised Tyrion if Varys did not know of the midnight conversation between the Queen and her Hand, but he shared the details anyway for the sake of appearances.

“And…?” Varys sat back in the stool as if he was expecting the enormity of the answer to occupy the space between them.

“I was bid a good night.” Tyrion replied flatly.

Varys leaned in again, lowering his voice in a conspiratorial tone. “That does not bode well for us. We are her advisors. We must be the ones to broach these conversations. If she does not trust our advice-

“-She listens to him,” he interrupted, “she trusts him.” It was true. When Ser Jorah had suggested she fly north instead of sail, she had waited for and heeded Jon’s counsel instead. “When we told her of Casterly Rock and the destruction of the transport fleet, she wanted to fly to the Red Keep and burn her ancestors’ fortress to ash just to strike a blow at Cersei. Do you remember?” the question was rhetorical, of course. Varys had stood alongside him when they delivered the news. Tyrion recalled the Queen’s fury and his own surprise at not being fed to Drogon later that afternoon. “It was Jon who counseled patience and restraint.”

“He tempers her more fiery impulses.” Varys nodded in agreement as he sipped from his own cup. Tyrion noticed that his own pace of consumption outmatched the eunuch’s. No matter, he thought as he took another drink.

“And should he be in danger, she’ll have every reason to fly off to save him and no one to argue against her going,” Tyrion finished the spymasters thought as he finished his wine. “You saw that thing in the Dragon Pit. It continued to fight even when chopped in two! And we face 100,000 of them or more. And whatever evil controls them, these ‘White Walkers’ and this Night King, they slew one of her dragons…” Tyrion inhaled deeply as he reached his conclusion, “She risked her dragons for him. She’ll risk her life for him. It’s dangerous, I agree.” Varys looked him over. “I believe in her, I do; but I know the consequences of failure. Renly Baratheon, Robb Stark, Rhaegar Targaryen,” Tywin Lannister he finished the list in his mind, “when you chop of the head the body falls to pieces.” Unless you’re a bloody dead man. “We cannot risk all we’ve work for to save the life of one man, no matter how comely he may be.”
“Make no mistake my friend I agree with you, but what would you have us do? Pull apart two lovers to protect our queen?” he asked, uncertainty creeping into his voice and coloring his tone.

Tyrion laughed, “Pull them apart? I’d have an easier time pulling down the Wall with my hands!” He raised a palm as if to show the absurdity of the statement. “No, dear spider, that would be folly. She loves him. She trusts him. She listens to him. And he listens to us. We’ll push them together. I have a proposal.”

Varys leaned in over the table, his right eyebrow raised high, inviting Tyrion to explain himself. Tyrion leaned in too, a grin spreading across his scarred face. He looked into the eunuch’s eyes as he repeated the words. “A proposal.”
The day dawned cold on The Bite. The blueish-grey waters of the northern bay reflected the dark grey clouds above. Harsh winter winds brought a mix of flurries and freezing rain that made standing on the deck on the ship incredibly unpleasant. Jon watched as a few miserable sailors hacked thin sheets of ice off the ship’s railings or swept half-melted snow into the sea. The sight reminded him of time spent shoveling snow in the yard of Castle Black. He remembered plenty of unpleasant days on the Wall; the driving rains on the hottest days of the early autumn when he first joined or the brutal blizzards of his time as Lord Commander. Well, I’d be hard pressed to find a pleasant one at all. He remained above deck long enough to glimpse the walls of White Harbor in the distance before retreating to the dry warmth below.

Jon took his time on the way down, meandering through the Targaryen flagship. He passed Tyrion’s cabin and was surprised to hear voices coming from inside. The dwarf is never up this early. Their conversation was hushed behind the closed door. Jon was tempted to press his ear and listen, the man’s thoughts were always a curiosity, but he decided against it. Not an honest thing to do. He continued through the ship, nodding to the members of the crew as he passed through the narrow corridors that led to the cabin. Her cabin. He opened the door, careful not to make too much noise, but it made no matter. Daenerys was sitting up in bed, breasts bare and silver hair fanning out behind her. She smiled sleepily as she saw him enter, her eyes warm and welcoming. Gods she is beautiful. These were his favorite times, the stolen moments after dawn or before sleep, where they could be side by side and simply enjoy each other’s company; their conversations light and sweet. The cabin’s wooden walls were thicker than the Wall in those moments, keeping out the wider world and the wars to come.

It all still seemed a dream to Jon. Being proclaimed King in the North. Treating with a Targaryen queen and her dragons. Knocking at her door that one night and all the nights after that. He remembered the feeling as he stood there, throat dry, heart racing, and hands heavy as iron. Love? The word had echoed in his head for weeks, ever since he had first held her hand whilst sailing south after their expedition. It was a strange feeling, yet he recognized it. It was the feeling he had felt when he had lain beside Ygritte; but stronger. Fuller. With her, he had always felt his duty to his brothers in the Night’s Watch weighing down on him like a rain sodden cloak. Now the feeling seemed light and pure. Love is the death of duty. Duty. Honor. Wind and words. He heard old Maester Aemon’s counsel in his head. In the end, he had chosen his vows, honored his promise to the Watch… and his sworn brothers had rewarded his loyalty with betrayal and cold steel.
And I thought those vows died when I did, he mused. He had sworn other oaths almost as soon as he had been freed of his old ones. One to his half-sister Sansa to help her retake Winterfell. Another to the Northern lords, to protect and lead those who had named him their king. And, finally, one to Daenerys Targaryen. What was it he had promised her? My lands? My loyalty? Myself? Is a bastard fit consort for a queen? He had surrendered his title as King in the North for her, yet he could never abandon the title he had worn all his life: bastard. She had never called him that. She had never even said the word. Doubt still gnawed at him. It always had.

“Jon?” she saw him too. Her gaze questioned the silence of the brooding thoughts he did not truly realize he was lost in. She looked at him expectantly, curiously.

“I was on deck not long ago. We’ll make port soon,” he said, “I expect the Manderlys will-”

“-Oh!” a small gasp came from the open doorway. Jon turned to see Missandei of Naath standing just beyond the threshold, a small bowl of oranges in hand. The queen’s handmaiden and close friend often brought the fruit to help stave off the sailor’s sickness. Daenerys seemed to enjoy them for a morning meal as well. Jon looked at her and saw the corner of her mouth curve upward ever so slightly. Of course, she knew what her queen and Jon were doing, but she feigned surprise for appearance’s sake. “Your Grace, I can come back later to help you-”

“No. Stay. I need to prepare for the day ahead,” she said, resuming her royal demeanor. He nodded and left the cabin, walking toward the door, over the threshold, and down the passage outside. As he walked, he thought he heard a faint, girlish laughter from the room he had just left. He passed Lord Varys and Ser Jorah by the foot of the stairs that led outside, talking softly. He could not hear the topic of conversation, but watched Jorah nod in agreement as Varys plied his craft. Jon did not like the spymaster, the man who had served Joffrey when the boy king had killed his lord father. Yet if Daenerys trusted him, Jon did too. The two men nodded as they caught Jon’s eye for but an instant before the Lord of Winterfell arrived on the ship’s top deck. He walked to its bow. The heavy rain from earlier had lightened to a merciful drizzle. Jon heard the gulls call as they circled the ships’ black sails. He looked up and watched the birds navigate the unreliable sea winds. They seemed to hang motionless in the strong gusts, swaying side to side. His eyes followed them as they left the ship and flew back toward White Harbor, closer now and easier to see.

The port city and seat of House Manderly matched with the grey sea and sky. Jon could make out the rows of houses beyond the docks, small structures with white walls and slate grey houses. Further on, he saw the New Castle and Wolf’s Den, a light grey as well, looming over the city. He looked ahead to the harbor’s entrance, a massive stone pillar guarding the mouth of the White Knife. Our fleet won't fit. We’ll ferry men ashore along the coast. Not as easy or quick as unloading at the docks but easy enough. Jon breathed deeply, inhaling the sea air. He could taste the salt.

As they sailed past the walls, Jon saw a group of men waiting on a long stone pier. Behind him, the deck was a flurry of activity as the crew prepared to dock. Within minutes, the dockhands had secured the ship to the pier with thick hempen ropes while the crew set a wide gangplank down on the edge. He turned to see Daenerys emerge from the lower decks, Missandei right behind her on the stairs. The queen wore a grey woolen dress lined in silver furs, the dress was shorter than usual and Jon saw her in leather riding pants and boots as well. It was a different look. More northern. He liked it. Jon nodded at her before walking to the gangplank and carefully making his way down to the pier.

A large group of soldiers stood on the dock to welcome to royal retinue. Jon counted twenty guards, their faces curious yet solemn. Some of their eyes met his, others looked upward in suspicion as they spied the dragon sails and the Dragon Queen. Heavily armed for a welcome
party, he noted. The men wielded tall spears and had swords and daggers at their belts. Some bore round shields engraved with the merman of the Manderlys on their left arms. Others held torches. Torches? In the light rain and daylight? They knelt as Jon stepped onto the firm, rain washed stone pier.

“Your Grace,” a broad-shouldered man rose and stepped forward. He wore a large steel breastplate enameled in the aquamarine and deep sea blue of the Manderlys. The rest of his armor was similarly colored. Jon noted with some amazement the craftsmanship of his pauldrons, both fashioned as cresting waves. Jon saw the longsword at his side, its pommel shining with an inlaid sapphire. White Harbor had always been wealthier than the rest of the North, made rich by trade. The man’s face had the same sharp features as his armor. Short-cropped white hair sat atop a weathered face with a strong jawline. Jon’s dark grey eyes met the captain’s smoky grey ones. Gods, is anything in this city not grey? Dark circles ringed his eyes, lessening the impact of his armor. He seemed weakened, almost fearful. “We received your message from Dragonstone. It’s good you’ve come. I am Ser Riles Amber, Captain of the Guards here in White Harbor. Lord Wyman sends his regards and regrets; he’s busy preparing for the march north. We thought there’d be more time.”

“More time?” Jon asked, not quite sure what the captain meant.

“He doesn’t know…” whispered one of the guardsmen, his voice ripe with fear.

“Your Grace…” his voice shaking, Ser Riles slowly reached into a pocket a produced a raven scroll. Jon saw the broken seal of dark grey wax. “A raven arrived from Winterfell two days ago.” He took the parchment from the captain’s hands and slowly unraveled the message. His eyes scanned Maester Wolkán’s elegant script for but a moment. No.

His hands felt cold. Fingers numb. He dropped the parchment, watching as it drifting slowly into a puddle on the ground beneath him, unfurling and expanding in the icy rainwater. Fear’s vicelike grip took him then. True fear. A feeling Jon had rarely known. A slow wave of terror washed over him. His thoughts raced, a frenzied scurry from one panic to the next, completely out of sync with the rapid beat of his heart. He breathed then. Just once. Deeply. Slowly. He steeled himself and focused on what he had just read. The Wall.

It seemed impossible. Jon had fought the dead Beyond the Wall, but only beyond it. The Wall was safe and strong. An impenetrable barrier of ice and stone and magic. A shield guarding the realms of men. A shattered shield. He felt exposed and looked around as if expecting to see the white mists of the dead creeping over the walls of the harbor.

He looked back and up the gangplank. They need to know. She needs to know. He turned to board the ship and saw her standing on the deck by the deck’s edge, Tyrion by her side. He stared at her as she made her way down to the docks, careful but graceful in her steps. She smiled at him softly, but the gesture faltered as she saw the look in his eyes. “What?” she asked, concerned.

“A raven from Winterfell. From Bran. He saw the Night King,” the words came spilling out now, an avalanche he was powerless to stop, “‘Eastwatch, the dead, the Wall.’” Jon saw Daenerys swallow hard. He looked into her eyes, his fear reflected in hers. They stood there for a moment, just looking at each other. Jon focused on her eyes, gaining the clarity of thought he needed. “Ser Riles,” he turned to address the captain, “have your men assist the harbor master in ferrying our men ashore. You will escort the Queen and I to Lord Wyman’s hall. We must have his men and supplies for the march north.”

“I- Yes your Grace,” Ser Riles nodded sharply before turning to his men. “You heard the king! Go! Wylis, run ahead of us to the New Castle. See Lord Wyman is told of His Grace’s orders before we
get there. Rolfe, stay with me and escort His Grace’s party. Apologies to all, we’ll have to walk on foot. My lord has mustered every horse outside the northern gates or at his stables in preparation for his march.” Jon nodded his assent.

They walked quickly through the streets of White Harbor. The cold and rain had driven most people indoors, but Jon saw a few smallfolk peer from inside their shops and houses. They look gaunt and hungry. Ser Riles must have seen it too. “Your sister, Lady Sansa, ordered the Northern lords to send shipments of grain to Winterfell. My Lord of Manderly shipped a good portion of the city’s common stores north along the White Knife. Claimed the sea would provide our winter stores. He’ll be right, of course, but it don’t make it any easier for some o’ the smallfolk here that relied on the grain.” Jon felt a mix of relief and pity, thankful for Sansa’s planning but guilty for its costs.

The party soon made it to the New Castle and were ushered inside the Merman’s Court. Lord Wyman, rotund and white-whiskered, sat low in his chair and greeted them. “Your Grace,” he hailed Jon, “and Your Grace,” his greeting to Daenerys was less welcoming, ice edging into his voice. Wyman Manderly had fought the Rhaegar’s forces on the Trident some twenty years ago. The lord had greeted Jon as a king just as Ser Riles had; he did not know Jon had sworn himself to the woman standing beside him. It would not do the correct the man, not yet, not in his own hall.

“My lord, my thanks for your hospitality. Had we come under better circumstances I would have liked to stay and see more of your city, but we must ride North at once.” Their eyes met, the news from Winterfell unspoken but understood.

“Aye, Ser Riles will see to it that your party has fresh, strong mounts. Pick any horse in the stable save my own. My fleet is yours as well, Your Grace. Any provisions you have brought from the south can be ferried up the river to Winterfell. Far easier than a march on winter roads. My men are yours as well, one hundred mounted knights and some four hundred men-at-arms.”

“We are most grateful for your assistance, my lord,” Daenerys spoke in the commanding tone she had once used with Jon. He remembered for a moment their first meeting in her hall on Dragonstone. Her tone, her demeanor, the way she carried herself, it made him feel strange; attracted to her confidence, but also frightened by it. By the look on Lord Wyman’s face, he only was only experiencing the latter.

“I- of course Your Grace,” he seemed to sink lower in his chair. The Northern lords may have spoken against Daenerys when her demand of fealty arrived some months ago, but none were so bold as to oppose her in person. “White Harbor thanks you for your men and assistance in this war.” She nodded.

The audience broke then, as Wyman shouted commands to his retainers and Jon’s party left for the stables. Exiting the Merman’s Court, they crossed the rain soaked castle yard quickly. Lord Manderly’s stables smelled of mildew and wet hay and horse dung. Jon found himself a suitable mount while Daenerys approached a silver-grey palfrey. Jon watched as she stroked the beast’s side, whispering some word in a foreign tongue. Their eyes met again for a moment before stable hands swarmed their respective mounts, muttering apologies as they saddled and readied the horses for the journey ahead. One stable hand had hurried to Daenerys’ side with a stool to aid her mounting the saddle, but she waved him away and deftly swung herself onto her mount.

With proper mounts, the ride to the city’s northern gates was quick. It all looks a bit smaller on horseback. As they passed through the walls, Jon felt the horse’s trot soften as cobblestone streets turned to rain-softened earth. The small Manderly host was assembling for the march outside the city gates. The knights, men-at-arms, and village levies stood huddled to the right of the road,
staring at the growing mass of Unsullied assembling across from them, disciplined and unmoving even in the chill drizzle and mist.

A terrible screech cut through the din of steel, soldier’s boots, and horse hooves. Jon felt his mount rear in a panic as Drogon and Rhaegal flew overhead. Daenerys’ palfrey panicking as well, but only for an instant. She had the same air of command on a horse as she did in Manderly’s hall. Another whispered word had calmed the beast as Jon was still wrangling with his own mount. The Manderly men abandoned their work and ducked for cover. *I can understand that,* he thought. The ranks of Unsullied had not wavered. Not an inch. A moment later, when the threat had passed and dragons landed nearby, the Northmen looked on in awe, some at the dragons and some at their rider. Whatever their feelings toward the queen, they would not doubt keep them in check after that display.

The preparations took most of the morning, but Jon was surprised at the speed with which the dockhands of White Harbor managed to ferry the Unsullied ashore. By the early afternoon, the column set off along the wet dirt road.

Jon and Daenerys rode at the head of the long column marching north from White Harbor. Behind them marched the Unsullied, eight thousand strong. Their lockstep march impressed Jon. He laughed to himself as he thought what the ancient Stark kings would think if they saw the scene. *Eunuch soldiers in White Harbor and a khalasar riding up the King’s Road.* Behind them rode the Manderly host, their proud merman banners fluttering the wind. Some of the men were not men at all. *Boys clad in mail and leather, but then I was a boy at the Wall. We need every man we have.*

The supplies the fleet had carried from the south had been transferred to the Manderly’s river boats and barges as Lord Wyman had proposed. The crews would make their way up the White Knife and thence to Winterfell, bringing with them the supplies their forces would need for the war to come: grains and salted meats, spears and shields, steel and dragonglass. Sometimes, the road took them alongside the river and Jon could see the boats working their way against the icy current. He silently thanks the gods, old and new, that the White Knife had not yet frozen over.

Jon looked to his left where Daenerys rode. She rode well, even on the poor winter roads. From the way she sat and the way she spurred the horse forward with a touch, Jon knew there were few riders as gifted. *Her time with the Dothraki,* he knew. On a horse, his queen became a *Khaleesi* once again.

Her true mounts flew above the column, Jon imagined that Drogon and Rhaegal would have preferred to range over the vast lands of the North, but with the news of the Wall, Daenerys kept them close. They hunted elk and deer on their own and occasionally found a shepherd’s untended flock. Tyrion had paid the farmers well for their losses.

The specter of fear loomed over them, paranoia shadowing their movements. With the Wall fallen, the North was open to the dead. He looked around, convinced that the enemy was beyond the next ridge. *No. No army can march hundreds of leagues in so short a time.* It was almost a comforting thought. From time to time, Jon felt himself clutch at Longclaw or the blade of dragonglass he had sheathed at his side. Jon looked at the dragons and the men marching behind him, hoping they would be enough.

Tyrion’s plans had fallen to pieces with the Wall. Jon could not be spared to ride through the North nor could they divide their armies to garrison the great keeps. They had to stay together. Tyrion and the other members of Daenerys’ retinue rode behind their queen. At times, he felt the dwarf’s eyes on him. He liked the man, but it made him uncomfortable.

The march continued day after day, through snow and ice and short northern days. At night, they
would stay in small holdfasts or else make camp in open fields. Jon helped pitch the commander’s
tent himself, sweat breaking and freezing on his brow as he labored to drive iron stakes into the
frozen earth. A small white and blue pavilion that they had been given by Lord Wyman’s men, it
was spacious inside but difficult to heat. Eager to warm herself on the cold northern nights,
Daenerys had near buried him in furs when they shared the bed under the tent’s cloth roof.

Though his lover lay beside him, Jon’s dreams were troubled. In them, he stood on the prow of a
small rowboat, a bitter wind freezing the blood on his face. Across a narrow stretch of water stood
the enemy, his eyes blazing with an otherworldly blue hue. Jon watched as his hands rose slowly…and
the dead rose with them. Then, something warm and familiar brushed against him, pushing the
fear from his mind. Daenerys? No. It was miles away, but also here, inside him. Primal and savage
but comforting. It had been months since he last felt the connection. Ghost. Jon smiled in his sleep.

The following morning, they were met with a brief but fierce winter storm that saw the camp and
road covered in a dagger’s length of snow. They traveled far more slowly than Jon would have
liked, the snow breaking up the otherwise orderly march. By the time the northern sun was
hanging low in the western sky, Jon saw a small holdfast not too far ahead. Atop its lone tower he
saw a banner boasting the direwolf of House Stark. This marks Winterfell’s southermmost claims.
Jon had known they were close, not only because the outriders had told him as much but because
the connection to his direwolf felt stronger by the mile. He wondered whether Daenerys felt that
same something with her dragons.

He decided they would make camp around the holdfast’s walls that night. Perhaps they have a
bedchamber for us. Soon enough, Jon and the other riders found themselves before the gates. A
guard looked down from the walls and then shouted something inaudible behind him. Then, old
wooden gates screeched like a wounded horse while Jon, Daenerys, and the others rode through
them. Inside, Jon noted the holdfast’s poor maintenance. Dead brambles and vines covered the
walls, concealing cracked stones. Daenerys looked similarly unimpressed.

The meal they had taken in the small hall beside the tower was as uninspired as the holdfast itself.
They had sat in silence for the most part, wolfing down a hot stew with mutton and vegetables.
Daenerys had retired early, one of the guards showing her to the lord’s chamber they had prepared
especially for the queen. She had stood in the hall’s entranceway for just a moment, long enough to
look back and catch Jon’s eye before continuing to the tower room. Jon met Tyrion’s eyes as the
man shot him a knowing look.

Soon enough, Jon left the hall as well and found the stairs that led to the chambers. He walked up
the stone stairs and saw an open door, a soft light coming from within. He would find his queen
within, warming herself by the fire. At least he thought he would…

As he entered, Jon looked around for a moment confused as to where Daenerys had gone. Then he
saw a small oaken door beside the room’s large hearth. He had not noticed that before. The warm
glow of the fire had cast the doorway in shadow, hiding it from Jon’s view. Jon approached the
doors and gave it a hesitant push with his left hand. Hinges creaked as the door swung inwards. Jon
peered inward just enough to see a narrow spiraling staircase, illuminated by dim torches, leading
upward to the top of the tower. He knew what he would find at the top.

Taking care to watch for uneven steps and other hazards, Jon slowly made his way up the winding
stair. The few torches in the passage flickered feebly, casting the dark stone walls in a soft orange
light. The flames seemed to grow as he passed them, as if drawing strength from his presence and
bidding him welcome to whatever lie at the stair’s end. A moment later Jon found himself in front
of another wooden door, the same dark and heavy oak he had pushed aside in the chamber below.
He extended a hand and did the same here… and in an instant the warm hues of the stairway’s
torches were washed away in a wave of cold white light.

No, not white. Silver. It was all silver. Jon blinked once, twice, trying to clear his vision and regain his night eyes. He glimpsed a full moon shining high above the tower. Dominating a cloudless sky, the moon cast its pale light across the snow-covered landscape. Wooded hills and soldier pines and roofed buildings, all covered in snow and ice, seemed to radiated their own silver light. And there, beside the crenellated walls of the tower, was his silver queen.

Daenerys stood with her back to him, her silver hair unbraided and undone in the way he had come to know and love it best. Hearing the crunch of his boots on old snow, she turned to face him.

“Jon,” she said, her gaze matching the softness of her voice. Wordlessly, he stepped forward and closed the space between them. She met his gaze for an instant before looking out over the walls. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it? I wanted to see it all from up here.”

“Aye, it’s beautiful,” he looked into her eyes. They shone a pale lavender in the moonlight. He lost himself in them. For a brief and blissful moment, Jon Snow forgot about the White Walkers and the Wall, about the northern lords and southern allies and wars to come. He was not King in the North or Lord of Winterfell or even a bastard. He was just a man in love with a woman.

A gentle tug at his hand pulled him away from his thoughts. Daenerys was guiding him to the battlements. The snow crunched softly as they walked. She wiped away a bit of snow from the raised walls barriers and leaned against the cold stone, gazing out into the night. Jon did the same as he took up a spot beside her. There they stood, for how long Jon could not truly say. She seemed enthralled by the moonlit landscape before her.

“I hadn’t truly seen snow until I flew Beyond the Wall,” she told him, still gazing into the distance. “It was always warmer in Essos and…” her words drifted away on a frigid gust of air. Jon knew what she was thinking. He thought about it too. He could still see the frozen lake shatter as Viserion’s broken body fell through the ice. Shattered… like the Wall. The magical barrier that had guarded the North for thousands of years was broken, gone. Nothing held back the dead. Nothing was keeping those he loved from harm. Jon looked to the tree line and into the groves of snow covered soldier pines that stood sentry in the distance. They could be out there, even now. A bitter wind blew across the tower’s top, cutting through Jon’s layers fur and leather and wool. He saw Daenerys shiver in the corner of his vision. Indeed, as the wind continued the world seemed to shiver. Jon felt cold. Suddenly the silver hues of the midnight scene seemed colder too, no longer beautiful. The moonlight was not the familiar silver of his lover’s hair. It was icy white and blue. Like their eyes… The wind blew harder now, making the distant pines sway to and froe. Pale shadows appeared to dance among the trees. He felt fear’s icy fingers closing their grip around his heart…

Then felt them melt away as Daenerys moved closer to him. “But this isn’t so bad,” she whispered. A sudden urge seized him then. It was different than the urges he felt with Daenerys in her bed chambers. It felt softer, warmer, like her hand in his. He wanted to hold her, to wrap her in his thick fur cloak and keep her safe. Don’t be a fool. A queen with two dragons and two armies doesn’t need your cloak. She turned to face him, the desire for the warmth of her chamber’s hearth written on her face. “Shall we?” she asked, though it was not a question. Jon nodded and followed her as they made their way to the door. He led the way, carefully navigating the uneven steps of the stairway and offering his hand to Daenerys as she came down after him.

Jon closed the stairway door behind him. It was warmer in her chambers. A fire still burned bright in the hearth, filling the air with a rich, smoky scent. Jon began to disrobe. He took off his cloak and draped it over a chair. Some nights the process was a hastier affair, with eager fingers
fumbling at clasps and laces. Tonight, Daenerys gave him a tender look as she helped him out of his padded armor and her woolen dress. He slowly pulled off his thin undertunic, revealing his scarred chest. She looked at him, her eyes full of emotion as she gently touched the curved scar over his heart, her finger tracing the pale red trail the knife had left. Sometimes she kissed them. Sometimes she traced them as she was doing now, but this time was different.

“…How?” she asked hesitantly. *She had never asked, Jon thought, never. Not when she first sat by my bed, not in the nights we’ve spent together since. Why now?* He had never talked about this, not with anyone save the red priestess herself. Even Davos had avoided discussing Jon’s death. He inhaled deeply and looked into the hearth for a moment, collecting his thoughts. Daenerys waited for his answer with her hand over his heart.

“Some of the men…” he began to explain. *My brothers, once. Hung as traitors. He had killed them as they had killed him. You’ll be fighting their battles forever. Thorne’s last words still echoed in his head. Not their battles. My battles. He felt Daenerys’ hand on his chest. Our battles. ”I let the Wildlings through the Wall. And they hated me for it, so they…”* He did not need to explain any further. His scars told the rest of their story on his own. He looked back at Daenerys. Tears rimmed her eyes, revealing a vulnerability she seemed to reserve for him alone. She opened her mouth to speak again, lips quivering slightly and chest shaking with uneven breaths.

“…and then you came back?” The words were quiet and uncertain. He felt her fingers brush against the places where cold steel had bitten into him. He remembered the feeling. The cold. The feeling of his blood melting the snow around him. The fading darkness the crept from the edges of his vision. And then...

“A red priestess, Melisandre of Asshai. She brought me back,” he explained. He almost missed the faint glint of recognition in her eyes. The red witch had resurrected him as Thoro had done to Lord Beric half a dozen times. It was the truth and Jon told it as such, his voice concealing any emotion. He could not say why he had been brought back. *Does it matter? I am here.* Daenerys dropped her hand, finding his and squeezing it tightly, reminding him that he was not alone.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. He nodded solemnly. Daenerys took his hand and pulled him to toward the bed. His heart lurched, but it was not that all-to-familiar lust he felt when she took him to bed. It was something greater. She turned and looked at him, amethyst eyes meeting grey ones, before climbing into the bed. He raised the furs and slipped into the bed beside her. She drew closer to him, her soft curves seemed to fit perfectly against him. He moved closer too, burying his face in her loose silver hair and inhaling her sweet scent. He felt the warmth of her body meld with his own heat, driving out his waking thoughts, the lingering chill from the tower roof and the memory of cold steel knives.

In the morning, they had dressed hastily, wearing the same clothes from yesterday’s ride. Jon had left the room while Missandei styled Daenerys’ hair in the riding braid the Dothraki seemed to favor. After breaking their fasts on a simple meal of eggs, bread and bacon, the party mounted their steeds and resumed their positions toward the head of the column. Hours passed in relative silence as the party rode north along the dirt ruts that passed as roads. Soon, Jon began to recognize their surroundings. He knew these lands from memory. Winterfell lay over the next ridge. Another moment’s ride would see the southern towers rising over the hills of the Stark lands. His lands. His home. His past and his future.

Once, Jon Snow never thought of the future. *Why should I?* He had been born with no true family or inheritance. He had sworn to the Watch that he would take no wife and father no children. Sworn to himself that he would never father a bastard. Yet one more glance at the woman riding beside before him saw those ancient oaths melt away. She said that she could not have children,
that she was cursed and called barren by some eastern witch. Jon did not believe her, but he also
did not care. He had never expected to hold a child of his seed in his arms. Some men might look at
their partner and see sons and heirs or beauty, family, wealth or legacy. Jon only saw Daenerys.
Once again, thank you all for the reviews and kind words. You may have been expecting the big reunion at Winterfell this chapter. Originally, that’s what I wanted to do to. This is a story about Jon and Daenerys, but still takes place in the world that the Season 7 finale set up. These next two chapters take us away from Jon and Dany to explore the wider plot for a bit. Hope you enjoy.

She touched the face before her, fingertips brushing across the cheek to the long, rounded nose. It felt cold. She reached out with her other hand, using both to explore the details of the statue before her. Her eyes were useless here, deep in the crypts below Winterfell. The guards responsible for maintaining the area only kept the first level illuminated with torches and tallow candles. The rest was lost in darkness. That did not bother Arya. There was a certain comfort in the solitude of the crypts; down here, it was just her. Well, me and hundreds of my ancestors. She could not truly say how deep she had gone or which Stark sat before her, only that he had the same long face she currently wore.

The Winterfell crypts told the story of House Stark, beginning with Brandon the Builder and continuing to her lord father, whose bones had been interred beside his sister’s, Arya’s aunt Lyanna. She missed him. Sometimes, when she could not sleep, she would find her way down to the crypts and sit beside his statue, telling him about her day or her time across the Narrow Sea. Across from Eddard Stark’s tomb sat her brother Rickon’s tomb, though the sculptor from White Harbor had yet to make a statue in his likeness. Arya wondered if he even could. He was a boy when I left. A small sense of shame filled her. I don’t even remember what he looked like. Beside Rickon stood Robb, his statue portrayed a bold and daring young man standing tall with one hand on his sword hilt and another on the head of a stone direwolf. Proud and defiant. Is that how he died? No, she had seen what they did with his body. The statue’s heroic gaze felt empty. As empty as his tomb. She had been there, had seen what they had done. Robb’s body would never find peace below Winterfell. And mother... Arya had never been as close with Lady Catelyn as Sansa, but thinking about her parents still pained her. She had been close once, so close to seeing them both again. Then the Freys and Boltons had slit her mother’s throat and tossed her in the river. Even now, hatred seeped into her veins as she thought about it...

Winter came for House Frey. Winter will come for all our enemies. The words of House Stark had echoed in her mind of late, repeating themselves as she had once nightly repeated the names of those who had wronged her. Winter is coming. Who was the first to say them? Arya wondered as she stepped down from the statue and silently landed on the dirt floor of the crypt. She felt for the base of the statue she had been exploring, fingertips searching for clues, for a name to the face. She felt the foreign markings across the base. Runes of the First Men, she knew the feeling after weeks spent here. Brandon... she guessed a name. There had been many Brandons in her house. Like my uncle, or Bran the Builder, or Brandon the Shipwright. He had always been one of her favorites, an ancient King in the North who had sailed his fleet west across the Sunset Sea. When he had never returned, his own son, another Brandon, had burned the North’s ships in his grief.

Arya wondered whether Brandon the Shipwright had reached the far side of the world. Could there be Starks across the sea even now? Would any of them look like me? Arya wondered as she moved
to another statue, another nameless King in the North. This face felt familiar too, like hers. It was strange. They were her kin, her blood, but it never felt like that. The carvings might say Stark, the faces might have once shared her long face and grey eyes, but they were not her family. They were just faces, trapped in the darkness below Winterfell. *And faces can change. Stark is just a name.*

Jon was not a Stark, she knew, but he was her family; the part of her family she missed most. They had never shared a surname, but they had shared meals and muffled laughs and secret jokes. She had confided in him and, perhaps, he in her. She missed him. *He’s alive. Another King in the North. And he’s coming home.* Sansa had received a raven from Dragonstone almost a month ago and another from White Harbor some days past. The thought drove her from her perch atop the statue she was inspecting. She made her way upward, through the utter blackness of the catacombs. Before long, dim torchlight flickered in the distance, tempting her onward with the promise of sight.

Soon enough, orange and scarlet light flooded her vision, blinding her. *White light,* she mused, *a different sort of blindness.* Rapidly blinking and regaining her sight, Arya looked to her left. There stood another statue, caste in a subtle light by the torches on either side. Below the proud figure she could read the faded letters, now written in the common script of the Andals instead of the runic markings of the First Men. *Jon Stark, King in the North,* she read. *Jon…* She wondered what the man cast in stone had been like in life. Beside him stood another king, then another. Arya walked along the long passage into the brighter light. *Torren Stark,* she read on one statue’s base. *Brandon,* she read on another. Before long, she was standing before her father’s and brothers’ statues yet again. They greeted her with blank stone stares. She smiled sadly before turning to the stairway.

The climb from the crypts to the castle yard was easy enough. The guards always made sure to keep the stairs dry and clean even after the winter storms. Arya stepped out of the stairwell and into the cold. Pale sunlight lit the yard, reflecting off the snow piles and shocking her with flashes of blinding white light. She blinked, trying to clear her vision as light green shadows danced across her eyelids. Crisp, cool air filled her nostrils, driving out the dank, old air from the crypts below. The walk from the entrance to the great hall was a short one. Arya covered the distance across the castle yard in short, swift strides. She reached the great oak doors, pushing it open with her right hand. The door gave a small squeak as she nudged it inward and entered the hall. An argument was in progress, its noise filling the hall.

“The Wall is fallen, my lords, we must see to our lands,” voiced Lord Glover of Deepwood Motte. He stood at the side of one of the hall’s long tables, facing Sansa’s seat but addressing the gathered lords as one. The lords of the North and the Vale were seated at the tables’ long benches. One other lord stood across from Lord Glover. Arya did not recognize his face.

“If this news in true, we must not abandon the lands north of Winterfell. We must face the enemy on the field,” he said. Lady Mormont stood then, her powerful voice compensating for her small stature.

“Forgive me my lack of experience in matters of war, my lords, but should we truly face the enemy, Winterfell is our only chance… unless, Lord Glover, you think the timber palisades of your family’s keep can hold back the dead.” The old lord looked angered but cowed. Arya smiled from her spot in the shadowy corner in the back of the hall.

Sansa took commanded of the room then, speaking of the matters at hand. “Jon has sworn himself and his kingdom to Queen Daenerys Targaryen. She had pledged herself and her *dragons* to our cause…” Arya saw her mouth continue to move, but the words she spoke went unheard. The lords of the North stood to a man, their uproar a storm within Winterfell’s walls. Sansa stood before
them, her eyes betraying nothing even as they launched insults and epithets in anger. This was not
the first time they had discussed Jon’s pledge, but every time it came up this seemed to be the
reaction. They’ll never trust a southerner, she knew. Arya took this moment to step forward,
walking from the entrance to the high table. With every step, the din seemed to quiet slightly. She
felt the eyes on her. Only a few of these lords had witnessed the fate of Lord Baelish, but even so,
they knew. Perhaps Sansa Stark was still a lady, gentle and noble; but, dagger and Needle at her
side, Arya Stark was another thing entirely.

By the time she reached the seat beside her sister, the lords’ complaints had faded into nothing like
a winter sunset. She looked at her sister then, and Sansa smiled before standing and addressing her
bannermen. “You swore allegiance to House Stark. You swore allegiance to Jon. You will honor
his oath and swear allegiance to Daenerys as well.” Her words were stern and commanding. Arya
could not help but admire Sansa in that moment.

“My lady,” Bronze Yohn Royce stood then, his runic breastplate glittering in the torchlight, “we
cannot serve a Targaryen. This girl’s father killed your own grandsire and uncle. Her brother
kidnapped and raped your aunt. We cannot trust her.”

“Aye, my lady,” Lord Glover raised his voice in support of Lord Royce’s. “Your brother Robb rode
south once and swore himself to some southern woman. He fell in love and lost his crown and
kingdom.”

“Perhaps you have forgotten your oaths, my lords,” Sansa said, her voice barely rising above a
conversational tone.

“Never, my Lady,” Lord Royce said, continuing, “it is only that-”

“-Jon and Daenerys march north with their armies, but we must act now. The Wall has fallen and
the North is exposed. You have all sworn oaths, my lords. It is time we see them through. Lord
Royce…” Arya felt the tension rise as Sansa paused for effect. “You shall escort Lord Umber north
and see his people to safety, and the wildings as well. With the Wall fallen, we must protect our
people.”

Arya watched the man’s face, some mix of frustration and rage turning his skin a bright pink. He
opened his mouth to protest the order. “I will not abandon Winterfell. I will not abandon you. We
rode north for you, my lady, not for the wildlings,” he finished rather plainly. Sansa stared at him,
hers eyes like ice.

“We need the Umber men. We need the wildlings. They’ve fought the dead for years. We cannot
abandon our allies. If the Wall has fallen then Last Hearth is in danger. We must bring them back
to Winterfell. You will ride north with Ned Umber and your knights,” Sansa ordered. They argued
back and forth for another minute or two before coming to an agreement. Lord Royce would take
five hundred mounted knights north to escort the Umber smallfolk and the wildlings south to
Winterfell. Accepting his task, Lord Royce turned and exited the great hall, his cloak of cream and
sky-blue billowing behind him as he walked. Arya, silent through the encounter, turned and smiled
at her sister. Sansa remained standing and facing forward, but Arya could have sworn she saw the
hint of a smirk on her face.

After Lord Royce, one lord after another brought their matters before the high table, each pettier
than the last: oats and hay for their horses, better lodgings for their highborn men and officers,
more comely women in the Winter Town’s brothels… Sansa dealt with them all deftly, addressing
each man’s concerns while committing to nothing. Arya’s gaze crossed the room as she spoke,
looking for signs of dissent or disloyalty. Instead, her met Lady Mormont’s hard stare. The young
lady of Bear Island was as hard as iron and her gaze equally so, but as Mormont eyes met Stark,
both young girls smiled softly. They sat back as one, admiring Sansa as she dismissed the northern lords and knights of the Vale.

Soon, enough they stood alone in the hall save Maester Wolkan and Lady Mormont. The young lady bowed slightly and took her leave and, at a glance, the old maester left as well. They ignored each other for a moment, looking out over the empty hall where Petyr Baelish’s blood had once flowed freely. Arya remember the moment fondly. The man had played her mother and aunt against each other. He had betrayed their house. He would have betrayed Sansa too, but she had learned his game, had asked Bran for his visions and wisdom. He could have turned us against each other.

“I expect Jon will return soon,” Sansa said, “then he’ll have to deal with these lords’ complaints.” She sounded annoyed.

“It might be easier with dragons,” joked Arya. Dragons! Even after what she had seen and done in Braavos, the idea still felt surreal. Her brother was riding home with a Targaryen queen and her dragons beside him. Perhaps he’s even riding one here, she smiled at the absurdity of image forming in her thoughts.

“Perhaps one of them will eat Lord Glover,” Sansa replied with a coolly delivered jest of her own. Arya saw a smile on her face. It was good to see her smile.

“Do you believe what he said about Jon?” Arya asked her sister, “about falling in love?”

Sansa stood still for a moment, pondering the question as her eyes swept the empty hall. “It’s possible, I suppose. Jon is unmarried and Daenerys is said to be beautiful. They must trust each other at least…” she paused to look at Arya, “elsewise she would have fed him to her dragons.” Arya laughed, but they spoke no more of Jon just then.

Later that night they took a small supper in Sansa’s chambers; her Lord Father’s and Lady Mother’s chambers once. A small table stood in the corner by an open window. It was there that the serving man had placed their food. Arya had wolfed down the warm, freshly baked bread and turned with a ravenous hunger on the flank of meat on the pewter plate before her. Sansa had looked on in some horror at her sister’s manners. They still had their differences.

The next morning Arya had watched from a covered walkway as Lord Royce and young Ned Umber prepared for the ride north. Five hundred mounted knights would accompany them to see Ned’s people safely to Winterfell’s lands. Once the yard was clear, Arya would begin her own task of training the women of Winterfell and the Winter Town to fight as she had been doing these past few weeks. Jon had ordered the training, she knew, and left Sansa to see it through.

It was, at times, a comical affair. Some of the women looked at the dirks and spears and swords as if they were snakes, but others were made of sterner stuff. They will never be soldiers, she knew, but they did not have to be. They just have to stay alive. A woman can never be a strong as a man, unless she was named Brienne of Tarth, but she could be faster, lighter, and cleverer. She taught them how.

Later that morning, she stood on the battlements, leaning into the snow-covered crenellations. Her eyes surveyed the vast emptiness of the moors outside Winterfell and, beyond them, the groves of evergreen trees standing sentry for the Stark lands. It was easy to lose oneself in thought with such a view. She saw a bird fly from the edges of the forest, its wings flapping slowly. But no... The bird seemed to grow before her, its body looked odd, its wings expanding in ways no hawk could imitate. Arya’s imagination raced backward in time to her lessons with Maester Lewin and the illustrations in the old tomes of Winterfell’s now burned library. A dragon, she knew. Like Visenya
rode into battle. Only this was not Vhager. The beast’s hide shone black in the morning light. The sun’s pale rays shone through the beast’s translucent wings, which glowed an odd shade of red, like dried blood. Arya looked on in wonder. Yet, alert as always, her eye detected movement to the south, and she turned to see riders cresting the ridge to Winterfell’s south. She watched them for a moment, her eyes straining to make out the details of their faint form. They rode at the head of a column that began to snake its way down the long dirt road that led to Winterfell’s gates. Arya saw a woman with silver hair riding confidently atop a grey horse, and beside her… Arya knew that look, that hair, those broad yet unassuming shoulders covered in a long fur cloak. She laughed at it all, a smile breaking across her face. Jon was coming home.
Bronze Yohn Royce

Chapter Summary

Bronze Yohn Royce completes his mission.

Chapter Notes

This is part two of our narrative scenic route. It is in some ways a standalone chapter, but important to the plot nonetheless. In the next chapter we’ll return to Winterfell and some long awaited moments, but first we’ll ride with Bronze Yohn Royce.

Bronze Yohn Royce, Lord of Runestone, had been this way before. The barren, snow covered hills had been green and full of wildflowers the last time he had rode this far North, but it all seemed familiar. What has it been, seven years now? Eight? A slight sense of shame weighed on the man, like armor kept on too long, as he fumbled with his memories. My mind withers with my strength. It would have quite a way to wither. Yohn was a massive man, barrel chested and well-muscled for his age. Only the short white hair on his head and his troubles with his memory betrayed his true age. Eight, he decided firmly, claiming the memory with a swift mental thrust. It had been eight years since he had escorted his son Waymar Royce to Castle Black.

They had argued about the decision for months. The third son of House Royce, Waymar would have little inheritance when Yohn passed to the Father’s judgement. His lands would go to his son Andar and Robar had still stood second in succession. Yohn had suggested Waymar pursue knighthood. With time he could have served Jon and Lady Arryn at the Eyrie, or else commanded the garrison at the Bloody Gate. Waymar had craved glory though, and there would be none in serving as a glorified sentry in time of peace. Waymar had suggested joining one of the free companies across the Narrow Sea, but Yohn had forbade it. “You are a Royce,” he had reminded the boy, “if you sell your sword you’ll sell your surname with it.”

In the end, Waymar had chosen to do both, giving up his house and swearing his sword and life to the black brothers of the Night’s Watch. Yohn could not disagree with the decision. Perhaps they had fallen on hard times of late, but the Night’s Watch was an ancient and honorable order. My son might rise to Lord Commander in his time, Yohn had reasoned with himself. He had committed to seeing safely to the Wall himself. A large Royce party had left Runestone and rode North. Lord Eddard Stark had hosted the men at Winterfell on their way to Castle Black, and Yohn had spent days hunting, sparring, and drinking with Ned in the cool northern clime before continuing northward.

It had been unusually warm the day they had said goodbye. Yohn remembered the Wall weeping and glimmering in the autumn sunlight as he bade his son farewell. The ride south had been easier then. On the way home, they had stayed at the Last Hearth, home of House Umber, and the Greatjon had feasted the Royce retinue.
“If he fights near as well as you do, my lord, my people need not fear any wilding raiders anymore!” Lord Umber had assured him that night, talking of Waymar as he drunkenly grinned with a tankard of ale in one hand and haunch of roasted meat in another. That had brought some small measure of comfort. Waymar would serve with honor and rise high at his post. He was defending the realm from what lie beyond.

He had died doing so. Yohn remembered reading the raven scroll, sealed in black ink, at Runestone some three years after seeing his son to the Wall. Lord Commander Mormont had written that Waymar had been lost on a ranging, killed by wildings. *A noble death. He did his duty to the last,* Yohn had thought then. It failed to numb the pain.

Now here he was, escorting the Greatjon’s people south alongside thousands wildlings. *Any one of these mongrels might have murder him.* Lady Sansa had ordered his men north to the Last Hearth almost as soon as her brother Bran had learned the truth of the Wall. He recalled the argument clearly enough.

He had stood in the great hall of Winterfell with two dozen other lords. Lady Sansa had called an assembly to discuss the defense of the North in light of the news of the Wall. Driven by fear, the lords blustered and argued and pushed their follies before the Lady of Winterfell. Calm and collected, Sansa had weathered the storm and issued her commands one by one.

“Lord Royce,” she had called him before the high table, “you shall escort Lord Umber north and see his people to safety, and the wildings as well. With the Wall fallen, we must protect our people.” *The wildlings are not our people.* He had held that thought back but offered his protests nonetheless.

“I will not abandon Winterfell. I will not abandon you. We rode north for you, my lady, not for the wildlings,” he had said confidently, drawing the nods of the lords around him. Sansa had stared at him then, eyes like ice.

“We need the Umber men. We need the wildlings. They’ve fought the dead for years. We cannot abandon our allies. If the Wall has fallen then Last Hearth is in danger. We must bring them back to Winterfell. You will ride north with Ned Umber and your knights.” It was a command, but one he could not commit to. In the end, they had reached a compromise. The most of the Knights of the Vale would stay close to Winterfell. Five hundred men, almost a quarter of his strength, would be dispatched to see the Northmen safely back to Winterfell.

So here he was, mounted on his chestnut brown destrier, riding at the head of their sorry column. Yohn was armored for battle, wearing his massive steel breastplate covered in bronze runic carvings. At his side he wore his sheathed longsword, old war horn, and the small dragonglass dagger that Lady Sansa had insisted he carry. Yohn doubted it would do any good should it come to battle. The going was slow. They had left the Umber keep two days ago, heading south toward the Last River and then on toward Winterfell. In truth it should have taken them a day to reach the river. The pace, the wildlings, the bitter cold, all of it made him anxious and angry.

Young Ned Umber rode at his side with Last Hearth’s maester and captain of the guards in tow. Behind them walked thousands of wildlings, mostly women, children and tired old men. They looked a great deal less fearsome than the legends he had heard all his life. His own knights brought up the column’s rear. Mixed in among the crowd marched the surviving Umber men and the countless woman and children the wars had left behind. *Mouths to feed,* he thought at first glance before correcting himself. These were the helpless and destitute, in need of a lord’s protection.

Bronze Yohn Royce would provide that protection. It was his duty. He was no fool and would not
be taken by surprise. He had sent outriders east and north to watch for their foe. Two knights had accompanied every wildling scout or Umber man; good steel would pair well with good eyes and an understanding of the land.

He glanced at the Umber lad, assessing the Lord of Last Hearth as he led his people to safety. *He must be seven? Eight? A strong build for his age.* The boy looked sullen in the saddle, no doubt upset over having to abandon his home. Yohn’s fatherly instincts seemed to overtake his reserved nature as he addressed the young lord, grasping at a topic to discuss.

“Have you ever been on a proper hunt, my lord?” his voice was gruff but betrayed an eagerness to return to the fond memories of his own youth and the joy of pursuing wild boar through the dense underbrush of a summer forest in the Vale. Ned shook his head from side to side. “Ah, well once this winter is over you must ride south to Runestone. We’ll have a broad spear in your hand and a boar’s head above your mantle in no time at all!” He laughed and saw a smile break on the boy’s face as he met Yohn’s gaze.

“How old are you, my lord?” Yohn inquired.

“Ten,” the boy’s voice had not yet deepened with manhood. *Ah, ten.*

Bronze Yohn laughed, a deep booming that rattled his bronze breastplate, “Ten? I would have guessed you were a man grown by the way you sit your horse.” Ned’s smile broadened further as he straightened his back and sat taller in his saddle as if to show the Lord of Runestone how well he rode. “You must do well at the lists too, no?” he asked. Yohn remembered the other joys of his own boyhood; learning to ride and fight and joust.

“My father never allowed us to try,” the boy explained, “said poking each other with sticks didn’t prepare you for winter or fighting wildlings.”

“Learning to wield a lance is no folly, my lord. I would be honored to host you at Runestone. My master-at-arms has trained many young lords to wield sword, shield, and lance.” Ned gave Yohn a true smile then. Yohn tried to return the gesture, his lips and dimples struggling against the weight of his heavy brow. Contorting his facial muscles, he produced a terrible grimace that felt altogether foreign on his face. The boy laughed at the sight.

Hours passed as the two lords rode south toward the Last River. Yohn told the young lord stories of Ser Artys Arryn the Falcon Knight and of Robert’s Rebellion, where he and the boy’s namesake had fought against the Mad King’s men. In turn, he asked the lad about his hopes and aspirations. What would he do when he returned home? Had he spotted any young maidens and asked their favor? The boy had blushed at that.

They reached the river late on the second day. Yohn saw the northern sun inching downward toward the western hills. There were hills on either side of the road, barren, snow-covered, long and sloping. *A perfect place for an ambush from either side.* His outriders would see to it that did not happen.

The Last River was just deep enough to merit a bridge. Yohn saw the pitiful structure before him. In the Vale, rivers were crossed atop strong stone arches, not thin planks of old wood lain across the water. *I doubt more than two men abreast can cross at a time.* The crossing was slow, with burdened Umber smallfolk and wildling women leading the way. Yohn’s knights would cross last, holding the rear in case of attack. The men slumped in their saddles, bored and cold and tired. *Five hundred noble knights selected to escort women and savages across a river.* It was not what many had expected when they first rode north against the Boltons.
Not long after arriving at the river, horn sounded to the east and north of the column. Yohn turned his head to see two knights galloping at full speed down a sloping ridge with their sky blue cloaks, illuminated by the setting sun, waving wildly as they rode. What is this?

The riders made for the two lords. “My lord,” the man spat out words through heavy, gasping breaths. Yohn recognized the look of fear on his face. “Beyond… the ridge… they…” What was it? Had the wildlings turned cloak?

“Breath,” Yohn urged the man, his chest rising with his temper, “then speak plainly. What madness has brought you riding down on us as if you’ve fled the seventh hell?”

“They come,” the mounted scout said slowly, his tone emphasizing the words. Other horns sounded now, echoing through the low hills. And below the din, Yohn’s old ears could hear a slow rumbling. It sounded like a faraway avalanche, or a growling beast, or both. He looked to the scouts again. They nodded quickly. One opened his mouth to speak, “the dead.”

The Lord of Runestone spurred his destrier forward and rode to the top of the hill from whence the scouts had ridden. As he crested the ridge, he saw the vast snow covered wilderness and rolling hills of the far north spreading out before him. He saw shallow valley with barren, icy hills guarding its edges and groves of soldier pines half-covered in snow in its center and… there.

He saw it then, what Jon Snow had described back at Winterfell. Bronze Yohn had never truly believed the threat, but his oaths to the King in the North and to Lady Sansa and his duties as a lord demanded he commit himself to the cause. Watching the cold white mist sweep down the hill opposite his own position, Yohn believed it now.

A howling wind blew from the north, a bitter cold that cut to bone like a knife of pure ice. Yohn looked up as snow began to fall, heavy flakes that scattered and blocked the evening light. And then he saw them, dark shadows against the snow and mist; a thousand shambling corpses covering the valley floor. He heard a gasp beside him and turned to see Ned Umber looking down upon the army of dead men marching toward the ridge where the two lords sat ahorse. He must have ridden up behind me. He looked back below the hill where the smallfolk were still crossing the river. If we try to cross that pitiful bridge in full, they’ll take us in the rear.

“My Lord,” he turned to Ned Umber. The boy’s eyes shone with fear. “Remember your duties. Your oaths. Take you men and see you people across the river to safety.” The young Lord Umber swallowed hard and nodded at Yohn. The old lord turned to the Umber mounted sergeants and gave the desperate command. “When the last of your people and the wildlings are across, set the bridge afire. Deny the enemy a crossing.”

“But what will you do?” Ned asked, his voice cracking in fear.

“My knights and I shall ford the river downstream once we’ve driven off the foe,” he lied. Yohn gave the boy a sad smile, more genuine and pure than before, then nodded to the men and saw them off. Yohn looked back toward the valley floor, the dead had moved closer, half a mile away perhaps. He could see the otherworldly blue of their eyes.

Bronze Yohn reached down to the side of his saddle and found his old war horn. When was the last time I used this? The Trident? It was a pale ivory horn, banded in gold with runic engravings of the First Men along its sides, as thick around as his muscled forearm. He drew a deep breath, the air freezing his lungs, pressed his lips to the horn, and blew a rallying cry to the Knights of the Vale. He reached to his left hip with his free hand and drew his longsword. Yohn raised it above his head, its steel shimmering in the day’s failing light. He blew the horn again. And again. War horns echoed his call to arms. Cheers and cries rose from the road behind him where five hundred
knights, armored in steel and robed in blue and cream surcoats, answered his call. Almost as one, they turned and rode up the ridge to form a line with their commander.

A wave of silent terror crashed over the line as the knights crested the ridge and saw the dead before them. Men steadied their mounts and steeled themselves for the task at hand. Lord Royce spurred his mount ahead of the line, raising his sword and blowing hard on his war horn once more. He saw a forest of lances and swords raised in response. He turned. The enemy was closer now, thousands of dead men held the valley floor. Now was the time. They could win this. One charge could break the enemy and give the others enough time to flee across the river. He readied himself and thought of his sons, of home, of young Ned Umber. Then he dug his heels into his destrier, pointed his sword toward his foe, and charged.

Five hundred knights charged with him, the hooves of their powerful war horses kicking up dirt and snow as they thundered down the ridge, lances and swords pointed forward. The dead looked up as one, their eyes ten thousand specks of burning ice. The line kept its cohesion, the men shouting their war cries as they quickly closed the distance. Yohn leaned into his saddle, pulled his sword back for its first stroke, and crashed through the first line of dead men.

Corpses flew in all directions as the powerful war horse plowed through the uneven ranks of dead men. Yohn slashed at a foe, almost losing his grip on his sword as it sliced through rotted armor and decayed flesh as a scythe through wheat. The ease of the kill surprised him. Yohn urged his mount onward through the wights, hacking and slashing at the stunted, blue-eyed soldiers in his path. He looked to his left and saw his knights riding beside him, hundreds on either flank, swords flashing. They were cutting through the lines of the dead. They were winning. Another blue eyed corpse lurched toward him; he caught the thing it its neck, a firm twist of his blade removed the severed head from its half-rotted corpse.

The Knights of the Vale rode onward, the valley shortening before them. Bronze Yohn Royce still led the charge, bringing his sword down and splitting the skull of the broken body that charged toward him. It worked, he thought, exhaling a hot breath into the cold evening air. The Knights of the Vale. Pride and relief rushed through him. The charge had worked. Victory would be theirs. Another attack through their broken ranks would see the enemy crippled and his men safely home. He raised his sword again, rallying his knights to his side. They gathered at the base of the far ridge, forming a line.

The snow fell heavier here, obscuring his vision of the valley and hills. The cold mist stung his cheeks. He felt an ache in his chest, an unnatural tightness from the chill. Then he saw them, four pale horsemen sitting atop the ridge. Even in the growing storm, he knew what he saw. Eyes like blue fire. Demons of legend. From either side stormed a new wave of blue eyed corpses, more terrifying than the last. Men clad in skins and black furs and beasts of every ilk. They seemed to spill over the ridge, eyes focused on Lord Yohn Royce’s five hundred men.

He raised his sword and, steeling himself, shouted his command, wheeling his line around and preparing to ride across the valley floor, through the carnage they had created but a moment earlier… but the dead block his path. The thousands of corpses his men had ridden down stood again, or else fumbled their way forward with arms grasping at the snow and dirt. No.

They were trapped. Dead men closed in on them from both sides. Yohn sounded the charge, bellowing out his command while urging his terrified destrier onward. The warhorse plowed through the ranks of dead men, slower this time. The corpses clawed at the beast, tearing chunks of flesh from his chestnut brown hide. Yohn watched the line falter as the dead closed in. His knights had scattered, fighting the foe on a dozen fronts. He turned his mount again, charging another group of dead men, sword cutting through soft hides, rotten flesh, and old bone. He swung his
blade savagely. No foe could stand against him while mounted on this mighty steed. A youthful, violent vigor ran through his veins. Rage filled his vision. He may face death today, but he had become death himself. Steel flashed, again and again, as he cut his way through the press of bodies. The warrior himself would fear this vision of violence.

Then a massive blow took him square in the breastplate, knocking him from the saddle. He watched with quickened breath as his mount panicked, ran, and was swarmed by the dead. He looked down at himself, breastplate dirty and dented. His breathing was painful; no doubt the blow had shattered his ribs. Yohn looked up at his assailant. Oh, Mother have mercy. A giant stood above him, perhaps sixteen feet in height, looking down at him with one ice blue eye. Yohn took a ragged breath as he raised his shield arm, pain shooting through his chest. He stepped aside as the giant lunged and almost lost his balance on the uneven ground. Yohn countered with a series of desperate blows against corpse’s knee, hoping to break its stance. Though he cut the giant’s hide to pieces, his attacks had no effect.

The giant swept low with one rotted hand, knocking the sword from Yohn’s grip. He looked around for a weapon, but saw nothing useful. His fingers fumbled at his belt for the small dragonglass dagger. It was all he had now. Yohn brandished the dagger, dancing aside as the giant swung at him with another clumsy blow. Now. Swiftly, he stepped forward and drove the glass dagger into the massive corpse. The ragged edge bit into the dead flesh, sinking deep into the giant’s lower thigh, disappearing through hide and rot. His foe stood rigid for but a moment, then collapsed. Yohn leapt to the side, diving into a wretched pile of snow and bloodless limbs to avoid the falling corpse.

Regaining his feet, he looked around. We are lost. Thousands of wights surrounded his knights, pulling the men from their saddles or else tearing their horses apart. Weighed down in heavy armor, many of the men fell to the ground and could not regain their feet. Those that did fought the dead with little effect. Steel was near useless against these creatures. Far in the distance, through the carnage and snow, he saw a thin column of black smoke rising above the hills. They’ve crossed. Perhaps there was still hope. Yohn reached to his scabbard only to remember the giant had disarmed him. The longsword lay discarded a few paces away. Pain shooting through his chest with every step, Yohn moved to retrieve it. He knelt and grasped the hilt, then rose slowly… and saw it standing before him.

His foe stood tall and gaunt, armored in black and wielding a sword of ice. Its flesh was pale, carved like the jagged ice of a glacier. Its eyes shone blue. They met Yohn’s own gaze. Gods… Yohn saw the thing look at his runic armor for a moment, a look of recognition on its face, before it looked at Yohn again and raised its sword. The White Walker stepped forward, closing the distance between them. Yohn grasped his own sword, rage and terror strengthening his tight grip. “Dance with me, then,” he muttered, his breath freezing in the air before him. Then he charged.
Daenerys II

Chapter Summary

Daenerys and Jon arrived at Winterfell.

Chapter Notes

Well. Here we go. I've taken the time to draft a longer outline for this story, so there is a plan. That said, I'm not going to roll my face across the keyboard and write out 20 reunions in a single chapter. That seems like bad storytelling. All in good time.

As always, thank you for the comments and reviews. Things you enjoyed or criticisms of what you did not are equally welcome... as are Bobby B quotes. I hope to get around to responding to some of them soon.

A distant scream echoed through the low hills that bordered the Kingsroad. It seemed to go on forever, softening as it echoed off each snow covered slope it hit but never dying. Another scream joined it, this one nearer than the first. Then another arose from the far hills. Then another. The screams formed an eerie song with the slow, rolling thunder of pounding hooves. It grew louder as the screams did and, soon enough, the icy moors of the Stark lands came alive with warcries of four thousand Dothraki bloodriders.

Daenerys Targaryen smiled to herself as she watched the horde approach. Her retinue was less amused. Tyrion, Varys and the others looked on with scowls, their faces half-hidden under thick riding cloaks. Jorah eyed the seen with a passive boredom, having spent years in Essos in his own right. It was Jon's reaction that interested her. His eyes had widened at the first scream and distant sound of hooves. His movements stopped, as if the northern air had frozen him solid.

He's never seen them before, not like this. The thought gave her some amusement.

Of course, the Dothraki had not ridden north to the sound of screams and warcries. It was a show of strength, a challenge even, to the stalwart Unsullied and now terrified Manderly host that marched behind her. Within a matter of moments, she saw her riders spill over the low ridges and slowly merge with the column moving north along the snowy dirt road. Good, she thought as she surveyed her forces. The Dothraki had made good time on winter roads, no doubt urging their horses onward to rendezvous with the Unsullied. What good were horselords if they moved slower than ships? That's what her bloodriders would say, she knew. Theirs was a stubborn sort of pride, but useful in its own right.

Beside the cavalry marched the Unsullied, disciplined as ever but no accustomed to the cold. Some of her men had fallen ill yet continued to march before Dany had commanded them to rest. It had taken a stern conversation with Grey Worm to see her orders properly carried through. The men sworn to me been the mightiest in the known world, but even the greatest warrior cannot fight beyond his own body's strength.

Dany felt a pair of eyes upon her and turned to see Jon gazing at her, his dark grey eyes meeting her
amethyst ones. It was a strange sensation now, looking into them. Every time she saw him, truly saw him, she remembered her vision in the ship’s cabin, the babe with her eyes, and the girl with his. It still haunted her, a dream of what she could never have.

His words shook her from the forming daydream. “Winterfell should be just over that ridge, Your Grace,” he pointed to a low, rounded hill perhaps a league away. She looked at it. Same as all the others. Everything looks the same. Were it not for the faint rays of sun I’d end up marching back to the sea. The North was dreary, cold, and miserable. She hoped Winterfell, Jon’s home, would be different.

Dany had imagined their arrival a hundred times over in her head. What will he do? What will I say? What of his family? It felt an odd concern. Sailing with him, speaking with him, riding with him… She felt she come to know Jon Snow as she had few other men. She remembered that wonderful bliss of sleeping next to him, his arms wrapped around her, and feeling safe and loved. She had been his family and he hers as they shared a bed this past month or so. Their journey had kept him close. Though she knew that it must, she did not want it to end.

As she looked across the frozen landscape, she felt another presence press against her mind. It was as familiar and warm as Jon’s gaze, but stronger, hotter, and altogether alien at the same time. She knew the feeling well and had for many years. Drogon. His presence pulled at her mind, turning her head westward toward the distant tree line of the Wolfswood. There she saw him, rising slowly from the thickets of snow covered soldier pines. Birds scattered in all directions, their faint songs calling warnings to their brethren, as the massive black dragon lifted himself into the air and flew northward.

As Dany’s eyes followed her dragons path, she saw the first of the old grey towers of the Stark stronghold rise above the crest of the nearest hill. A moment later, their group had reached the top. All Winterfell lay before her, old broken towers and rounded drum towers and thick stone walls that had stood for thousands of years. Outside of the walls there lay a village. Dany could see the smallfolk walking about and tending to their tasks. Within the walls she saw smoke from two dozen fires, the dark plumes rising high and fading into the cold grey of the northern sky. She saw trees within the walls. A forest? No, a godswood, she knew from her reading. All northern houses kept godswoods, even those families that did not follow the old ways, she recited to herself, remembering the histories that Ser Jorah had gifted her those many years ago. Some trees were barren while others still kept their evergreen needles. One stood out against the rest, its branches forming a vast canopy over the otherwise dull green and brown grove. Weirwood, she knew. The word felt odd in her thoughts, foreign yet powerful. She looked intently at the massive white tree in the distance, straining her vision to make out its finer details. The weirwood’s blood red leaves rustled in the chill breeze, shaking the whole of the tree ever so slightly to and fro. It looked eerie, almost alive. The beating heart of the North.

That’s what Winterfell was, in truth. Daenerys knew that the lords of the North were gathered within the keep, awaiting the return of the man they had proclaimed king. Yet Jon had sworn himself and his claim to her. And I to him, in my own way. We have given ourselves to each other. Jorah’s warnings echoed in her mind as she guided her mount down the road that led through the town to Winterfell’s gates. Many of these men fought my father and brother not so long ago. Would they now fight alongside a Targaryen?

A guardsman sounded a horn in the distance as the head of the column approached Winterfell’s gates. The column slowly splintered as it marched onward. Most of the Dothraki broke off to make their wintered camp outside the eastern walls. The Unsullied would do the same on the opposite side. Dany saw the banks of snow piled against the outer walls and wondered if thousands of men could truly weather the Northern winter in tents. I cannot lose half my army to the cold.
Jon directed his mount next to hers as they approach the streets of a small town outside the gates. “The Winter Town,” he said as the details came into view. Dany noticed the blackened sides of some stone buildings, yet their roofs looked to be made of cut slate and fresh pinewood. Jon must have seen it too. “Fire,” he said grimly. “The Boltons left Winterfell and the town a scorched ruin when they drove the ironmen out.” 

Ironmen and Boltons. He said his people had suffered enough and here is the proof.

Daenerys saw the Stark smallfolk scattered before the oncoming column of riders. Old greybeards looked at the royal retinue with tired eyes. Some nodded as she passed whilst others knelt in homage, recognizing their liege lord. Many simply looked at her, their stares pulling her attention in a hundred directions. They don’t trust me. Her advisors had warned of such a reaction on Dragonstone. She had felt out of place before as a foreign ruler in the city of Meereen, yet here she was meant to be queen, meant to rule people that were just now judging her with such suspicion. It made her angry for a moment, a flash of boiling blood that subsided as she looked at Jon. He did not look back.

They passed through the town and under Winterfell’s outer gate, riding into the central yard of Winterfell. Dany saw the large stone keep to her right, snow piled against its high walls, and the arched entrance to the godswood on her left. Between them stood the assembled lords of the North and Vale, fully armored and robed in hues of blue, grey, and black. Their unwelcoming eyes matched their surcoats. Daenerys pulled her palfrey to the side and dismounted in one swift motion as Jon climbed down from his own horse. He walked to her side and as one they walked toward the middle of the yard.

Dany saw a tall girl garbed in fine furs of silver and black step forward, separating herself from the gathered nobility. She wore a long black dress enveloped in her furs. Long auburn hair hung loosely behind her and at her sides. Dany saw the leather fixings of her fur cloak emblazoned with the direwolf of House Stark. Sansa, she knew at once, remembering Jon’s descriptions and stories. He stepped past her and threw his arms around his half-sister, holding her close. She hugged him back. He held her for heart’s beat before releasing her, grabbing her head on either side, and pulling her toward him while planting a kiss upon her brow. She smiled but seemed annoyed at the display of affection all the same. Then Jon stepped back and Dany saw Sansa in full.

The girl’s eyes were blue, a pure and beautiful blue like a southern sea. Yet as she looked at Sansa she saw something else too, an untrusting gaze that emanated a certain coldness. It was more than a little off-putting. Dany recalled what Jon had told her. Sansa had watched her father die, been kept as a hostage in the Red Keep, and had twice been forced to marry against her will. She has known suffering too. Dany recalled her own feelings of dread, of powerlessness and fear when her brother would fly into one of his rages or Drogo would take her during their first few nights together. She never felt that sort of fear anymore, not since she had stepped from her husband’s spent funeral pyre unburnt and reborn. But she remembered the frightened girl she had been. She regarded Sansa for a moment more. Were it she who hatched dragons, what would the realm look like? Dragons had aided in Dany’s conquests as they had Aegon’s, but a woman’s chief weapon was her mind. Judging by her gaze, Sansa Stark’s armaments were no doubt forged of Valyrian steel.

“Your Grace,” Jon stepped forward to bridge the small distance between the two women, “may I present my sister Sansa of House Stark, the Lady of Winterfell. Sansa, this is Daenerys of House Targaryen, Queen of the Seven Kingdoms” Sansa’s icy stare melted then as she feigned a welcoming smile and curtsied low.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Your Grace,” she said with a practiced courtesy, loud enough so all the yard could hear, “we’ve been expecting you for some time. Winterfell welcomes you and thanks you for your aid.” Dany nodded, accepting her thanks as Jon seized that moment, turning to address...
the assembly.

“My lords,” he shouted, adopting a commanding tone that forced Dany to hold back a soft smile.

“The King in the North!” a few lords raised their swords as they hailed their lord. Jon shook his head side to side ever so slightly before continuing.

“Queen Daenerys has pledged herself and her forces to our fight. She had come here to defend the North, to defend your people, our people, from the true enemy.” A quiet breeze of disgruntled murmurs swept through the crowd. “I have pledged the North to her in return,” he finished. The breeze became a tempest of curses as the lords shifted uneasily.

She looked behind her and caught Tyrion’s eye, then Jorah’s. Both men looked uncomfortable as they looked on the scene before them. Behind them the rest of her retinue continued to fill the yard while dismounting their horses. They may have been right after all, but she could not look back now.

“Now is not the time for old grudges and past judgements. The dead have passed the Wall. We must stand together,” Jon’s voice rang through the yard, “only together we will defeat our foe.” He finished, turning to face Daenerys once more. Jon... He had sworn loyalty to her before, once in the cabin and again in the Dragonpit, but here? She saw the lords of the North feel a similar sense of shock. The assembled lords resumed their skeptical glares.

This moment calls for a queen.

Daenerys stepped forth to speak. “I am Daenerys Targaryen, rightful Queen of the Seven Kingdoms,” she had rehearsed the phrase a hundred times before, but ever since Jon’s pledge of loyalty aboard the ship it felt hollow. “I shall have to earn their trust. I must deserve it.” Her words failed her for a moment, her confidence wavering. The she saw in her mind’s eye the pale blue figure launch his bolt into her dragon’s neck, saw Viserion fall from the sky, and a cool purpose filled her. “I know you do not trust me. I will not ask you to. Nor will I ask you to bend the knee. Bent knees will do no good against the dead. Instead I ask that you steel yourselves for the fight to come. Fight with me” Dany felt her spirits rise as she saw the disgruntled looks and murmurs swept away in a tide of sharp nods and “ayes”. It was no roaring cheer or warcry, but it was the best I shall get from these men. Then the din of voices quieted as a hush fell over the crowd. Dany saw the lords’ eyes look beyond her to some unseen figure, apprehension written on their faces.

“Jon,” Sansa said as she stepped forward. Dany watched as Jon turned to his half-sister, her short nod directing him around and toward the castle’s inner walls. There, at the foot of the stone stair, stood another girl. She was of a height with Daenerys, perhaps a bit shorter, with shoulder length brown hair and grey eyes like Jon’s. She wore a tight leather jerkin, fine leather gloves, and well-worn leather boots, all brown to match her hair. Her grey fur cloak was styled in manner Dany had never seen before, draped across her chest like a thick tunic and stitched together from numerous hides, but open in front as well. To allow for movement in combat, Dany realized as her eyes found the thin sword and dagger at the girl’s sides.

Jon had talked about his half-siblings on the way north, he had talked of young Arya with a rare softness in his voice. Lying beside her in bed, he had told her of his little sister. Wild, he had called her, but sweet and caring too. Dany had not known what to expect, imagining everything from a young Dothraki rider to some sweet young southern lady. She had not imagined this.

Arya Stark held her position and posture for a moment, stalwart and stoic. Dany watched Jon step forward, his face betraying no emotion save his eyes. They shone with a tenderness she had seen only once before.
They looked at each other for a moment, just a moment, before Arya’s expression crumbled and she ran toward Jon. He stepped to meet her… and was almost knocked off his feet as she jumped up to hug him, wrapping her arms around him and burying her face in the furs of his cloak. Jon hugged her back, his arms holding firm as he leaned back to support her weight. Then, holding her close, he laughed.

Dany had heard him laugh before, the soft laughter he reserved for their time alone; those few, sweet hours when they lay together with heads resting on pillows, lost in each other’s’ presence. She could recall another sort of laugh too, the hearty chuckle he sometimes offered in response to one of Tyrion’s or Ser Davos’ jokes. This was different; a ringing sound as clear and pure as the cold morning air. It echoed through the courtyard. Dany saw some of the assembled lords smile and laugh as well. Seeking to maintain her royal demeanor, Dany allowed herself only a small smile.

At last, Arya released her brother and landed deftly on her feet. They regarded each other for a moment before Jon reached forward with one hand, playfully tussling the brown hair atop her head and laughing again. She tried to swat his hand away, but he had already dropped it low, trying to pull the thin sword at Arya’s belt from its sheath. With an almost unnatural swiftness, she caught his wrist with her hand, twisting it slightly and looking up at him with a devious grin. Jon looked surprised. Slowly, she let go and pulled the sword out, turning it to present to her brother hilt first. He grasped it in his right hand.

“After all this time, you managed to keep it?” he chuckled, disbelief coloring his tone as he turned the blade over, inspecting the thin yet strong castle forged steel.

“In a way. It found its way home just like I did,” she said, proud yet joking. Jon offered her the thin blade back and she sheathed it while nodding to the scabbard at Jon’s side. “Looks like a sword found you too.”

Jon smiled as he grasped Longclaw’s hilt and drew it from its sheath, rippled steel shimmering in the morning light. He had shown the blade to Daenerys months ago, while they had still remained on Dragonstone. Jon had been stripped of all arms upon his arrival, of course, but she had escorted him to the armory to retrieve the blade after he had mentioned it in passing. The armory had been guarded by a single Unsullied sentry, and he promptly stepped aside to let his queen pass. Inside, the few lit torches had cast their dim light on the piles of spears, shields, and swords.

Jon’s sword leaned against the wall in a corner. He had retrieved the weapon and drew it from its scabbard. Dany still remembered the sense of awe she felt looking at the blade, its steel colored silver and granite and rippled like oil stirred in with water. She had never seen a Valyrian steel blade before, but she knew the lore.

“Valyrian steel,” he had said, “forged-”

“-in the fires of the Old Valyria itself,” she had breathed out the interruption, remembering her lessons from childhood. The dragonlords of the freehold had made their weapons with dragonfire and sorcery, a process lost in the Doom. Viserys had always talked of Blackfyre, their family’s ancestral sword, lost to the ages as well. He had said that when they returned home and reclaimed his birthright, he would have the Valyrian blades of the Usurpers’ dogs melted down and a new Blackfyre made.

“It’s called Longclaw,” Jon said, though his eyes, almost black in the dim light, seemed to be focused on her instead of the blade. Dany had moved closer to him, a hand’s length away, and reached for the hilt of the sword. “Careful, Your Grace,” he whispered caution as he guided the hilt into her grip with one arm and steadied her arm with another. It’s lighter than I thought. He stepped
back then, letting her hold the sword with two hands. “You handle a sword well,” he had laughed softly.

The memory of Jon’s laugh melded with the sound of his mirth in the castle yard before her. Arya held Longclaw now, looking graceful yet ridiculous as she swung a sword far too big for her body. Smiling, she returned it to Jon and he sheathed it again. Jon turned to look at Daenerys, his eyes alight with joy. She smiled back at him, happy for him.

Yet as she stood there watching Jon with his sister, she felt a sudden sadness fill her. Something more than melancholy but less than despair. On the ship and on the road, she and Jon had been as one, sharing their meals together, sharing her bed. It had felt so easy, so natural, being with him. But now he’s home. With his family. The hope she held for a future with him seemed to fade like the sun’s light behind a cloud. And where is my family? My parents are dead. My brothers are dead. My family will fade away with me.

An uncomfortable tightness seized her chest as her quiet despair played over again in her mind. These thoughts were not new. Loneliness haunted Daenerys, a scar that no one could see. With Jon she felt healed, more whole, but even so the scar remained. And now he is back among his sisters and his people? She had seen the looks from the smallfolk and lords alike. They don’t trust a Targaryen. If the Stark people and bannermen did not accept her, would the Starks? Would Jon? I am his queen. I am his lover. Could I be a part of his family? What had Tyrion said that night aboard the ship? A fine match for the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms… Could I be his wife?

It would be a lie to say this was the first time she had asked herself that question. That vision had ignited her imagination. When she dreamt of the future, of victory, it was not the Iron Throne she saw. It was Jon. His grey eyes, his soft smile, his scars… She remembered running her fingers across the rough grooves on his bare chest as he told her what had happened. His scars were deep, unnaturally so, but there was something deeper still, some connection she felt with him that she felt with no one else.

As she thought of him, that familiar Targaryen fire rushed through her veins, veins that ran with the blood of Aegon the Conqueror and her brother Rhaegar. Fire and blood, a small but firm voice whispered in the back of her mind. Take what’s yours. The urge that had driven her to sack the slaver cities, to burn the khals, and to ambush the Lannister forces took hold… yet it was somehow calmer, gentler, tempered by the tenderness she felt when she looked at him. Confidence filled her, burning away the cold and uncertainty. She wanted him. She would have him. All of him… Now and always. But no, not now. Now is not the right time. She resolved to broach the subject when they were alone. Perhaps in the godswood, or else tonight in their chambers.

“Your Grace,” Jon was walking toward her with Arya at his side, “may I introduce my sister Arya.” Dany pushed her thoughts to the back of her mind and turned to face Arya Stark. Jon’s sister did not curtsy, kneel, or bow as the others had. Instead, she looked at Daenerys, into Daenerys, with cold grey eyes. Her stare was off putting and she held it unblinking. Jon looked on, his smile transforming from one of happiness to one of confusion. Dany met Arya’s gaze, determined to win this battle of wills, but Arya broke off the contest, cracking a smile and nodding her head deeply in a bow of her own sort.

“I saw your dragon flying over the forest before you arrived,” she spoke first, ignoring the tradition of a monarch speaking first just as she had ignored the need to bow. “Black. Like Balerion the Dread. What’s its name?”

“Drogon. He’s the larger of my dragons… and the one I ride,” she delivered the answer with a hint of boastfulness. Arya’s eyes widened. It had clearly worked. Dany regarded the girl again.
“I’m glad you’ve come to Winterfell,” Arya adopted a more mellow and respectful tone, nodding again before stepping back a half pace and ceding the space to Jon. He smiled again and rubbed Arya’s head with a gloved hand as she moved to join her sister. Dany looked at Jon as he looked past her, his eyes focusing on someone she could not see. He took a few swift paces, fur cloak waving gently behind him as he made his way to a large man clothed in black garb.

“Oh!” she heard the man give a shout of surprise as Jon hugged the man, struggling to wrap his arms around the other’s girth. Their hug was brief, the way greetings often were between two men. Jon let go and they stood laughing and patting each other. Then Jon spoke.

“I received your raven. We’ve brought the dragonglass north. Mountains of it. Well done, Sam.”

“Oh, well… I did not much, truly. Just a bit of reading…” he looked at Dany then back at Jon. “It’s good to see you again, Jon,” he offered a smile.

Dany walked to Jon’s side as the silent composure of the courtyard assembly began to fracture. Guards were returning to their posts. Stable hands were helping her retinue and riders with their mounts. She saw the lords begin to chat with each other, gathering in a dozen smaller circles. She watched as Tyrion approached Sansa, the younger girl towering over her former husband. Her Hand said something that she could not hear and Sansa offered a polite smile in return before turning away a moment later. Then, Dany turned back as she heard Jon begin to introduce her to his friend.

“Your Grace, this is Samwell Tarly. He was my brother on the Wall,” he said, continuing, “Sam, this is Daenerys Targaryen.” Tarly? Is that what he said? Samwell Tarly… Guilt rushed through her and she glanced back at Tyrion for a moment, but his attentions were directed elsewhere. Does he know? Jon certainly did not, nor did she intended to tell him just now. Strength can be terrible. That’s what she had said to him and to herself. She felt terrible. I burned his family alive. It had been the right decision, she knew, but it did not make facing Samwell Tarly any easier.

Sam’s eyes met hers for a just a moment, but long enough for her to see the uncertainty in his gaze. “Targaryen… oh…” Sam looked back and forth between her and Jon. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Your Grace,” he offered meekly, voice shaking. He spoke to Jon then, “Bran is back too, Jon. He’s, well, different than you may remember him.”

“His visions,” Jon offered his own explanation. On Dragonstone, they had received Winterfell’s raven bearing news of Bran, his visions, and the army of the dead. Dany had wondered then what sort of magic gave Jon’s half-brother his visions, but she had never doubted them. How could I? After what she had seen in the east, visions seemed normal enough to her.

“Yes,” Sam said hesitantly, “and much else besides. Best to hear it from him, I think. He’ll be in the godswood, by the weirwood tree.” Jon nodded at Sam and looked at Dany before turning to walk back across the yard at her side. He made for his sisters, Arya still grinning and Sansa with a faint smile upon her face, and then toward the archway that led to Winterfell’s sacred grove. Dany walked at his side with the Stark sisters and a few Winterfell sentries behind her.

They walked under the stone arch and into the godswood. Dany drew in a quick, cold breath as the torchlit stone walls gave way to a beautiful grove of oaks, maples, and evergreen pines. Trees, some barren and others still with their leaves, rimmed the enclosure with thick frost-covered underbrush connecting them like spans of stone wall between tall towers. A thin layer of snowfall covered the ground where pale, dappled light fell through barren branches and leaves, illuminating the grove with an almost spiritual quality. And there in the center stood the massive white weirwood she had seen from the hill outside Winterfell’s gates. Its red leaves hung over the grove, rustling gently in the wind. It’s warmer here, she realized. The wind did not sting her cheeks as it
had riding across the frozen hills. The winter breeze whispered wordlessly in her ear as she stepped fully into the clearing and saw the face carved upon the tree, its white eyes keeping watch over the grove of the old gods of the North.

Snow crunched lightly under Dany’s feet as she walked underneath the trees beside Jon. She took in another deep breath, savoring the crisp, clean scent of the godwood. She, Jon, and the others made their way around a large pond that sat frozen beside the weirwood. As they turned, a lone figure came into view, robed in thick furs and slumped over in a large wooden chair an arm’s length from the tree. And his eyes… Dany could see them from where she stood. His eyes shone as white as the snow around them, blank and unseeing. She heard Jon’s uneven breath and saw him tense for a moment. He hesitantly moved forward but Sam got there first, feet shuffling ahead through the snow and ice. He laid a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Bran,” Sam’s voice was soft as his gently shook the boy. Brandon Stark’s eyes flashed, alternating between a pale nothingness and the same blue eyes of his sister Sansa as he returned to consciousness.

“Bran…” Jon said, approaching the boy’s wooden chair and bending to embrace his half-brother. “I thought you were dead.” Dany watched the reunion with a sense of curiosity. Sansa and Arya she had understood. They may have been strangers, but she had looked into their eyes and found something familiar. But those eyes.

“I’m glad you’re home, Jon,” Bran’s monotone voice drained the words of their intended emotion, “I’ve been waiting for you.” Sam shifted nervously behind the reunited brothers as Jon released his half-brother from his hug and stood tall to regard him in full.

“Your eyes, Bran…” he began “what did you see?”

“I’m the three-eyed raven now, Jon. I can see everything.” Everything? “I need to speak with you. Alone.” He insisted, though any hint of authority was lost as his hot breath dissipated in the cold air.

Jon regarded him for a moment, confusion writ clearly on his face. “In a moment,” he said as he turned to Dany, bidding her step forward with an open arm. “Bran, this is-”

“Daenerys Targaryen,” he said plainly, as though her arrival in the godwood were as expected as that evening’s supper. His eyes met hers as he spoke, “It’s good to see you again.” Again? An odd sense of unease filled her then. She remembered the feeling; it was the same thing she had felt when Quaithe and Mirri Maz Duur had spoken to her. It felt like she had swallowed a stone, a low sinking feeling weighing her down from the pit of her stomach. What does he know? What has he seen?

She addressed him, “it is a pleasure to meet you as well, Bran.” He nodded, accepting her response with a cold indifference.

“I need to speak with Jon,” he said again. He has sent ravens to warn us before, what could be so important as to merit a private meeting? Dany watched as Jon acquiesced to his request, nodding at his sisters and the others that had followed them into the godwood. Bran interrupted him as he turned to Sam, “Samwell already knows,” he said, raising a hand to stay the plump man’s movements. Then he turned to Daenerys again.

“Daenerys will stay. Whatever it is that concerns me concerns her as well.” Jon insisted. That gave her some small degree of comfort.

“Very well,” Bran nodded solemnly. Silence overtook the group for a moment as they watched the others leaves the same way they had come. Dany looked around the godwood again, taking in the
scenery before resting her gaze back on the boy in the chair. Bran met no one’s gaze, staring instead at the white branches of the weirwood before him. As the Stark sisters disappeared through the archway, Jon broke the silence.

“What is it, then? Have you some news of the Night King or The Wall?” concerned colored his voice as he demanded answers from his half-brother. Bran glanced at Sam, then again on Dany before meeting Jon’s gaze.

“Sam and I have learned the truth,” he said cryptically. Dany’s mind raced. What was he talking about?

“The truth about what?” Jon pressed the boy for answers.

“The truth about you, Jon. You’re not a Stark—”

“I know that.” He interrupted, clearly annoyed now. Dany watched as Jon shifted his stance into a more defensive posture. She had seen him do that before, during their first few encounters on Dragonstone. He was uncomfortable.

“You’re not a Snow either, or a bastard by any name. Eddard Stark was not your father.” The words seemed to wipe the frustration from Jon’s face. His lips and cheeks relaxed from their grimace and returned to that expressionless state Dany knew so well. Only his eyes betrayed his thoughts now. She could see them alive with shock and confusion. She stood by silently. Do I say anything? Place my hand in his?

She did not know what to do. In their countless conversations, Jon had only spoke of Lord Eddard Stark a number of times, yet each mention of his father had brought a strange mix of melancholy and pride to his grey eyes. Dany knew the feeling; a wonderful sense of belonging tempered by the knowledge that your family was not truly yours. Eddard Stark had been stolen away from Jon just as Dany’s family had been from her.

Jon spoke then, his words impatient, “Aye, then who was?” It was more of a demand than a question. Bran turned away from Jon and looked again at the tree.

“Rhaegar Targaryen,” his answer hung in the air, frozen. “I saw him, him and my aunt Lyanna. Your mother. They were in love, Jon.”

What? The godswood spun before her as the words echoed in her mind. The weirwood’s leaves shone a deep, fiery crimson as they caught the brightening rays of the sun. Rhaegar… Dany felt her heart leap and skip a beat as her breath quickened. And Jon. She looked at him, garbed in his padded armor and dark fur cloak. He stood motionless as he listened.

“They married,” injected Sam, his voice quivering, “Rhaegar had his oaths to Elia Martell annulled. Lyanna remained in Dorne when he went to fight Robert Baratheon and… well…”

“Robert killed him on the Trident. But Lyanna lived… long enough to have you. My father claimed you as his own and brought you back to Winterfell,” Bran said, continuing. “He called you Jon. To protect you. But Lyanna named you Aegon, of House Targaryen,” he finished.

The sun’s pale rays of light seemed golden now. Jon. She looked at him felt a surge of warmth in her chest. Aegon Targaryen. My family. Was it true? Her mind raced. His arrival at Dragonstone. Their moment in the caves. On the cliffs with Drogon… Yes. She knew it then, perhaps she always had, deep in that place beyond memory and before dreams. Fire filled her, but not the red rage she so often felt. This was different, a happiness she had not felt in many years. She smiled, a true
smile, wide and unrelenting. She wanted to laugh, to shout into the chilled silence of the sacred grove. Most of all she wanted him. Just to be with him, to hold him.

“Jon…” she breathed out his name on a whisper, not even intending to speak aloud. Jon turned to look at her, his grey eyes wide and showing a rare sadness. She felt her radiant joy darken as she looked into his eyes. Sadness filled them. Why? She did not understand, not truly. He had a family, she was his family and he hers. She stepped forward and grasped his hand tightly but met with only a weak squeeze in return. She looked up into his eyes.

“I…” words failed him as he opened his mouth. What do I say? She held his hand tighter still, willing her joy to spread from her body to his. They stood in silence for a moment before Jon looked away as he so often did. Gaze averted, he opened his mouth to speak once more, but his words were cut off. A horn sounded in the distance, shaking them both from their silent reflection. Jon turned to look at Bran and Sam. Sam gave an unknowing shrug as the horn sounded again.

“We should go and see.” Jon let go of her hand and stepped away from the tree, away from Sam and Bran, away from her. She followed as he made his way back across the snow-covered ground of the godwood to the archway that led to the central yard. Would that we could have a moment alone. She cursed the horn and the horn blower and every damned sound in the castle. He was confused, she understood that, but she knew she could help him understand. Aegon Targaryen. My brother’s son. This was meant to be. We are meant to be.

She would have to find another time. Perhaps tonight. She would be with him tonight and they would make love and talk while wrapped in each other’s arms. Yes. A breeze picked up as they exited the passageway, carrying with it a hundred whispers. Dany looked ahead and saw lords and guards and members of her own retinue standing around a figure, cloaked in black and mounted on a dark horse. She watched as Tyrion approach the rider cautiously, his mouth moving and speaking words she could not hear.

Then the rider raised his left hand and pulled back his hood. At once, Dany recognized the short-cropped golden hair from their parlay at the Dragonpit. Jaime Lannister, the Kingslayer, the man who had killed her father and tried to kill her, sat mounted before her. She looked at him, then back toward the gate then led out toward the Winter Town and beyond. No crimson clad soldiers marched through after him. Perhaps they’re setting up camp outside the walls. As she thought the words, she knew they were not right. He was clad in simple black leather, not his crimson and gold armor she had seen previously. At a word from his brother, Jaime turned to look at Daenerys and Jon beside her, fear and regret written on his face. No, she thought as a cold anger washed over her. He has come alone.
The Three-Eyed Raven I

Chapter Summary

The Three Eyed Raven has a vision.

The Three-Eyed Raven sat alone in the godswood of Winterfell. A gentle breeze rustled the red canopy of the heart tree, plucking a few weakened leaves from their rooted holdings and softly placing them upon the ice of the frozen pond below. The wind pushed the barren trees around him, making them sway to and fro, just so. He felt the air upon his face and liked it, a sweet caress like a mother’s soft hands. It seemed so warm on this side of the Wall.

He looked at the heart tree, knowing what he must do. It was his duty to see, to learn, to know. He reached out and touched the weirwood, fingers brushing against the rough white bark. His mind reached out too, his consciousness pressing against the thick trunk before him. He urged it forward. *It should be easier now,* a voice whispered in the back of his mind. He listened to it, light and familiar like a child’s. *Breathe,* it told him, *just breathe.* He exhaled slowly and watched his hot breath form a brief mist in front of him. *Breathe…*

He felt it then, as he closed two eyes. His thoughts rushed forward along his fingers, merging with the roots and tendrils of the weirwood, reaching the other trees in the grove, the trees in the Winter Town, in the Wolfswood and beyond. He breathed deeply again, and felt the cold nighttime air seep into his skin with the snow and ice. He felt the hooves of an elk press into his side, the wet earth giving way ever-so-slightly. He let himself sink into the earth itself, his roots spreading across a thousand leagues and ten thousand years. Then he opened his eyes. All of them.

A thousand eyes and one saw everything, but understood little. He felt himself pulled in all directions as memories flashed by him. A soldier with a seven-pointed star carved upon his shield and brow. A husband hugging his wife, tears in her eyes as the man turned from his low hovel to joined his comrades marching down a dirt road. A fire among some trees, burning brightly in the night. Stars. Endless stars that brightened and dimmed and brightened again as they swirled around him. The Three-Eyed Raven reached out, grasping at one, but it dissolved in his hand like a wisp of cold mist. *Breathe,* the voice said again. He did, and watched the clouds roll over the hills as snow fell and melted and gave way to spring wildflowers. The sun rose and set and rose again. Orbs of gold and silver light wheeled overhead. Every breath felt as long as a life age of the earth.

*Focus,* the voice said, and he did. The spinning slowed. *Focus.* The sun set over the Wolfswood and a bright, full moon rose over the countryside. He saw it now, countless eyes looking in from all directions. The heart tree at Winterfell stood in repose next to the shallow pool. Green moss covered the ground and green hung above him, a canopy of dimmed colors cast in pale moonlight. *Summer,* he knew. A light breeze rustled the leaves, carrying with it the faint sounds of boisterous shouting and cheers. *A feast,* whispered the voice. Even now, he could still remember that.

A sob cut through the tranquil silence of the sacred grove. “Please…” he heard a voice say, “please…” He turned and saw a boy, garbed in brown and black leather with black hair to match, sitting upon a patch of thick moss. *Bran?* No, he would know Bran’s memories. This boy was younger than Bran, different hair and different eyes. Grey eyes, almost black in the moonlight, and rimmed with tears than shone silver.
“Please, make me like Robb,” he begged the night air, “make me true and trueborn. Please…” He buried his face in his crossed arms and sobbed silently again.

“Jon…” the Three-Eyed Raven spoke the name allowed, realizing who stood before him. The boy looked up again, surprise clear in his eyes.

“Hello?” the young Jon asked, voice shaking with sadness and uncertainty. No one was there. The wind, he would think. Alone but for the wind that softly shook the trees and rustled the leaves and disturbed the shallow waters of the godswood pool. Accepting his loneliness, the boy slumped over again and sighed deeply as he listened to the sounds of the feast echoing from beyond the grove’s enclosure.

The wind blew again and the scene before him dissolved, washed away like dirt in a rainstorm. He was flying then, over hearth and hill and hall, forest and field. The sun rose and set and rose again as he left the land behind and skimmed across the dark waters of the sea, black waves roiling in a summer storm. He blinked, a swift shadow passing over his thousand eyes. For a moment, everything was dark.

Then bright sunlight filled his vision and laughter his ears. He stood on a cobblestone street, a few passersby garbed in colorful robes of purple and crimson and green, murmuring words in a foreign tongue. A house stood before him, structured like all the others with high, arched windows, shuttered to the street outside. It made for an impressive façade. He heard laughter ringing from one of them, a multitude of voices both high and deep. Was this important? Is this what I must learn? The voice inside him wondered. He moved forward, his hand pushing aside a heavy oaken door painted in a deep red, and walked into the home.

He stepped into the courtyard of the house. Smooth stones covered the surface of the yard, making way for small bushes and a simple fountain in the center. A stout lemon tree grew in the northwest corner. The laughter was clearer in here, filling the interior with the joyous sounds of childhood. He walked toward the tree and peered into the arched window beside it.

A boy stood hunched over in a fit of laughter, his silver hair a tangle around his face as he pointed at a man sitting upon the edge of a bed. He was a large man, with broad shoulders and a heavy-set brow. Golden hair covered the sides of his head and formed a silver-gold beard upon his cheeks and chin. It sparkled as if wet. He could see why. The man wore a confused grin as he examined the crushed lemon in his large, muscled hand; itself glittering with the juices of the fruit he had just pulverized.

Behind him, a girl sat upon the bed, biting her lower lip, trying but failing to stifle her own giggles. She was younger then the boy, but shared his lilac eyes and pale silver hair. She crawled forward and took the ruined lemon from the old man’s hand, placing it gently upon a pewter plater that held an assortment of fruits, seasoned meats, and small blocks of cheese. Then she smiled again, a childish smile with a missing front tooth; a smile that brought a broader grin to the man’s face as he patted her gently and spoke. “Thank you, Princess,” he chuckled lightly.

The wind again blew through the open window, the gust dissolving the figures before him. He was gone, brushed away out of the house and down the cobblestone street and across the city. Across many cities, across vast swaths of countryside and narrow streets lined with old, gnarled trees. He reached out, mind and hands grasping at a branch, rooting himself down wherever he was. He looked around again. He was outside another house, this one drab and far less grand than the one before. Shouting echoed from inside. He moved forward, crossing the threshold before him.

Two figures occupied a courtyard alongside an empty fountain and barren, brown bushes. The boy and girl he had just seen, he realized, but older. The boy stood taller, his hair a bit longer, his
clothes more ragged and his face tired. His purple eyes, ringed with dark circles, shone with a black rage as he breathed quickly, chest rising and falling in uneven movements.

The girl stood across from him, silent tears streaming down her face. Her silver hair was longer too, and her long green dress was frayed at the ends. An angry red mark was forming on her left cheek. “I warned you,” the boy said, “this is all your fault. I warned you not to wake the dragon. You will not do it again, will you?” The question was not posed as such. The girl nodded meekly.

“Bran?” a voice rang through the courtyard as he watched the boy storm off, leaving his sister with her tears. “Bran.” The scene dissolved before him and he felt himself drawn back across the sea, back through the branches and the roots and the from the deep places in the earth. Back through his fingers and veins and bones. Back into his broken body. He opened his eyes.

“Bran,” Sansa stood before him, her back dress and black fur cloak standing out against her auburn hair. He looked up, the sun hung lower in the western sky, casting long shadows over the godswood. Another moment might see it slip below the walls of Winterfell. *It must be later than I thought.* Sansa regarded him for a moment, then spoke again. “It’s getting late, Bran. You should come back to the keep.”

It was cold, he realized. He could not feel his legs, of course, but a chill had crept into his fingers, making them stiff and numb. He turned to look at his sister. “Jaime Lannister is here,” he said plainly.

“He’s come alone,” Sansa said with an edge to her tone. “Jon has placed him in some tower room while they debate what to do.” The Lannisters had promised to marches their forces north, yet they had betrayed the realm and the Starks. *I could have seen that,* he told himself. But there was so much else to see, so much he did not know. *My task is greater than Starks and Lannisters and Targaryens.* Yet still he did not know what that task was.

Sansa stepped closer, laying a gloved hand on his shoulder. His furs covered him, but he could still feel her touch. “What did you see just now?” she said, voice barely above a whisper. She had not asked about his visions, not at all. *Perhaps she’s afraid.*

“Jon, I think,” he said. He met Sansa’s gaze but she looked away, an odd look on her face. Silence settled in between them as brother and sister lost themselves in thought. Then she spoke.

“What did you say to him earlier today? What was it that is so secret his own sisters could not know?” Her tone was almost accusatory.

“You’re not,” the words escaped his lips before his thoughts had even formed. It was hard, sometimes, to remember who he was and how to speak and reason with people. Memories of a thousand lifetimes would flash amidst his thoughts. *Bran, they call me, but that is only part of who I am now. A single sapling in a mighty forest.*

“What do you mean? Not what?” she spoke the words slowly, emphasizing each one. Bran had not spoken those words, but Bran would have to explain them now.

“Jon is your cousin, not your brother.”

“That’s impossible,” she began to explain. “Uncle Benjen took the black and Brandon and Lyanna died before any of us were born. He is father’s bastard. Our brother.”

“Lyanna died giving birth to Jon.” He saw the scene clear in his mind. He had visited it time and time again. Lord Eddard kneeling beside his sister, the faint cries of her newborn son, the
whispered words between siblings. *Promise me, Ned. Promise me.*

“… You saw this?” she asked, hesitant. He nodded and watched for Sansa’s reaction. Realization flashed in her eyes, a bolt of lightning upon a deep blue sky. Her lips parted slightly to speak again. “…Then that would mean…”

“Jon is the trueborn son of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark,” he finished her thought.

“And you… you saw this? You’re sure?” she sounded uncertain, wary even. They had not spent much time together since reuniting. He knew how she felt about him now. Love tempered with fear of the unknown. He did not have to see anything to know that; it was writ plain on her face.

“In a tower in Dorne. Where he was born,” he finished simply. He watched her digest the information, mouth twisting as if she were chewing on some bitter root.

“Who else knows?” she demanded, a harshness creeping into her tone.

“Samwell Tarly and Daenerys Targaryen.” He saw her breathe deeply.

“No one else can know, Bran. No one. If the Northern lords found out Jon was the son of Rhaegar Targaryen… They already mistrust Daenerys. Some of them even mistrust me. And I don’t trust them.” A memory stirred inside him; one of Bran’s from a happier time. Summer in Winterfell, his mother sitting him down and scolding him for some forgotten offense. Her stern blue eyes looking into his. He regarded Sansa then, her eyes blue like their mothers.

“He needed to know,” he explained. Sansa nodded, accepting what he had told her. She could not see as he saw, could not remember what the trees and stones and mossy earth remembered. He could. Yet what Jon’s true parentage meant eluded him still. *And what I saw just now? Why did I see that?* He still needed to practice, to hone his mind for the war to come. He needed to see better. To remember.

The sun had sunk behind the outer walls, casting snow-covered ground of the godswood in shadow. Rays of sunlight still shone above them, pale orange beams of light that scattered upon the red leaves of the heart tree. Sansa spoke then. “It’s getting cold, Bran,” the harshness of her commanding tone was gone, replaced with an almost motherly affection. “Come inside.”

He reached inside his mind, Bran’s mind, and recalled what it was to smile. He did not have to go far. He looked at his sister and turned the corners of his mouth upward. “Thank you, Sansa. I’ll stay out here a bit longer.” She looked at him, a sad smile appearing on her face before she turned away and walked out of the grove.

He turned back to the tree, looking into the white eyes that wept tears of dried red sap. He reached out with his mind again, this time to the branches instead of the trunk. He felt them there, talons grasping at the ancient white bark. Like a hand slipping on an old leather glove, he slipped into the skin of first raven. Then the second. And then the rest. One by one he saw his eyes flash white, a blast of strange scents and colors filling his mind. He felt light as the wind rushed under his folded wings.

Then he pushed off the branch of the weirdwood and, flapping his many wings, brought himself above the trees and the walls of Winterfell. The vast landscape of the North spread out in front of him, and with his sharpened eyesight he could now see what his two blue eyes could not. Smaller birds flitted from tree to tree in the small groves of soldier pines he passed over. The chill evening wind stirred the snow, making wispy columns of tiny ice crystals dance in the day’s failing light.
He flew onward, across forest and field and river. A razor thin moon rose over the endless tracts of snow, its light just enough to see by. He lost himself in the beat of hundred black wings, always steadying himself against the push and pull of the northern air. The moon rose higher in the sky. And higher. Onward he flew. North and east and north again.

The Three-Eyed Raven felt them before he saw them. A bitter cold bit into him, cutting through feather and muscle and bone. He could feel it in his body in Winterfell too. A presence pressed against his mind like a slowly growing glacier. He’s here. There, far below on the frozen ground, he saw the legions of dead man marching onward. A hundred eyes strained to make out the details. Corpses in black furs, grey furs, and leather armor moved slowly through the fallen snow. Some even wore armor, their steel breastplates glinting dimly in the moonlight. He saw the falcon sigils on their surcoats.

It was time to leave. The dead were here. He would not be far now. The Three-Eyed Raven marked the location in his mind. The trees, the hills, the frozen river. How far had he flown, a hundred leagues? Fewer? The others would need to know. Fifty bodies turned as one and flew back the way they came. Home, he spoke to them as one, go home.

He drew a ragged, gasping breath as if surfacing from the icy pond beside him. He looked up, but could not see the moon beyond the canopy of dim red leaves. It was time to rest. He called for a guard, his voice hoarse from disuse. Someone must have heard him, he felt it. Leather boots pounded against the frozen earth. A guard emerged from the archway with torch in hand.

“M’lord?” he asked, concerned.

“To my chambers, if you would,” he motioned at the wooden chair. The guard nodded, putting his torch aside as he grasped the handles at the back of the chair and pushing it forward across the godswood. It seemed a painfully slow process, but once through the archway two more men came to help, another guardsman and a stable boy. He saw them scurry from a darkened corner, leaving horns of ale and a set of dice behind on the ground.

His three companions saw him to the keep, up the stairs, and to his chambers with plenty of grunts and ‘pardon m’lords’ as they clumsily lifted his heavy chair up the stone stairs. The largest of the guards set him down in his bed while the stable boy lit a fire in his hearth. He thanks them all and dismissed them. He looked around the room. Bran’s room. It felt odd but familiar, like reuniting with a childhood friend. He disrobed as best he could and climbed under the furs, basking in the warm glow of the fire.

Sleep weighed heavy on him, though he fought it, striving for just another waking moment. His dreams would be troubled. He knew that. They always were these days. Greendreams, Jojen had called them.Visions of a different sort. He remembered them all. A thousand thousand stars flashing blue and white in whirling night sky. A woman’s dreadful scream as cold fire erupted from a bloody wound. A lion, hide pierced by five arrows, lying dead upon the snow. More dreams swirled about him as darkness clouded the corners of his vision. At last, unable to withstand it any longer, he closed his eyes.
Tyrion II

Chapter Summary

Tyrion Lannister adjusts his plans.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for the reviews and kudos. This chapter took a bit longer to write than I thought it would... some mix of writer's block and motivational issues. Oh well. We forge ahead.

His ass hurt. A dull, throbbing ache that never seemed to subside. Even after two nights spent within the comfort of Winterfell’s heated walls, Tyrion could not rid himself of the saddle sores suffered from days spent riding on winter roads. It had been an unpleasant journey upon the back of a particularly unpleasant black gelding. Thrice Tyrion had tried soaking himself in a hot bath to ease his pains. It was easy enough to do, servants would draw and carry water from the keep’s natural hot springs and fill the small brass tub in his quarters. The first and second baths had felt wonderful, the hot water driving the chills and aches from his bones and easing the cramping in his legs. Only after the third time did he realize the water smelled faintly of sulfur. *I’ll need a bath after my bath*, he had thought.

With long bouts of sitting out of the question, Tyrion had elected instead to spend his time walking and wandering the walls and passageways of Winterfell. He remembered only some of the layout. The last time he was here was many years ago, late into that great summer that now seemed so far away. The dark greens of the northern pines and broadleafs had been replaced by snow and ice, a dozen hues of white cast upon the greys and browns of the castle’s walls and roofs. Winterfell looked different now, but more beautiful too. He enjoyed walking along the battlements of the inner wall, gazing out upon the Winter Town and the frozen hills beyond.

The views within the keep were less spectacular. Dim torches illuminated dark stone halls that wound on endlessly. As he waddled down a dark, unfamiliar corridor, he pulled at his memories, trying to recall which way to go. *Left or right?* It did not help that he had been drunk for much of his first visit here, on his way to see The Wall. He had refused the Stark’s hospitality on his way back south, preferring instead to sleep in a brothel instead of suffer young Lord Robb’s insults.

*Left*, he decided at random, hoping for the best. The keep seemed bigger than he remembered, more rooms and passageways and towers than he could hope to successfully navigate. The great hall was his destination now, to meet with the Northern lords and convince his queen and the Lord of Winterfell of his brother’s good intentions.

Jaime had arrived two days ago, dressed in black and riding upon a swift black stallion. Indeed, everything was black save the golden hilt and pommel of a sword emerging from his black cloak’s cover. Tyrion had known who it was before the figure removed his hood. He knew how his brother rode, the way he still dipped his left shoulder as if tilting at the lists and the way he kept
his sword hand resting in his saddle. That knowledge did nothing to lessen his shock at seeing his face.

Of course, Tyrion had been expecting Jaime. They all had. Only in a fortnight or another moon’s turn. It would take time to gather supplies and men from the south and march them up the Kingsroad. Tyrion had guessed his brother might bring another five thousand men to fight against the dead; those who had survived Daenerys’ ambush and the siege of the Rock. Perhaps they’ll be along in another moment. Tyrion had strained his ears for the distant sound of stomping boots or shaking mail, but heard only the disquieted murmurs around him as the other lords looked on in suspicion. His family’s men were not marching north. One look into Jaime’s green eyes told him as much.

If I had only had another moment alone with him, he thought as he passed through a wide corridor. He had been first to approach Jaime, to question his appearance, but he did not get far. The horns that had announced Jaime’s arrival had summoned everyone back to the center yard. Any lords and knights not already present returned at once while sentries and smallfolk had abandoned their tasks to turn and look upon the scene. The queen and Jon Snow had emerged from a snow-covered archway not a moment later, ostensibly having been speaking with the Lord of Winterfell’s younger half-brother in the Stark’s godswood.

They looked every bit the royal match as they crossed the yard; Daenerys in her grey, fur-lined riding dress and Jon with his great fur cloak. Their facial expressions had been less reserved. Jon had seemed sullen, as he so often did, and Daenerys had worn a curious expression on her face. Joy? He honestly could not say. He and the queen had shared some lighthearted moments together, but even armed with those memories Tyrion could not give the look she wore then a proper name.

The warm fire in her eyes had faded as she surveyed the scene and realized who the rider in black truly was and that he had ridden alone. Then, as he so often had since they landed on Dragonstone, Tyrion saw a hot rage begin to boil within his queen. He knew the signs; the clenched fists, tight jaw, pursed lips, yet it always shone brightest in her amethyst eyes, like a tempest at twilight.

“Your Grace,” Jaime had spoken as he clumsily dismounted from his stallion, sword rattling at his side as he landed with a dull thud upon the frozen ground. Shut your mouth you damned fool.

“Your Grace!” Tyrion pursued his brother across the yard as he cut off his speech. “May I present my brother, Jaime of House Lannister,” he breathed out the introduction over mutters of “Kingslayer” and “oathbreaker” in the crowd.

“You’ve brought fewer men than we were expecting,” Daenerys said with a cold edge to her voice. “Perhaps the rest of the Lannister forces are on their way by ship?” Jaime looked at Tyrion for a moment, his jaw locked tight as if preparing to charge, but his eyes looked to Tyrion for aid.

“I… no, Your Grace,” he said, stepping closer to her, drawing his sword slowly from its ornate sheath. Widow’s Wail, Tyrion knew. Two Unsullied stepped forward from the press alongside a number of Stark men. All moved to block Jaime’s path, but he had laid the sword upon the ground before they reached him. He took a knee and looked up at Daenerys. “She lied,” he said, disbelief coloring his voice, “to you. To me. To all of us. She ordered the men to stand down as they prepared to go north and-“

“Enough,” Daenerys’ interruption was an order. “So you’ve ridden north to confess your betrayal?” The question hung in the air as if frozen before she continued. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. Oaths don’t mean much to a kingslayer, do they?”

Jaime opened his mouth to speak, but Tyrion stepped forward to cut him off. “Your Grace, he has
ridden north in spite of Cersei. To warn us. To fight with us.” Apologies, brother. If that wasn’t true before, it is now.

“Or perhaps to fight us,” she suggested. The northern lords murmured in agreement. Tyrion briefly looked around at the scowling faces on all sides. Whatever their feelings about a Targaryen, they’ll always hate a Lannister more. How many of their kin died at the Red Wedding? “To scout our forces and subvert our efforts while his sister takes back the lands in the south.”

Jaime’s moment of quiet submission ended abruptly as he stood, guards taking half steps towards him in his sudden motion. “I saw that thing in the Dragonpit. I rode north to fight them. I could have stayed in the south and let you have at them alone,” he replied in defiance.

“Perhaps you should have,” the queen replied coolly. Jaime offered no response, instead looking to Tyrion. What am I to say? His mind raced for an answer, a logical retort and reason to stay his queen’s hand, but another beat him to it.

Jon stepped forward, his sullen trance seemingly broken by the scene playing out before him. “You,” he gestured at the four Stark men standing around Jaime, “see the Kingslayer to a tower room and post two guards at the door day and night.”

“Aye, m’lord,” one responded as the guards nodded at Jaime and escorted him toward the keep’s large oak doors. Better than a dungeon, he mentally shrugged as he watched his brother disappear behind the entrance to the great hall. He turned back to Daenerys, but she had eyes only for Jon. Emotions swirled inside them; anger and frustration, love and tenderness and desire, confusion and loneliness. Her lips parted but a fraction of an inch as if to speak, but no words or orders came forth. What is it…? He wondered briefly before seizing the moment and breaking the silence.

“Thank you, my lord,” Tyrion spoke. Jon nodded at him and caught Daenerys’ gaze once more, his own grey eyes reflecting… what? Sadness? It was a fleeting glance between two lovers and Tyrion could not rightly say what he saw before Jon turned to the assembly to speak.

“We’ll see to the matter of Ser Jaime later,” he announced to the yard before turning and walking away abruptly. Daenerys did not follow him. No one did.

The crowd had dispersed then; the smallfolk returned to their tasks, the guards to their posts, and the lords to whatever idle lords did. As Daenerys walked away and Ser Jorah and Missandei moved to follow her, Tyrion found himself alone amidst the milling press of bodies and cold winter air.

An idle lord himself, Tyrion had spent the following days wandering throughout Winterfell, in his own chambers, or chatting with his brother when the guards permitted him time alone. The conversations with his brother were strained and awkward, but he knew Jaime would have done the same for him. He did, in fact, not long ago.

Tyrion seldom saw Jon and his queen refused his council, refused to even discuss trivial matters. What had happened in that godswood? Whatever it was, it had turned two inseparable lovers into two sullen sulks in a matter of minutes. He hoped this gathering he was just now walking towards would bring them back together. He had planned to push them together. They were stronger together.

His plans had all gone awry since landing upon the shores of Dragonstone. His plans for the siege of the capital, for taking Casterly Rock, and for a successful truce with his sister had met with as much success as a Skagosi vineyard. He could not let his plan for their marriage fail. It was too important, especially now their forces would be without Lannister arms.
The sounds of a dozen boisterous conversations assaulted his ears as he opened a door at the end of the long passageway and entered a side room leading directly to the great hall. As he reached the arched entrance, he saw perhaps thirty lords and as many attendants seated at the long tables. Lord Glover, Lord Cerwyn, Lady Mormont... He silently recited the names as he recognized each face in the hall. Yet for every face he knew there were two he did not. Stark guardsmen stood sentry at every main entrance. Jon and Sansa sat upon the high table with Ser Davos standing behind them, talking quietly in the Lord of Winterfell’s ear. Jon flashed a brief smile as some unheard jest before standing to address the gathering.

He raised a gloved hand to silence the murmurs and opened his mouth to speak, but before he could do so the great oaken door creaked loudly and swung inward. A gust of snowy air blew through the hall from outside, making the torches and braziers flicker and dance. Daenerys walked through, the pale light accentuating her silver hair. Jorah and Missandei walked a half step behind her as she strode across the hall.

Tyrion looked again to Jon and saw that odd gaze in his eyes. He swallowed hard and nodded at his queen, waiting until she had taken a seat beside him before continuing. “Jaime Lannister has ridden north, alone,” he began, “he has brought no troops or provisions, just his sword and the news that the southern armies will not join us in this fight.”

Angry whispers filled the room. Oh come now, we all heard this information in the yard this morning. “Send Cersei her brother’s head, I say!” shouted one disgruntled older lord, his head a thicket of wiry grey hairs. Some of the other northerners nodded in agreement. Tyrion moved to step forward and silence the man, but thought better of it. Best not risk it, lest they pick the wrong brother. Jon addressed the man.

“No. Whatever else he is, Ser Jaime is our guest now. I’ve ordered him confined to quarters for the time being, but’s that not what we’re here to discuss.” The murmurs died as the lords’ collective curiosity took hold. “My broth – Bran saw the dead marching past the Last River. They’re further south than I hoped.” The whispers adopted a more hushed and worried tone at the news. Ever elusive but always present, the threat of an army of dead men always darkened the mood.

Jon continued, “And that’s not all. Cersei has hired the Golden Company to fight for her. Between the sellswords and the Lannister forces, they match our own men in numbers. We cannot hope to win a war on two fronts. I’m sending a garrison back to White Harbor and another force of pikes and archers to hold Moat Cailin against any incursion northward. The bulk of our men will remain at Winterfell.”

Is Cersei fool enough to try that? Tyrion was not sure. She wanted his queen dead. She wanted him dead, but even she would not march an army north in winter. She’ll surely try something, though...

“We were promised southern supplies as well!” shouted another lord, clean shaven and baby-faced. His high-pitched voice interrupted Tyrion’s thoughts, “our men need to eat. Our children need to eat!”

“Aye,” Lord Glover stood then, “the queen’s riders and eunuchs are eating through our stores faster than we thought. Some grow sick and weak, using our healers’ herbs and poultices. We won’t last half a year more with them camped outside the walls and in the Winter Town.”

Tyrion looked again to the high table, expecting Daenerys to speak, but she had eyes only for Jon. It was Sansa who stood to silence the dissent, “Lord Manderly’s river fleet will arrive soon with the queen’s supplies from Dragonstone. We can gather additional provisions by sending hunters and foragers into the surrounding countryside. Deer and elk from the woods. Fish from the White Knife. The North will provide.” She finished.
“Deer and elk!” the young Lord Cerwyn rose to his feet, joining the others. “Our hunters haven’t caught anything bigger than a hare for weeks. Those damned dragons eat half the beasts in the Wolfswood and scare off the rest.”

Daenerys stood to address the young lord’s concerns, but Sansa answered the challenged. “Those damned dragons will keep us alive when the dead come, my lord,” Sansa looked to the queen for a moment and the two women made brief eye contact as some understanding passed between them. “But, we shall draw them closer to the keep, on the eastern side, to allow for your men to hunt unmolested.” Some of the men nodded in agreement. Cerwyn was a skinny young man to begin with, but he seemed to shrivel under Sansa’s gaze before sitting down again. Tyrion raised his eyebrows in some surprise. Quite the administrator, he thought.

The Sansa Stark that now resumed her seat before him was a different woman than the frightened girl who he had been forced to marry in King’s Landing. One look into her icy blue eyes told Tyrion that. Her words just now showed it too. Sansa had taken food from hungry mouths all over the North to ensure Winterfell’s armies remained well supplied. She had silenced angry lords who urged her to resist her own half-brother’s decision to swear fealty to Daenerys. And, of course, there was the matter of Lord Baelish. He had heard rumors, but hoped to receive confirmation from Sansa herself. She was no doubt a competent leader. Ruthless, some might say. The thought gave him some measure of disquiet. She may have come across these abilities naturally, but it seemed more likely that learned them from her time in the capital. From Cersei… and father.

Sansa’s words had eased some of the tension in the room. Jon looked to Daenerys, seated at his side, then back to the assembly. “If that’s all, my lords.” It was. Tyrion stood still as he watched the groups slowly exited through half a dozen doors. Jon moved off to the side as well and Daenerys with him. They stood facing each for a moment, alone in the corner by side of the roaring hearth. She reached for his hand and held it firm. Jon returned to the gesture, but to Tyrion it seemed half-hearted. He still wore that sullen look upon his face and, a moment later, he turned and left Daenerys behind after they had exchanged a few whispered words. She caught her Hand’s eye for a heart’s beat before turning and leaving, disappointment etched on her delicate features.

As the crowd thinned, Tyrion saw Varys sitting across from him, his face half lit in dim orange torchlight but otherwise cast in shadow. A fitting look for the master of whispers. The eunuch smiled at him, a knowing look in his eye, and then stood to greet him as Tyrion made his way across the room. He turned slowly and made sure the room was empty before opening his mouth to speak.

“Our queen seems rather troubled of late,” Tyrion pointed out.

“Oh?” the spymaster said with a raised eyebrow, the firelight dancing in his eyes, “do tell.”

Of course… “I was hoping you could tell me. What has transpired between them?”

“Who?” he asked innocently. Why must it always be like this…

“Our queen and Jon Snow. Weeks spent on a ship and in the saddle and we rarely saw them separated yet now they speak in hushed whispers before he leaves her alone in his own hall.”

“Hmmm…. Indeed,” the eunuch nearly sung out the syllables. Helpful. “Daenerys and Jon Snow have not shared a bed these past two nights. He keeps a room in the largest tower and she’s been given grand chambers a few floors above.”

“And you know this how?”
“Lorra, a young serving girl in the service of the Stark’s,” Varys said, spinning his tale. “Poor young thing. Her mother has fallen quite ill. Too little coin for food now, you see, and far too little for the proper healing herbs and wood to keep a fire in the hearth. A bit of silver for wind and words seemed a fair trade to her.”

“And so Lorra reports our two young lovers are in love no longer.” Tyrion finished simply.

“Not so fast, my friend,” he chided playfully, “one look into Daenerys’ eyes should tell you otherwise.” True enough. “It’s our young Lord of Winterfell who has found some reason to withhold his affections.” Tyrion made a sweeping gesture with one hand, inviting his friend to get to the point. “They arrived here as lovers not two days ago, yet when they emerged from the godswod to meet your brother something changed. I doubt it was Jaime’s arrival that drove them apart, do you?” Tyrion nodded. “Good,” he spoke faster now than before, rapidly spinning his web. “Brandon Stark spends all his time by the Stark heart tree in that godswod. That’s where they went to see him, to speak with him.”

“It’s said the boy has visions,” Tyrion added.

“Indeed,’ said Varys, “and whatever whispers he spoke to our royal pairing has seeded some strife between them.” And, as master of whispers, you don’t have a bloody clue what it is. Excellent.

“Well…” Tyrion began to turn toward the door, “I suppose there’s only one way to find out.” Varys nodded slowly as Tyrion made for the exit, for the godswod, and for the broken boy he had not seen in years.

It was darker outside than Tyrion expected. The days were short this far north, but even so he found it disconcerting. A light snow was falling and Tyrion cursed himself for not bring a hooded cloak as snowflakes clung to his hair and eyebrows. It was a short enough walk to the godswod, though, and he did not want to wander back through the maze of corridors just to be slightly less uncomfortable while he spoke to Bran. He crossed the castle yard, almost empty in the twilight. Guardsmen and young stable boys shot him queer glances as he passed, though none question his intentions. He passed underneath the stone archway and into the sacred grove.

He paused at the edge, looking at the heart tree and its blood red leaves. He had never been a particularly devout man, but he could not deny there was some mystic energy to the grove, some presence that brushed against his mind like the snow against his hair. Now, where is he? Tyrion looked around for the boy or his high wooden chair but could not see either from his position. He set off in a westerly direction, or what felt like west, he was not sure. Trudging through a light layer of fresh, powdery snow, he slowly circled the weirwood but found no sign of Bran. He looked to the edges of the godswod, to the barren oaks and evergreen pines but did not him there either, only a flash of white. Cold snow upon a colder wind. Lovely.

Disappointed in his utterly pointless venture, he turned to make way back to the archway, thinking all the while of the roaring fire he might find in his hearth. He began to whistle a nameless tune to keep himself company, the sharp tones leaving his lips and dancing aimlessly in the evening air. As he passed the pool of black water by the weirdwood’s side, Tyrion stopped for a moment to regard the face carved into the heart tree, it’s eyes crying tears of dried blood. Odd for a god to cry, he thought as he resumed his song.

Then, as he lifted the toes of his boots to turn on his heels, he felt a sudden hot breath on the back of his neck. Something tells me that’s not Brandon Stark. He heard a low growl and cautiously turned around to find a great white wolf an arm’s length away from his face, it’s long yellow teeth bared threateningly. Eyes, red as the weirdwood’s leaves, shone bright in the dim evening light.
“Hello there,” he said, shivering in his boots. The beast growled against a low, guttural sound, and stepped forward with one massive white leg. *I did not travel to Meereen and back to be supper for some pup.* He thought about running, but decided in the end that would do no good. *I’ve faced dragons, I’ll take my chances with you.* There was only one way out of this…

“You look rather warm in that white fur,” he addressed the wolf, “I bet that pelt would make a fine winter cloak, though perhaps too large for a man like me.” The wolf growled and took another step closer. Tyrion mirrored his movements in reverse, taking another step back. “No? Perhaps some fur undergarments instead. I’d do anything to keep myself warm on these horrid northern nights.” Teeth flashed again as the direwolf advanced, snarling. Tyrion took another step back. Then another, then another. He felt his heel sink into water and wet mud below. Turning, he saw his right foot partially submerged at the edge of the pool. Water stood behind him and the wolf in front.

*Shit.*

“Ghost!” a woman’s voice echoed from the archway. The great beast’s ears twitched and it turned to face the direction of the shout. Tyrion breathed a sigh of relief as the wolf bounded away to the edge of the grove where a hooded figure stood beside a mighty oak near the entrance. The light from the archway’s torches cast his savior in shadow. Face concealed underneath the hood of a black sable cloak, the figure bent slightly and, extending a gloved hand, scratched behind the ears of the white wolf as he approached. *Ah.*

“Well,” Tyrion laughed nervously as he approached the pair, walking across the tracks the wolf had made in the snow, “I believe I owe you my life, my lady.” The figure raised two hands and lowered the black hood. Lady Sansa’s auburn hair shone a dozen hues of scarlet and fiery orange in the torchlight. Her blue eyes met his own mismatched pair, a look of amusement dancing across her face.

“It would have been a shame, eaten by a wolf after lasting so long around those dragons,” she said with just a hint of humor in her voice.

“At least it wasn’t a lion,” Tyrion had to stop himself from laughing at the absurdity of it all. *A grown direwolf.* “Still, we’ve survived all sorts of monsters, haven’t we?” He saw her smile a bit, but noted the reaction failed to reach her eyes. A prolonged silence settled in between them, punctuated only by the white wolf’s heavy breathing. Then Tyrion spoke again. “I was looking for your brother Bran. You wouldn’t happen to know where he is, would you?”

“I was looking for him too,” she replied, voice trailing off in disappointment. “If he’s not in the godswood, he’ll be in his chambers. Asleep, I suspect.”

Tyrion nodded and made to excuse himself, but thought better of it. Watching her hold court in the great hall had piqued his curiosity. They had spoken upon his arrival two days ago, but their conversation in the yard had been brief and formal. *The last time we truly spoke she was a frightened child in the clutches of my sister… who is she now?*

“You were quite good, you know, in there. Handling Lord Glover and Cerwyn and all the others,” he offered her a genuine compliment.

Sansa laughed, a humorless sound that echoed menacingly off the stone archway and into the dark of the grove behind him. “Those fools…” she sighed softly, her breath forming a brief mist above Tyrion’s head. “I did what I had to do. We need provisions here at Winterfell, not scattered across a dozen holdfasts. I’ve addressed their complaints at every turn, but every day brings new ones.”
“Ah,” Tyrion chuckled, “the joys of ruling.” Sansa flashed a small smirk in his direction, but it quickly slid from her face as a whirlwind of concerns burst forth from her mouth and mind.

“Daenerys’ men are going through our stores faster than I hoped… and more fall ill every day. But where are we to lodge them? The Winter Town doesn’t have room for another thousand men, let alone ten thousand. It’s almost a relief your family’s soldiers won’t be marching north,” she paused for breath and looked at Tyrion, assessing his reaction. He pursed his lips and nodded to show her that he was listening.

The snow was heavier now, falling as fast as the grievances and concerns from Sansa’s mouth. The large white flakes fell on Tyrion’s exposed head or disappeared into the white fur of the wolf sitting beside Lady Stark. Tyrion lowered his head and brushed the accumulations from his damp hair before venturing forth with a question. “What of Lord Royce or Littlefinger? Last I heard they had ridden north to help you. Are they no help to you now?”

Sansa looked away for a moment, off toward the heart tree and beyond. Tyrion saw her gloved grip tighten in the wolf’s thick fur. “I sent Lord Royce northward a fortnight past. I’ve heard nothing from the Last Hearth. And Lord Baelish…” her voice trailed off. I see. She turned and met his gaze again, staring intently. “I did what I had to do.”

Oh, I understand. He tried to imagine Petyr Baelish’s face then, his black hair, that clever smile, and those twinkling, mischievous eyes, but he could not see them. The eyes were green flecked with gold. The hair was a pale blonde and bald atop. The face was weathered and serious.

I did what I had to do too, father.

“He was a monster,” she said, breaking the momentary silence. “They were all monsters… I’ve been married off and raped and beaten by monsters. At least Joffrey and Ramsay knew themselves, knew what they were. But Littlefinger? He claimed to do it out of love,” she said bitterly. Tyrion expected tears to start falling as heavy as the snow around them, but none came. The only hint of emotion she showed was the coldness that had crept into her tone.

Yet when she spoke next, the coldness was gone, replaced by a softer, hushed tone. “I used to think you were a monster,” she admitted. She looked at him again, blue eyes emanating strength and determination tempered with a woman’s kindness.

“A frequent mistake,” he replied simply. She smirked at the jest and he smiled back at her. Tyrion thought he saw something else in her eyes, a look that suggested she wanted to say more but could not bring herself to do so. What would we discuss? Our farce of a marriage? Our lovely wedding feast?

“I’m glad you’re here, Tyrion,” she spoke his name and brushed the spoiled memories from his mind.

“As am I, my lady,” he said as he stared into the red eyes of the wolf and reflected on Sansa’s words. Monster. I suppose not even you can be called that, eh? He thought as he reached out and gingerly scratched the underside of great white wolf’s snout. Surprisingly, the beast pushed down on his hand, urging him to continue his attentions. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Sansa turning slowly to leave. Watching her, a thought burst forth in his mind, bright and promising as a new dawn.

I came here to question Bran, but perhaps she knows what is troubling Jon.

“Sansa,” he called out perhaps a bit too loudly, “what of Jon?” Sansa turned back to regard with a curious gaze. A flurry of emotions passed over her face in an instant: guilt and confusion and frustration and more that he could not name.
“What about him?” she spoke the words cautiously as if expecting some trap.

“That gathering in the hall earlier was the first time I saw more than a moment’s glimpse of the Lord of Winterfell,” he explained.

She guffawed, “The Lord of Winterfell… Jon’s spent more time riding around the Wolfswood than he has in his own keep since his return.”

“He spent quite a bit of time alongside Daenerys on our journey north,” Tyrion offered. “Yet now he seems troubled? I wonder…”

“He’s in love with her,” Sansa stated, “it doesn’t take a maester to see that. I’ve never seen that look in Jon’s eyes before. When he looks at her it’s… something’s different, I don’t know” she finished lamely.

“She’s in love with him, too. That much is clear.” Tyrion added. Sansa nodded in agreement. “And yet something keeps them apart. Drives him away. That cannot continue. Whatever has happened between them, we must see it mended. And quickly. The Northern lords must see them together.”

“Together,” she breathed out the word as she considered his answer, “you almost sound as if you want to see them—”

“—married,” he finished. “Precisely.” She shook her head slowly, uncertain of his plan. “You don’t approve?”

Sansa bit her lower lip for a moment as if trapped in a maze of her own thoughts. She knows something. What?

He pressed the attack, hoping to find out. “What better way to unite House Stark and Targaryen? To unite North and South? To see the lords of the Vale and the North stand behind the best match this country has seen in centuries?”

“Houses Stark and Targaryen…” she mulled over his words, still uncertain.

“Sansa…” he said softly, “you are Jon’s advisor as I am Daenerys’. If you know what troubles him so, you must tell me.”

“It’s not my place to say,” she protested. He raised an eyebrow and looked at her intently. Finally, she relented and lowered her voice in a conspiratorial tone as she bent slightly to speak softly in his ear. “Bran, well, he saw a vision of Jon’s mother,” she said, voice barely above a whisper. Jon’s mother…? Jon was a bastard. His mother was some whore or farmer’s daughter or innkeeper’s wife, dead for years more like than not. Why would the boy see Jon’s mother in his visions? He looked at Sansa again, eyes demanding an answer. “My aunt, Lyanna,” she finished in a low tone.

Thoughts and images rushed through his mind, memories of hushed conversations and concerned glances. Lyanna Stark? Jon’s mother? And his father, Lord Eddard? No. Fool. Not his father. The father was… He remembered now, though he had been a boy of eight then. Lyanna had gone south, had run off with…

“… Rhaegar Targaryen,” he spoke the name aloud, tone matching Sansa’s hushed whisper. “Jon Snow is Rhaegar’s bastard?” he asked incredulously.

“His trueborn son,” she corrected. “Bran saw them marry. A secret ceremony in Dorne, before the war.” Well. This certainly complicates matters. Tyrion struggled to keep himself from laughing at the absurdity of it all. A secret prince named King in the North, now in love with the Dragon Queen… who happens to be his aunt. The last scions of House Targaryen, off to face an army of dead men and save the realm. I swear I saw this mummer’s show once at Casterly Rock.
Sansa looked a good deal less amused. “No one can know the truth, Tyrion. You saw how they reacted to Daenerys. If the northern lords found out that they had named Rhaegar’s son as their king…” she shot him a concerned glance. She was right, of course. The Lord of the North were already on edge with two Lannisters and a Targaryen claimant in their lands. Even with a hundred thousand dead men marching south, their pettiness knew no limits. This revelation could see them march their men home in protest.

“They will not,” he agreed. “You must speak with Jon. I will as well. Make him see the truth of this. Eddard Stark raised him as a son and he looked upon him as father. Visions from trees do not change that.” Sansa nodded, accepting her task. He had no doubt she would perform her part admirably.

“It grows colder here,” she said, resuming their normal tone of conversation and glancing around the dark godswod, “will you accompany me inside, my lord?”

Tyrion gave her a crooked smile as he brushed the snow from his hair and shoulders once more before stepping to her side. Together they walked out of the grove, through the archway, and back across the yard. Tyrion struggled to keep pace with his much taller partner. The wolf padded alongside them for a time before running off toward the western gates. Two large lit braziers stood on either side of the great oaken doors of the main hall and two Stark guardsmen stood beside them. The man on the right noticed his lady and Tyrion approaching his position and immediately stood upright. The guard on the left mimicked his companion’s posture before remembering his own duties and scrambling to open the door.

“M’lady,” he mumbled as Sansa and Tyrion passed out of the snow and into the darkened hall. It was empty now, with the long tables pushed to the sides and the fire burning low and untended in the massive hearth. He saw Sansa turn to him once more and open her mouth to speak.

“You really think a marriage between them is…” she struggled for the word, “proper?”

Tyrion shrugged, his muscles stiff from the cold, “She loves him. He loves her. I see no reason we cannot bring them together. They just need a good shove toward the weirwood tree, no?” He flashed her a mischievous grin which she did not return.

The air between them felt thick for a moment before she met his eyes and nodded. Then, turning, Sansa made for the door on the far end of the hall, leaving Tyrion alone. They might have been married, but she still had such a proper mind. Do you really think a crown gives you power? His father’s mocking question echoed in his mind. No. Heirs and titles were meant for keeping thrones, not winning them. Aegon Targaryen had ridden forth on Balerion the Black Dread and forged one kingdom from seven. Robert has smashed Rhaegar’s forces on the Trident and seized the throne for himself. Daenerys would do the same to his sweet sister, once the fighting in the North was done. Jon Snow would help her, would sit by her side as she ruled.

Tyrion Lannister and Sansa Stark. Matchmakers. The irony did not escape him. He watched her walk away, long sable cloak waving behind her as if caught in a gentle breeze. The Lady of Winterfell, he recited in his mind.

Of course, that is what she was. If Jon Snow was truly Rhaegar’s son, Sansa was the rightful heir to this keep and all its attendant lands. And Jon... Tyrion thought about the man as he walked to the right and found the corridor from earlier. Jon was a trueborn Targaryen, son of the crown prince. Heir to the throne. His claim might best Daenerys’ own. A male would always have a better claim in the eyes of the noble lords, even if he was a son’s son or more distant still. Yet even as he thought through the implications of the godswod revelation, Tyrion knew it did not matter. 
He thought about Jon as he meandered back to his quarters, opening the latched door and slipping quietly inside. Tyrion did not doubt the man was confused. His father was his uncle, his siblings were his cousins, and his lover of his own blood. What will I say when I see him next? Tyrion considered his quandary as he stared into the fire some servant had lit before he arrived. Yellow and scarlet flames danced before him, wisps of fire licking the soot-blackened stones bordering the hearth.

A log cracked and split, sending red embers up into the air. Tyrion tried to count them before they burnt and faded. It was said the red priests of the east could see the future in their fires. Tyrion wondered what Kinvara, the priestess he had summoned to Meereen, would say if she could look into the hearth before him. Some riddle or prophecy. That all this was meant to be. The thought lit another fire inside his mind. Yes... Jon would come to grips with his parentage and the role he was meant to play. Tyrion knew exactly what to say... and exactly who would say it.

...

Well, I'm going to start adding a bit of commentary at the end of these. Though I'm entirely new to this sort of thing, fan-fiction seems like its a cool opportunity for "authors" and readers to explore familiar and favorite universes and characters. Tyrion is a bit of a challenge in that Show-Tyrion has sort of flat lined since Season 4. That's why I've incorporated some of his book personality here.

With regard to the story, I don't think there is any real romantic potential between he and Sansa. For one, she's beautiful and he's an ugly dwarf. Has Sansa learned that inner and outer beauty aren't the same thing? Yes, but I think both she and Tyrion are kinda done with romance for the time being. They come together and talk like exes who have come to grips with what happened to them.

My pace of writing will likely slow over the next couple of weeks, but I've got plenty of cool ideas to play around with in the coming chapters. I've got an ever growing outline so if you're expecting some big scene that hasn't really happened yet, chances are I haven't forgotten it.

Many thanks to all those sharing their thoughts or pointing out typos. Reviews of all kind are welcome.
He was running. His feet felt light upon the freshly fallen snow and the old leaves beneath. He passed over gnarled roots and small icy pools. The others ran beside him, grey and black flashes among the trees. He smelled them too, amidst the pine sap and wet wood. They were not his brothers and sisters; those whom he could not feel anymore, but they were a family of sorts. He was faster though, moving up the hillside and between the trees and through the barren underbrush. He ran, swift as the winter wind, leaving them behind.

Then he was alone. All alone. He slowed, padding across older snow that crunched beneath his feet. The wind howled through the trees, but he stopped his urge to join in its mournful song. The smells were different up here, still pine and snow, but the air carried upwards from the men and horses below, bringing with it the scents of woodfire and meat and sickness.

A dull thud shook the trees and the rocks and earth, loose snow fell from overhanging branches and showered him with ice crystals as white as his fur. His right ear twitched. He turned. Nothing. He saw nothing. Smelled nothing. Wait. Heat? He felt heat. A low fire. Like the stone and wall fires at home. And there, that faint rumbling sound. He was here.

Slower now, careful steps upon the old snow. Light and quiet through the thicket. To the top of the hill. There. Below in the frozen meadow. Black as night. Snow and ice melted around him as he slept. But only one. Where was the other?

Red eyes flashed. Then bronze. Red again. Then he was flying over the forest. The wind lifting him higher felt warm on his scales. Trees went on for miles, white and brown and green, like him. He sensed his brother in the distance, bigger and more powerful, sleeping among those trees. He would wake soon. He could feel it. He reached for his other brother, beyond, but felt only the cold. He felt her too. She was far. Alone and sad. Then he blinked, and saw blackness.

Jon opened his eyes, blinking as he drew a rapid breath. The cold air bit at his throat and lungs. But he had just felt so warm. Why? He had been in Ghost, he knew. The wolf dreams had returned as soon as he had felt Ghost again. But then, in the other dream… he had been flying? The wind howled outside his tower room and he shivered. The fire he had made in the hearth the night before had died, leaving behind a blackened log covered in grey ash. It was colder this morning. It had been growing colder and greyer every morning, in truth. That had not bothered him until now. Perhaps I never realized how much it helped to have another warm my bed.

That was a lie, of course. Ygritte had warmed his bed plenty of nights when they were Beyond the Wall and after they had climbed over it. He thought of the wildling girl, her grey-blue eyes and freckled face and fiery red hair, but he could not picture her clearly. Her eyes seemed too blue, almost violet. Her freckles faded into delicate porcelain skin. Shame overwhelmed him momentarily. He had kissed her and laid with her, yet now he could not even remember her face. He had loved her too, once. Or was that only another lie?

They were all lies. His sworn brother’s vows and Cersei’s promises and his own father’s—uncle’s—claims of fathering a bastard son. All lies. Is there no one I can trust to tell me the truth? Rage swelled inside his scarred chest, filling him with fire. Suddenly it did not feel so cold.

No. This won’t do. This isn’t right. Nothing good would come of brooding in his chambers when there was still important work to be done. He needed to clear his head. He rose from the furs, cold air brushing over his bare form. He walked to the table and reached for the flagon of wine. The cold metal stung his bare fingers as he poured himself a cup. He put the silvered goblet to his lips
and drank slowly, the cold red washing away the phlegm and bile from his night’s rest. *Bitter, but good.*

Jon donned his grey woolen underclothes, thick leather breeches lined with wool, brown leather jerkin, and the padded leather armor he liked so well. Then he slipped on his worn leather boots and riding gloves made of fine sheepskin. He picked up the gorget he had favored for months now, steel emblazoned with twin direwolves. He ran a gloved thumb over one of the wolves, brushing a bit of dust from the raised image. It felt wrong. *I won’t need proper armor anyway.*

He placed the gorget aside and reached instead for Longclaw. His bastard sword lay sheathed and set against the wall in the corner of the room, red eyes of the wolf pommel shining dully in the bleak morning light. He secured his sword belt around him then grabbed his thick fur cloak that hung on a wooden peg on the wall. He would have felt naked without sword and cloak. Securing the heavy furs about his shoulders, he unlatched the door and walked out of his chambers.

Dim torches set in sconces lit the hallway before him, their orange and scarlet flames flickering on the grey stone of the walls as thin black smoke licked at the timbers of the roof above him. At this level, the tower connected to the main keep on several floors, but the keep was not his destination. He turned and hurried down the winding stone stair to his left. He placed one foot after another on smooth, uneven steps as he made his way down level after level, cloak dragging behind him as he went. He paused outside Arya’s chambers, two levels below his own, but heard nothing. Even now, he had hoped to speak with her. That would have to wait.

Onward he went, down the winding stair until he reached the base of the tower. A single Stark guardsman stood vigil by the heavy oaken door banded in iron. He straightened himself as he saw Jon approach.

“M’lord Sta-er.. Snow” he said nervously before unlatching the door and pushing it open for his liege lord to pass. Jon gave him a curt nod as he moved out of the warm comfort of the keep and into to biting cold of the courtyard. The winds were fiercer this morning than they had been in days past. The direwolf banners atop the battlements snapped like whips as the gusts pushed them back and forth. Jon looked up at the sky and saw the pale winter sun fighting to be seen through a curtain of grey clouds rolling in swiftly from the northwest. He liked the cold and grey of the North. Biting and bitter it may be, but it was honest and clear. The cold was true to its nature. The wind hid nothing from him.

He strode across the frozen, hay covered mud of the yard to the stables where his favorite gelding awaited him. ‘Frost’, the beast was called. His dappled white-grey hide looked like Winterfell’s snow-covered battlements. His temper was cool as well, calm and collected even when he heard the howling packs of wolves roaming the Wolfswood.

That’s where Jon was headed now. The silence of the woods helped him collect his thoughts. The icy wind through his hair as he rode made him feel alive. It was all he could do to distract himself from what Bran had told him three days past. *Targaryen...* He did not doubt his brother’s – cousin’s – visions. They had proven correct before. Yet now seemed different...

“M’lord?” Rickard, the stable boy, stood by the stable’s entrance as Jon approached. He was young, far younger than Jon himself had been when he left Winterfell to take the black, with mousy brown hair and mousy features to match. His blue eyes shone bright against the pink of his cheeks, stung as they were by the cold morning winds. “You’ll be wanting Frost again, I take it?” he asked with a half-grin on his face as he made to ready the horse for riding. Jon had stopped to chat with the boy on previous mornings. His blissful unawareness of the wider goings on in the North and the world was almost refreshing. He felt no such urge today, simply nodding at Rickard...
as the youth saddled and readied Frost for his ride.

When the stable boy finished his preparations, Jon approached the horse, slipped his foot into the left stirrup, and hoisted himself into the saddle. Lightly digging his heels into Frost’s sides, he urged the horse forward and out of the stables. The gelding was not powerful and would have been a far cry from the beasts that southern knights rode into battle, but he was swift and steady and true. That was what Jon needed just now.

Jon felt the cold air caress his face as he exited the keep’s inner yard and rode through the gates, through the Winter Town, and into the frozen moors beyond. He heard the sounds of horses and men rustling about the massive Dothraki camp to his rear. It would have been proper to see that the men who had ridden north to defend his lands were welcomed and treated well, but Jon did not have the stomach or patience for such today.

The Wolfswood was his destination this morning, just as it had been the prior two. He spurred Frost toward the tree line, ready to immerse himself in the grey light of the frozen wood and eager for the smell of pine and wet earth. Frost slowed as he approached the forest’s vanguard; a fearsome line of soldier pines cloaked in white blankets of ice and snow. There was an eerie silence to the winter wood that both Jon and his mount could sense even here. As horse and rider passed into the wood, Jon felt as though his face had brushed against a thin veil dividing the open Stark lands from the forests beyond.

Time took a different pace in the wood. The passing of moments and hours was not governed by the slow slant of the northern sun across the southern horizon. The trees blocked most of the light. Frozen pines swayed gently in the chill breeze while solemn, barren oaks and other broadleafs stood sentinel beside them, thick branches covered with thin layers of ice that seemed to slowly slip off the brown bark into long icicles that hung threateningly overhead. The game trail he followed was wide enough for two horses to ride abreast, at least in the summer time. Now the snow fell thick even in the woods and Frost struggled step after step as his hooves pressed against the icy crust into the softer snow beneath. Even so, Jon urged him onward.

Pale, dappled light fell upon horse and rider as they made their way deeper into the wood. The soldier pines grew taller and more forbidding; the air thicker and colder. Jon trod onward upon the gelding, enjoying the peace and quiet the woods provided.

Then a sudden stillness shook him from his solemn state. Frost stood motionless upon the path, though Jon could feel the horse’s panicked breathing pressing against either side of the saddle. He looked around, but saw only trees and ice and frozen underbrush. Then, he saw a flash of white and red between the trees. He knew what it was.

“Ghost! To me!” he cried into woods. His words did not echo, consumed as they were by the thick trees of the inner Wolfswood. Yet they carried his message to the beast stalking just beyond the path. A moment later the great white direwolf padded out from behind the trunk of a truly massive oak. He had only seen his wolf outside the walls these past few days, though he knew Ghost sometimes favored the warmth of the godswood when sleeping. Jon smiled at his old companion as he approached. Like the woods and air, Ghost was honest and true. Ghost could never lie.

Frost was no doubt terrified at the sight of a wolf near his own size standing next to him. Jon eased his horse with a few soft words and softer pets against his mane. As they rode onward, the two became better acquainted with one another, with the great white wolf even giving the gelding an affectionate sniff, though the intention of the gesture may have been lost on the horse.

The trio made its way deeper still into the wood. Soon enough, the game trail merged with a greater path; a small road that, though still snow-covered, gave enough space for the wolf and rider
to move abreast among the trees. Onward they rode, over small frozen streams and around the fallen giants of the forest, their broken trunks secured to the earth with thick bands of ice.

Frost’s hooves found a steady beat as they punched through the old snow. The rhythm of crunch and thump lured Jon into a trance, a trail out of the woods and into his own thoughts. *Targaryen*… The word occupied his mind like a foreign invader, yet still seemed familiar. That’s what he was, in truth. *Can I deny it?* His mother had by Lyanna of House Stark. She had fallen in love and run off with Crown Prince Rhaegar of House Targaryen. They had married, or so said Sam, and Jon had no reason to distrust his friend. Then she had birthed Jon… and died.

The shock of Bran’s revelation had not truly stunned him as it should have. Maybe, deep down, he had always known, or at least been ready to know. *I never even knew my mother’s name.* Lord Eddard had never spoken it to him or indeed spoken of his mother at all. She had been a shifting shadow, a haunting memory that had hung over Jon for all his years. Then, in an instant, Jon was a Targaryen, not a Snow. Not Jon, but Aegon. Not a bastard, but a prince.

Thoughts swirled around his head like an autumn storm. *Bastard.* That word had defined him for nigh on two decades, yet it was a lie. *Stark.* His mother’s house. Eddard’s house. His house, he had thought. *Targaryen.* His true name. Aegon. The name of the conqueror. He almost laughed into the icy silence of the woods. *How many times did I wish to be some Targaryen prince of old? On how many nights did I sneak out to the godswood to beg the old gods to make me a trueborn son?* He still remembered those nights, steam rising off the heated godswood pools, warming him as he sat upon the moss by the heart tree. It all seemed a cruel jape now.

His horse’s sudden jolt to a halt stirred him from his thoughts. A wide and sturdy stone bridge stood before him, mortared stone securing the span across a deep, frozen gulley. Jon recognized the spot and smiled, turning to Ghost. He shifted his weight to his left foot and deftly swung his right down across the horse. Dismounting, he walked across the bridge, leather soles falling upon pressed snow and the packed earth beneath it. He crossed to the other side and found his way to the sloping shore of the frozen river where he and the others had found the direwolf pups so many years ago.

*The direwolf is the sigil of your house.* A shade of past echoed his own words in his mind and ears. *You were meant to have them.* He saw clearly in his mind’s eye the party then, robed in thinner cloaks and grey summer wools; Eddard and Robb, Bran and Theon, Jory and other figures besides. And there on the ground, five small beasts, their hides colored from a snowy grey to a deep black. Only his, the runt of the litter, had been a white as pure as fresh fallen snow. Eyes as red as a deep fire, as red as thick pools of blood. Jon turned and regard Ghost with another smile.

*That hadn’t been a lie, at least. I am half a Stark.* That is what he had told Theon before he left Dragonstone, no? *You’re a Greyjoy and you’re a Stark.* Jon was a Stark and he was a Targaryen. The idea did not bother him. All his life he had yearned to know the truth. His mother had been a faceless memory for years, an empty openness upon which he cast his yearnings and doubts. Jon had imagined her as a crofter’s wife, a nobleman’s daughter, even a whore. Never had he imagined that his mother’s statue and bones looked up at him from the Stark crypts while it had been his father’s face that was a fading memory.

As a boy, Jon had heard the stories of the rebellion. Rhaegar kidnapping Eddard’s sister. The Mad King burning Rickard and Brandon alive. Robert smashing southern armies and killing the dragon prince in single combat upon the Trident. Those heroic deeds now rang hollow in his mind. *More lies for Robert and Eddard and the rest.* His mother and father had loved each other, and they had died for it, leaving him alone in the world.
He looked up as a powerful gust of wind brushed ice crystals from the trees, casting a cloud of thin snow into the air and making it seem as though it were snowing. The wind cut through his furs and wools, making him shake. His toes and fingers felt numb, though not uncomfortable. The cold helped him think, drove him inward to where he had to face his thoughts and fears. The winter woods could always do that to a man.

No, not alone, he knew. Against all odds, Sansa and Arya and Bran were home. They were his family. And Davos and Sam, men who had faced their own trials, stood beside him as counsel. He had the lords of the North, the men and women who had raised him up as their king and entrusted themselves and their people to his protection. And he had her.

He had not said the words yet. He had not found the right time. There never seemed to be a right time. Especially now. What would I say? There were no words, in truth. But the way she looked at him, the way she kissed him, the way his heart twisted in upon itself whenever he saw her smile at him. Do I love her?

He wanted her. That was no lie. And not just in the way a man could want a woman, though he often felt that urge. She was quite beautiful, after all, but he wanted something more. He wanted to hold her at night, to wipe away her tears, to laugh with her at shared and secret jests, to share in her triumphs and joys and sorrows. He wanted to sit alongside her as she ruled, watching as the sun spun overhead and the seasons fell past them like so many autumn leaves. My hair might turn as silver as hers in time, he mused, and our children might take after their mother too, crowned in silver with bright amethyst eyes.

As he imagined the future, doubt seeped into his bones alongside the wet cold of the wood. Was it right? She was a Targaryen. So was he, though he did not feel like it in the slightest. She was his family, his aunt, his own blood. Such arrangements were uncommon across Westeros, though not unheard of given the right circumstances, but still… He felt as if his mind pulled at him from one direction as his heart did the same from the opposite. And what of the lords who raised me up as king? They had chosen him as king in part because they thought him Eddard’s bastard son. Winterfell was his, but if he chose to remain as Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North it would be just another lie.

Cold anger welled inside him as he considered his position. It was another of the gods’ jests. She was the one thing he truly wanted, everything he wanted, really. A surname and a lover and a family. A sense of belonging. Would they be driven apart because she shared his family and his surname and his love? If they survived the fight against the dead, would the realm accept them?

I will not lie. They would have to know. He would speak to Sansa and Arya first, of course. No matter what blood they did or did not share, the girls were still his family. The perhaps Ser Davos, maybe Tyrion as well. Men he trusted to give him true and honest advice. And then, before gathering the lords in the hall, he would speak with her.

His thoughts crystallized like ice in his mind as he stared off into the distance. His course was clear, even though the ride back through the woods would not be so direct. Jon turned from the frozen stream, grabbing onto a thick root protruding from the earth to help keep his balance as he scaled the incline. Ghost leapt up the ledge in one graceful movement. His wolf beside him, he walked back across the bridge and mounted Frost, Longclaw rattling at his side. He slowly turned the gelding to face the way he come a few moments before and urged the horse forward.

The ride back was easier than he thought, the snow to give way more easily, the forbidding trees grew smaller as he made his way out of the deep wood. Above him, the sun still struggled to break through the grey clouds, but every so often it succeeded in doing so, rays of pale golden light
falling through the canopy of barren branches and making the Wolfswood come alive with a thousand sparkling suns as the light reflected off the ice and snow.

Before long, he was at the tree line atop a small bluff that gave him an excellent view of Winterfell and its attendant lands. He saw the keep, its strong walls, and its godsdowen where three days past he had learned the truth. He saw the massive camps of the Unsullied, Dothraki and Northmen encircling the walls on all sides, a hundred plumes of dark smoke rising from cook and campfires. To an unknowing eye, Winterfell looked to be under siege. And soon it might well be.

To his left he saw a field of tree stumps where hundreds of proud pines, now fuel for Winterfell’s fires, had once stood overlooking the Stark lands. A dozen deep troughs ran through the snow back to the keep and camps, like wagon ruts on a dirt road. Honing his vision and squinting against the sunlight upon the snow, he saw a team of men making its way back to the forest to gather more wood while another dragged a felled tree behind a team of oxen.

The preparations for war were tedious and slow. His advisors and Daenerys’ held meeting every day, but little enough was accomplished. They could not ride forth to fight the enemy without the dragonglass from the south, nor could they send their armies home or to other keeps and holdfasts. It was exceedingly dull. He looked off to the south where more hills blocked his view of the distant White Knife. He hoped Lord Wyman’s river fleet would arrive soon, bringing much needed supplies and weapons to feed and arm the North.

He had set Sandor Clegane and Gendry to the task of seeing the supplies safely through Winterfell’s gates. A smith trained in the capital, Gendry would see that the dragonglass and steel were handled with care. And, thinking himself a bastard at the time, Jon had wanted to give his companion an opportunity to prove himself and rise through the ranks of command. The Hound had been another matter. Jon neither liked nor wholly trusted the man, but he could not deny he worked with a certain efficiency. Together with the Manderly men, they would bring the much-needed war material northward.

Steeling himself for the tasks ahead, he spurred Frost onward down the sloping hill and toward Winterfell in the distance. The roads approaching the town and keep were clear and well-worn. Yet as he approached the gates, he sensed a frantic energy in the air. The smallfolk and guards acknowledged his presence as he rode by with Ghost pacing beside him, but they seemed distracted too, all looking inward past the gates to the castle yard.

Jon passed under Winterfell’s walls and immediately came upon a strange scene. Hundreds of men milled about the yard rather aimlessly, with women and children mixed in among them. Some of the men wore grey and brown skins stitched together, their long bears covered in hoarfrost. The wildings, he knew as recognized their garb. Others wore the simple wool and fur of northern smallfolk. All wore tired expressions upon gaunt faces. Some looked up at him with fearful eyes as he dismounted Frost and handed the gelding’s reins to a stable boy.

He scanned the yard for a familiar face and found two. Sansa stood toward the center, talking with a man in worn armor of boiled leather. The small chains that crisscrossed his torso from shoulder to hip marked him as a bannerman of the Umbers. Jon had seen plenty of men dressed the same upon the battlefield some months earlier. Ser Davos and Master Wolkan stood a half step behind Sansa, their faces showing concern for scene and people in the yard.

Jon made to speak with them but paused as he saw a shock of silver hair in the sea of brown, grey, and black. Daenerys was stooping low as she draped a black fur cloak about the shoulders of a shivering boy. Ned Umber, he realized, recognizing the youthful face from their gatherings in the hall.
Daenerys looked up and met Jon’s gaze as she whispered comforting words into the young lord’s ear. Fear shone in her violet eyes. He moved to speak with her, but was intercepted by Sansa and her small retinue. “These are all those that made it back from the Umber lands,” she said, the tone of her voice as hard as ice. Jon looked at his cousin then. He knew her well enough to see that beneath the veneer she often wore there was true fear. When she offered no immediate explanation, Maester Wolken stepped forward.

“They were set upon by the dead, my lord. Thousands of them, the Umber bannermen say…” his voice shook with fear as well. Jon looked around again. Fear was the Lord of Winterfell just now. Perhaps the threat of dead men marching south had seemed some elaborate game to half the Northern lords and their men. Jon rightly suspected many had only stayed in Winterfell to prove their loyalty to the Starks after refusing to honor his call to arms against the Boltons.

But looking at Umber women and wildling men huddled in fear around these courtyard braziers? People who had hated each other for thousands of years… Who could deny it now?

“And what of Lord Royce and his knights?” Jon asked the group. He recalled Sansa telling him that she had sent the Lord of Runestone north to see the Umbers and wildlings safely back to Winterfell. He had not seen a single falcon surcoat or shining steel breastplate amidst the crowd. Bran had shared his visions of the dead south of the river with Jon and the others, yet he had hoped Royce’s party had moved far ahead of their foe. The old, barrel-chested lord was their best choice for command in the field.

Sansa swallowed hard and replied, “I was told Lord Royce stayed behind to hold off the enemy while the others fled across the river to safety.” Sansa had never seen the dead, but they both knew what that meant. Five hundred mounted knights… Dread seemed to freeze his lungs and clutch his heart. Five hundred more soldiers for his army.

He nodded at Sansa and spoke again, “we should see these people warmed and fed. Use the great hall for beds if you must. Tents in the godswood. Whatever we have to do.” She nodded and turned away to consult with the maester and see the new arrivals were given good care. Outspoken as she may have been at times, she was thoroughly capable. Jon was thankful for that and for her.

Once again, he looked around at the desperate people huddled before him. Suddenly, his melancholy rides through the woods and his musing about parentage seemed foolish. He was the Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North. It was his solemn duty to protect his people, Umber and wildling and the smallfolk of the two dozen other houses who now stood in the Night King’s path. He had to do his duty.

Davos stepped forward to break the momentary silence. “There is some good news, Jon. Least, it’s better news than this,” he motioned behind him to the crowd of refugees before nodding at a location behind Jon. He looked around to the corner by the tower, across from where the stables stood. Perhaps thirty men stood penned up between ranks of Unsullied and Stark guards. They were armored in mail, plate and leather, but otherwise looked as tired and harried as those who had fled from the Umber lands to the north. Their shields, spears, and sheathed swords sat discarded in an unordered pile behind the rank of Stark guardsmen.

He had not even seen nor recognized them before, but as he looked over the small crowd an odd wave of emotion washed over him. Some wore yellow-gold mail whilst others were armored in the unwelcoming crimson, gold and black plate that he had seen at the Dragonpit. More Lannisters? Tyrion stood beside one of the men, a captain in dented and dirty armor with a thick black cloak stained with dirt and dampness secured about his broad-shoulders. As Jon approached the group, Tyrion turned to address him.
“My lord,” he said cordially, “might I present Ryn Hill, who is commander of the twenty four men you see before you.” Tyrion drew a long, deep breath then, as if the air around him contained the courage he needed to continue his introduction. “These are Lannister men and gold cloaks from the capital, they have—”

“We rode north to join you, m’lord,” Ryn cut off Tyrion’s explanation as he launched into his own. “T’fight with you.” He stepped back on his left foot, turning to motion to his small company behind him with one hand. “Some of us here were at the Dragonpit when your lordship brought that thing south. We saw what you saw. Others here lost family and friends when Cersei destroyed the old sept. Some just knew it were the right thing to do.”

Jon looked into the man’s hazel eyes, searching for some hint of dishonesty. Was this true? Or another lie? He looked over the men again, their proud crimson and gold armor seemed at odds with their tired expressions. Cersei already betrayed us once. Has she sent Ryn Hill and twenty-three other soldiers to make sure we lose this fight?

His suspicions mixed with a kinder feeling. ‘Hill’, Tyrion had named a man. A bastard from the Westerlands. Even learning of his own true parentage, Jon still had a soft spot in his heart for other bastards. He had taken to Gendry kindly enough on a friend’s word. He would allow Tyrion to argue for his countrymen before him. Besides, we’ve just lost five hundred men. We need every sword we can get.

“I know it’s not what we expected from the south,” Tyrion spoke again, “but these are two dozen good and honest men. Why else would they desert their posts to ride north?” To kill us in our sleep, a voice not entirely his own whispered in the back of his mind. Men who had sworn sacred oaths had killed him before, so why should he trust these Lannister men who had no doubt sworn oaths against him? What if they tried to kill him? Or Sansa or Arya? Or Daenerys?

He looked to Davos beside him. The old smuggler met his gaze and nodded knowingly for a moment before opening his mouth to speak. Jon did not know what he would say, but he trusted him. “Seems t’m we’ve been sent more than swords,” he looked at Ryn as he stepped forward to address the small gathering. “Were all your men stationed in the capital?”

“For years, m’lord. During the fight against Stannis and still after that. Some here went with Ser Jaime to take back Riverrun and returned to find half the city in ash and then, well,” he stopped for breath, eyes wide with emotion. “Was like I said, m’lord, we saw what we saw at the Dragonpit.”

Davos turned back to Jon. “Two dozen men who know how to prepare for a siege,” he said, “we’d be fools to turn ‘em away. And we’d be fools t’trust ‘em.”

“Then what do you propose?” Tyrion asked.

“We’ll put them under the command of one of their own. A capable mind who knows a thing or two about siege preparations himself.” Jon detected the slightest hint of glee in Davos’ voice as he turned to Tyrion. The Queen’s Hand got the message.

“Very well…” he sighed, “Ryn, we shall see your men fed and sheltered, but will not permit you to carry your weapons within the walls. They shall be stored in the armory and readied for you should it come to battle. We shall put your men to use preparing Winterfell for attack. I trust you know the proper process for making pitch?” he asked with the shadow of a grin.

“Aye, m’lord,” Hill nodded vigorously, seemingly relieved. “Thank you, m’lords.”

With that Tyrion marched off with the captain and his men, bringing with him a small escort of
Unsullied and Stark soldiers. Jon watched them walk away through the crowds, the rattling of their armor adding to the din of the yard. The press of bodies had already lessened from a moment ago. Sansa was directing the refugees inside the hall. Soldiers and guards were returning to their posts. Jon’s eyes flitted from person to person as he looked for Daenerys, but when he found her she was already marching purposefully to his position.

“Your Grace,” he greeted her cordially as she stopped in front of him. Davos stepped away tactfully and moved to tend to his own affairs. Jon stood alone to greet his queen.

“Jon,” she spoke softly, as if they were the only two in the yard. And perhaps they were, just now. Jon looked into her eyes, deep violet pools of that still shone with a tenderness. He could not face her now. He just could not. Yet before he could muster the strength to turn away she reached out to grab his hand. “I had hoped we could speak alone.”

He saw her swallow hard and felt himself do the same. What do I say? Part of him wanted to kiss her. Part of him wanted to flee back into the Wolfswood. He felt the two emotions charging at one another inside his chest. His heart beat rapidly, strong thumps like the thundering hooves of a galloping warhorse. He looked at her and, grip tightening in her own, opened his mouth, ready to utter his allegiance to whichever side won the battle within him.

Head and heart clashed with a pitiful whimper, robbing him of any decisiveness. Jon breathed out a slow, disappointing sigh. What do I do? Daenerys drew in a shaking breath of her own, though whether it was from the cold without or within he could not say. A gentle nudge to his own hand drew his gaze away from her.

“Oh!” Daenerys jumped back a half pace as Ghost turned his massive head to regard her. The wolf had taken them both by surprise. Of course… his wolf had spent his time wandering the forest and the godsdowd. She had not met him yet. Ghost was a good deal less terrifying that a dragon, but he was still a fearsome sight to most. Jon watched with a mix of curiosity and apprehension as Ghost considered the woman before him. He sniffed her, extending his neck and pressing his long white snout to her navel. The wolf’s black nose remained there for a moment, rapidly twitching side to side as it collected Daenerys’ scent. Then Ghost raised his snout to her chest, then to her face as carnelian eyes met amethyst ones.

Each held the other’s gaze for a moment. Jon felt a small surge of affection as Daenerys, maintaining her stare, removed her right glove and reached out to pet the wolf. Ghost tilted his head to catch her hand before she could draw it back. Terror flashed in the queen’s eyes for a moment, only to be replaced by amusement as the direwolf gave her bare hand a playful, affectionate lick.

“Hello there,” she laughed as she rustled the fur atop Ghost’s head. His wolf shuffled forward a step then sat back on his haunches, playfully turning his head back and forth against Daenerys’ fingers. Jon allowed himself a smile too as he watched the silver queen play with the white wolf.

“This is Ghost,” Jon stated. She turned back to him. Their eyes met again. He had expected her to be angry or frustrated, as she had so often been when things did not go as planned. He had spent his time riding out beyond the walls instead of at her side or in her bed. But no, that time is long past.

Daenerys wore a regal mask when she dealt with matters of state and war. Jon could still recall the intensity of her gaze during their first meeting on Dragonstone. He had been met with it time and time again in the following weeks. Until that day aboard the ship…

He remembered it, though his mind had not been entirely clear after the ordeal Beyond the Wall. Since then, she spoke to him as a friend and, after their first night together, as a lover. Her gaze was tender and soft and her tone subdued as she spoke to him. “I know it’s… difficult,” she struggled
for the proper words. “What Bran told us in the godswood. I know it doesn’t seem right. But it is, Jon. It just is,” she drew herself closer to him as she spoke the words, as if willing him to accept them. To accept her, her family, her name, to accept everything. Desire shown in her eyes, a desire deeper than a simple physical urge. He did not want to look away, but he could not match the intensity of her gaze any longer.

He pulled back. Neither her warmth nor her dragons’ fire could burn away the cold doubt that lingered in his heart. The lurking suspicion that this was just another jest. Another lie. “I can’t… not now… it’s not…” he muttered into the frozen dirt. He heard her sigh and breathed deeply himself, hoping the cold air would freeze the emotions swirling inside him.

Daenerys did not say anything else just then. She simply retook his hand in hers, giving him a reassuring squeeze before walking away. That helped. Jon was surprised by her patience, her calm demeanor. She’s not the same person I met those long months ago. He knew that, even if he did not now know what to do.

It was odd, really. When he had felt lost before all he had to do was go down to the crypts beneath the keep and look upon Eddard’s stone face. More often than not, he found his answers there. Yet now that seemed a fool’s errand. How can I seek truth from a lie? Maybe the only person to understand him was Daenerys.

He raised his gaze and looked across the yard, but she had gone by then. Indeed, most of the yard had emptied save the guards and stable boys. The Umber smallfolk and wildlings were being tended to elsewhere. Those Lannister soldiers were being accommodated as well. Jon was alone, save for Ghost.

The rest of the day passed slowly, the actions of the people in Winterfell reflecting the grey dullness of the sky above. Men and women drilled in the yard with tourney swords and quarterstaffs and branches snapped from godwood trees. Guards walked about the walls and young girls walked after them with bristled brooms, brushing aside ice and snow to keep the battlements clear. Servants and soldiers stoked the braziers or else filled them with more logs and coals from the stockpiles. It all seemed simple enough, another day, save for the thousands of soldiers outside the gates and tens of thousands of dead men descending on the North as they all milled about their tasks.

And what of my task? He had been king and was still Warden of the North; charged with the realm’s defense. As Jon watched from the covered walkway, his personal concerns retreated to the back of his mind, no longer important in the moment but not forgotten in the slightest. The enemy was still out there, his strength augmented now by five hundred mounted knights. Jon needed to know where he was, what he was doing.

Bran had proved adept at locating the dead before. He had let Jon and Daenerys know the Night King was marching on Eastwatch. He had let them know the Wall had been breached. Even so, his cousin did not have all the answers. Indeed, he seemed almost reluctant to use his sight to watch the enemy’s movements. Bran was powerful, but volatile. With time, his abilities might mean victory or stave off disaster, but now Jon needed men in the field, not wisps and ravens.

The Dothraki are capable riders, he considered as he assembled scouting parties in his head, and the wildlings know the dead well. I would need true Northmen to lead them, though. Names raced through his head as he considered the options. Ser Jorah, of course. He had proved himself in their foray Beyond the Wall and could speak the guttural Dothraki tongue. Cley Cerwyn? No, the young lord of Castle Cerwyn had refused the Stark call to arms. He would be too eager to prove his loyalty through brave deeds, and, as Jon had learned on his first true ranging with Qhorin Halfhand,
brave deeds were often the death of many a scouting party. *I shall find other capable scouts among my household*, he decided. *And I shall lead a party myself.*

That was only proper. If he was asking men to risk themselves for information, he would share in that risk. Sansa and Arya would not like it. Nor would the Northern lords. And of course, Daenerys would expressly forbid it. Not that that would stop him. *Scouting might be easier on her dragons*, he mused, half remembering his dream of flight from that morning. Yet they dare not risk the dragons for purposes of reconnaissance.

He would propose his plans at the next council meeting, which they had agreed yesterday would come after this evening’s supper. Jon had forbid lavish meals upon his return to Winterfell, only to be told that Sansa had issued such a directive months ago. The Northern lords ate the same fare as their men. That fare grew worse by the day. Jon hoped Lord Manderly’s river fleet would arrive soon with fresh provisions.

A bitter cold gust of wind cut across the walkway then, making his cloak billow behind him even as he stood still. Then he felt another soft gust from the other direction and saw flickering flames out of the corner of his eye. The door that led from the walkway to the keep was being held open by a figure garbed in black. Jon did not have to turn to know who it was.

“Are you going to join me? Or are you just trying to have the cold reach Arya’s chambers?” he spoke his words out over the yard below him, but the winds carried them back to Sansa. He heard her laugh softly and turned to meet her smile with his own. *The true Lady of Winterfell*, he regarded his cousin for a moment. *She needs to know the truth.* “I had hoped to talk with you,” he said.

“About another heroic ride through the Wolfswood?” she said, the bite in her voice as cold as the air around him. Her tone sapped all warmth from their greeting a moment before. Every now and then Sansa reminded him of Lady Catelyn.

Jon sighed. “It’s related to that, I suppose. You wouldn’t truly understand—“

“—I understand,” she cut him off. “I understand that we need you here. Preparing the men. Preparing the walls. You’ve fought these dead men. You know this enemy, yet you’re off riding around the woods like some boy squire pretending to hunt outlaws.” Jon could almost imagine the fumes rising from her nostrils as she reprimanded him, yet when she next spoke it was in a softer tone. “We need you here, Jon. All of us.”

He nodded his head solemnly. “You’re right,” he agreed, “it’s just… it’s like I said, you wouldn’t understand.”

“No,” she said firmly, “it’s like *I* said. I understand. I know Jon. Bran told me everything.”

*Well then.* Jon was not sure whether to be pleased or angry, or whether that simplified or complicated matters, though he supposed it was all a bit of both. *I was going to tell her anyway*, he reasoned. He opened his mouth to respond, but Sansa continued unabated. “It doesn’t matter to me who your father was. It shouldn’t matter to you. Our fathers are dead, Jon. We need to look after ourselves now. We need to look after our people.” Her reply sounded almost pleading.

“My father…” the words summoned a newfound anger from deep within him, “Eddard claimed to be my father. He claimed me as his son. His bastard. It was all a lie, Sansa. A damned lie.” Raw emotion sprang forth from his mouth alongside his angry words, spewing forth like dragonfire.

She looked into his eyes for a moment, laughing humorlessly. “Are you serious? Father lied?
Father saved your life,” she stated bluntly.

“What do you mean?” Jon responded, confused.

“I was there in King’s Landing the day Joffrey learned of his father’s bastards. Two dozen or more, Jon. Men and girls and babes still at their mothers’ breasts. He had them all killed because they were a threat to his claim. Any child who even looked like the old king had his throat cut,” her voice shook with emotion. “Robert hated the Targaryens. He fought a war against them because your mother fell in love with your father. He had Rhaegar’s children killed during the Sack. What do you think Robert would have done to Rhaegar Targaryen’s trueborn son by Lyanna Stark, his betrothed?”

Silence overtook the pair for a moment as Jon considered her words. They were true, of course. *I’ve been a fool.* He had been angry at Eddard Stark, the man who raised him, for making sure Aegon Targaryen had not died in his crib. He had raised him as Jon Snow, giving him a new home in his mother’s old one. Jon felt a sudden sense of shame overcome him as he thought of his anger from these three days past and his rides through the Wolfswood. Then he remembered his reflections on his ride this morning, and his plans.

“You’re right,” he conceded, “but they need to know. I’m not a true Stark, nor a Snow. I cannot ask the lords to follow me based on a lie. I will not lie. I shouldn’t be ruling the North,” he paused for a moment, “you should.” Her blue eyes widened in shock as he spoke the words

Whatever her thoughts on the matter, Sansa pushed them aside as her reprimand continued. “We’ve just lost Lord Royce and five hundred knights and you’re concerned about that?” she asked incredulously. “Titles don’t matter right now. Who cares? Who cares if you’re a bastard or a Stark or a…” she caught herself before she announced the truth to any interested ears. Jon watched his cousin for a moment, the mention of Bronze Yohn Royce had tempered her anger. He knew how she felt, knew the feeling, the regret and shame and anguish of sending men to their deaths.

“It’s not your fault, you know,” he said softly as he moved to touch her shoulder.

“I… well…” Sansa’s words failed her for a moment, “he rode north for me. He rode into battle for me and stood by me when Lord Baelish tried to tear us apart.” *Baelish…* He had yet to ask her about that, though he had heard whispers of what happened. *Now is not the time.* “I sent him to his death,” she finished solemnly.

“No. Lord Royce knew the costs and he knew his duty. Your decision and his saved thousands of lives, Sansa,” he said, comforting her as her confident demeanor cracked open for but a moment. “Thousands of men and women who will be here to fight alongside us when the time comes.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” she said, regaining her composure. “And now you want to make an issue of your heritage in the middle of a war. Want to play games with the oaths of the lords and the smallfolk while we struggle to feed ourselves.”

His moment of tenderness was whisked away on a chill breeze as their argument resumed in earnest. “I will not ask men to follow me into battle based on a lie. They will know the truth. If nothing changes, good. If they’d prefer a trueborn Stark as their leader, good. But no more lies.”

“You’ve sworn the North to Daenerys. If you tell the lords that you’re not truly Lord of Winterfell, does that make your oath to her a lie?” *Damn it Sansa.* Perhaps she was right, though he could not admit it. He knew his course was the right one. Grey eyes met blue ones as the close cousins regarded one another, their thoughts battling in the frozen air between them. “Do what you must, Jon. I won’t stand in your way, but whatever you decide, keep my words in mind.”
“I will,” he promised, “but I will not lie.”

Then she laughed, puffs of breath misting before her. “You’re as stubborn as he was.”

“Who?”

“Father,” she replied, “our father. He was as much yours as he was mine. He loved you. You know he did.” He nodded in agreement. “Whatever he did, Jon, he did for love. Don’t blame him for that….”

“I don’t, I-”

“I watched him die,” she ignored his interruptions as she continued to speak, “I saw them take his head. And you were a world away and Arya was dead then Bran and Rickon were dead. Then mother and Robb and all the rest. Dead.” Bitter tears welled in her eyes. The first tears he had seen her shed in years. “Everyone I knew and loved, dead. I would have given anything to have someone to talk to or laugh with. Some to love me.”

“What are you sayin-”

“-the way that she loves you,” she said, looking directly into his eyes. He felt his heart clench. Surely we are not talking of this now. “It doesn’t matter if you’re her family or she your queen or whatever excuse you want to put forth. Don’t throw that away. It does not matter. She loves you,”

“I don’t know-” he began to protest meekly.

“-if you love her?” Sansa scoffed at that, a sound as bitter as the winter winds around them. “I thought you said you weren’t going to lie.” Then she walked away, leaving him alone with his thoughts.
Arya II

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you all for the comments and kudos. It really does help my motivation to see people are enjoying this. I promise to be more engaging in the comments section going forward. Also going to re-title the chapters because we're pushing the limits of my roman numeral knowledge.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Arya wondered how quickly she could kill him. It would be easy, she knew. He was of a height with her, and far less skilled with a blade. I could do it quickly, he wouldn't even be able to run. Needle through his heart or a knife across his throat. She could kill his brother too, the Kingslayer, confined in his quarters. She had considered it when she was disguised as a serving girl at the Twins, but he had had too many guards around him. Yet now? Now the dwarf and crippled knight were in her home and at her mercy. Two dozen Lannister soldiers had ridden north as well. She could kill them too, wipe out the men of House Lannister the same way she had wiped out the men of House Frey.

Winter will come for all our enemies. She remembered the rushing thrill she felt when she cut old Lord Walder’s throat and watched his blood pool on the ground of his own hall. The same hall where Robb and mother had died. It was the same feeling she had when she watched his heirs choke on their poisoned wine.

Arya had studied poisons in Braavos, had learned the textures and smells and potencies. She knew what each poison did and how to stop it. The Strangler or the Tears of Lys would have been more suitable for men as despicable as the Freys, but she had not had those available to her. Terrible deaths for terrible men. Instead, she had stolen the Twins’ maester’s stores of Greycap, a common poison yet just as deadly given the proper quantities. Greycap could coat a blade given the right consistency, but she had chosen to mask the poison in wine to hide the scents.

A dozen murderous fantasies swirled through her head as she watched Tyrion Lannister waddle away across the yard and through the great doors to the hall. Perhaps they have come to help… But no, that did not matter. The Lannisters had killed her father, brother, and mother. Jon liked the dwarf, but he had not been there. He had not seen what she saw. After the war ended, the Lannisters would pay their debts.

“My lady…” Brienne’s questioning tone shook Arya from her vengeful thoughts. Arya looked at her. The woman stood beside her, armored in fine, lobstered steel and wielding a thick quarterstaff. Her straw blonde hair was tussled and messy from the morning’s drills in the yard. Jon and Sansa had charged the two with the training of Winterfell’s woman. Washerwoman and cooks would not be marching in the field beside the Unsullied and Northmen, of course, but should the battle reach Winterfell’s walls they would defend their home.

Thus, Arya Stark and Brienne of Tarth, with the assistance of her squire Podrick Payne, drilled the women day after day, teaching them to fight. Many had mastered the basics by now, learning how to properly hold a shield and sword, how to parry a blow, and how to lunge and stab and slash. With most the tourney swords taken by the men, the women were left with whatever they could
find: daggers, old quarterstaffs, even straight tree branches. *I trained with a piece of wood,* she mused. *It does not matter, as long as they have steel and dragonglass when the time comes.*

“We should spar in pairs,” she responded to Brienne, “have each fighter face another of her own age and height, if there’s a match.” She looked around to find a willing partner, but the Winter Town and serving girls would not do for such an activity. Who would have the courage to strike a lady? Only Brienne could match her in skill, yet that would not do either. Their fights, though exhilarating, often proved a distraction to those around them. Brienne would instead pace around the women and offer instruction.

Arya puffed hot air from her nostrils in amusement as she considered the group before her. There was young Lorra, one of the keep’s serving girls. She was small and shy, seldom meeting Arya’s eyes, but she fought well enough. Old Innis from the kitchens was here too, though she swung her rolling pin far too slow to have any real effect. There were a number of Umber women too, though Arya had not learned their names just yet.

Arya continued to survey the group and saw Fyona, a maid with red-brown hair closer to Sansa in age and near enough as beautiful. A drunken Dustin soldier had tried to force himself upon her not three nights past, yet she had beat him back with her banded wooden club and escaped. That little tale filled Arya with an odd sense of pride. Perhaps these drills were working. Here was Fyona, ready to train and fight while her attacker lay bruised and chained up in the kennels awaiting judgement. Arya would have slit his throat for the offense, but Sansa and Jon would no doubt find some lesser sentence to hand the man.

Winterfell’s cells were full of other offenders; thieves stealing extra rations and whatnot. All Northmen too, to their shame. The Unsullied and Dothraki kept to their camps. Even when faced with an unnatural, deadly foe, the men of Westeros acted like undisciplined fools. Arya hoped the women were made of sterner stuff.

“Each of you should find a sparring partner,” Brienne’s voice rang clear across the yard. Slowly, even reluctantly, the women paired off and stood opposite their chosen foe. She set her eyes on young Lyanna Mormont. *Fierce, willful, and highborn, she’ll do fine.* Arya walked to Lyanna and gave her a wicked smile.

“Think you can strike me?” she teased. The young lady of Bear Island turned to meet her gaze and offered a vicious glare. The two girls were close enough in age to merit a friendship, but Arya would not have described their interactions as the beginnings of such. Both were stern, stubborn, and serious. Yet both respected the other as well.

“Think I can beat you, more like,” she retorted. Arya grinned.

“The goal is the strike your foe without being struck yourself. Anywhere but the head, if you please. The healing rooms are full enough as it is. You may begin when ready.” The yard came alive with the subtle scrapes of leather boots against frozen mud and light clattering of wooden weapons clashing in a pitiful mock battle.

Arya faced Lyanna as the younger girl, wooded blade in hand, lunged forward without so much as a word. Arya had not even picked up her own practice blade from where it lay on the ground. She spun on her heel and easily danced aside. Lyanna brought the blade back and swung again, using both hands to guide the wooden blade in a great sweeping arch. Arya twirled, spinning out of the way of the oncoming blow and off to her foe’s unguarded left side, grinning all the while.

Lynna grunted in frustration and regained her footing. She brought her weapon up over her head and stepped forward with her left foot, putting her entire weight behind the downward blow. Arya
watched sword descend with some amusement before stepping aside and letting it crash to the
frozen earth with a dull thud.

Arya placed her hands behind her back, inviting further attacks with the overconfident, mocking
gesture. Lyanna’s eyes shone with fury as she drew the sword back and prepared to swing again.
Then she threw it down and charged, yelling some incoherent battle cry. The unorthodox attack
took Arya off guard for a moment. A moment was all that was needed. Lyanna crashed into Arya,
his momentum sending both girls into the dirt. Small fists wailed against Arya’s padded leather
jerkin as Lyanna pressed her advantage, scoring blow after blow against her foe.

Recovering from the shock of the attack, Arya shifted her feet and bent her knees, pushing against
the ground and twisting her torso, forcing Lyanna off her and regaining her footing in one fluid
motion. The girl looked upward in surprise but made to resume the offensive.

Then a deep, booming laugh cut through the din of mock battle and the steady beat of blood
pumping through Arya’s ears. She looked to the side of the keep were Ser Jorah Mormont stood,
arms crossed over his heaving breastplate as he smiled and laughed at the scene. The knight’s
mirth shook the two combatants out of their furies and Lyanna stood, dusting herself off.

Jorah approached the pair just as Brienne made her way over. “That’s one way to do it,” he
laughed softly as he stooped to retrieve Lyanna’s discarded sword and handed it back to his little
cousin. He looked at Arya and gave her a smile as well.

Arya liked the old knight, though she had only spoken with him a few times. They had twice talked
over meals in the hall. One morning she had found herself next to him as they were served cooked
quail eggs and dried fruits from the cellars, along with the normal ration of brown bread. He has
asked her about her childhood in Winterfell and she his time in Essos after her lord father had
chased him from the North. Many of his tales were not particularly pleasant, but she enjoyed them
nonetheless.

Later that evening they had talked again, that time over mutton stew with yams, onions and carrots
mixed in. The latter conversation had been comprised of her questions and his answers; mostly
about the army of the dead and expedition beyond The Wall. It was then that she had learned of the
Hound’s survival and Gendry’s whereabouts. Both men had accompanied Jon and Jorah to capture
a dead man. Both men were making their way to Winterfell with the dragonglass from
Dragonstone.

Arya looked from Jorah to Lyanna as the girl steadied her ragged breath. “Well, I won. Didn’t I?”
Lyanna asked harshly, her voice still colored with her subsiding battle rage.

“I suppose you did, given the rules…” Brienne answered as she pondered the circumstances. Arya
looked at the armored lady, considering her tone. Honor and loyalty and oaths meant a great deal
to Brienne, she knew. Yet when it came to battle there was no honor involved. She had watched
her kick and wrestled with the Hound, had she not?

“Well struck,” Arya agreed, “doesn’t really matter how you kill your enemy, does it? As long as
they die.”

Jorah regarded her curiously for a moment and nodded, “I suppose that’s right, my lady. Though
never a good idea to abandon your footing in a battle. You need to fight with your head as much as
your hands. A woman’s mind can be her strength in a fight.”

“I have all the strength I need,” Lyanna challenged the older man, “and the North breeds strong
women,” she shot him a glance, “maybe stronger that it does the men.” Jorah’s smile noticeably
lessened on his face as he listened to her words. Then he nodded and spoke.

“Aye, that it does, or else something about it draws them here,” he agreed as he inclined his head toward Brienne. Silence fell about the group as they considered the knight’s words. Behind them, the dull clattering of a dozen sparring matches continued, though Arya could hear some of the fighters stifling their giggles. She turned quickly to see who it was and saw Podrick showing a younger woman how to handle a thick quarterstaff. The boy was blushing and seemed almost as flustered as the girl. She would return order to her charges in a moment, but there was something she wanted to know first, something they had not covered in their earlier conversations.

“You were with Daenerys from the beginning, I’m told,” she addressed Jorah. Arya had heard rumors and whispers of the Dragon Queen’s journeys from Sansa and others. She had hoped to hear more from Jon or Daenerys themselves, but neither had been around much in recent days. “How did she come by dragons, Unsullied, and a horde of Dothraki screamers?”

Jorah looked off into the distance, drawing a in a breath and opening his mouth to speak. “All in ways as unexpected as my lady’s charge just now,” he said, turning back and flashing half a smile at Lyanna. “You might ask her yourself. I know the queen would welcome your company.”

“She seems a bit busy for story time,” Lyanna responded. *She and Jon both.* Arya knew why, of course, though it had been something of an accident. She had been in the godswood a few nights past when Tyrion Lannister had entered the sacred grove and Sansa after him. Arya had not been praying or meditating really, just enjoying the warmth and comfort of the ancient enclave when the pair had begun to speak at its entrance. Concealed in the evening shadows, she did not have to move to hear their conversation.

In the end, she was surprised to find that she was not surprised at all. Jon was neither a bastard nor her brother, but a Targaryen and son of her long dead aunt. *What of it? Names are fickle things. They can change as easily as faces.* It did not make him any less her friend or her family. And if he loved the queen? *Again, what of it?* Good on him. She only hoped he would come to his senses and accept what he was. He would be happier for it. Arya wanted to see him happy.

It all seemed rather amusing really. Despite their trials and struggles, each surviving child of Winterfell had become part of what they always wanted to be. *Jon is a trueborn son,* she mused, *and Sansa the Lady of Winterfell with a dozen noble knights in her service. Bran is, well, whatever Bran is. And I…* Still, she was not quite sure what she was nor what her role was. *To finish my list? To protect my family?* Arya did not know the answer.

A raven *quarked* loudly above her and she looked up from her thoughts to see the large black bird fly off above the southern wall from the rookery window, a small scroll attached to its leg. It was a larger bird, one of the ones maesters often used for longer journeys or swifter flights. *South… that’s odd. Why would we send a message south?* She looked between Jorah and Brienne before her, but neither had seemed to notice.

“We’re all a bit busy for story time,” Arya offered her sparring partner an answer and she moved to excuse herself from the yard. “I’ll return in a moment,” she nodded at Brienne and left her with the two Mormonts. As she walked away, she heard Brienne begin to question Ser Jorah about his time in with the queen as Lyanna made to find another sparring partner.

Arya made her way across the yard to base of the tower that held the rookery on its upper floors. The tower was still under repair from the fires the Bolton bastard had set years ago. The outsides were blackened from the flames, though the soot bled into the dirty snowbanks piled against the thick stone base. The insides had been gutted and were being rebuilt, or had been before focus had switched to preparing Winterfell for war. Only the stairs and the rookery itself were of any use.
One way in and one way out. If someone was in there, she would find them with little trouble.

As she reached the tower’s doorway, the oaken door swung inward to reveal one of the Lannister soldiers grasping the iron ring that serves as a handle. He was a younger man, with brown eyes and greasy brown hair that shone in the grey light. The soldier looked down and regarded Arya with a look of surprise. “Ah, your pardon, m’lady,” he said, his tone matching his facial expression.

“You sent that raven just now?” Arya leapt into questioning the man, her voice perhaps a shade too harsh. What was he doing up there? Where was that raven going? Why south?

“Aye, m’lady. And seeing to the rest o’ them. Your brother has set us to help prepare the castle for siege. Always need ravens ready for a siege,” he finished with a grin.

“And where was that one going?” she took a step forward into the threshold as she pressed the attack.

“Why, White Harbor, if it please. Requests for more supplies from the Manderlys,” he explained, “now if m’lady would excuse me, I’ve work to be getting to,” he bowed as much as his crimson and black armor would allow before moving past her out into the yard.

“Wait,” Arya commanded. The man stopped and turned, armor rattling as he adjusted his stance.

“Thank you,” she gave him her sweetest smile, that sort she had been taught to do when she was still a girl under her mother’s wing. “Thank you for coming north to fight with us. What’s your name? Where are you from?” she asked in a light, girlish voice.

The soldier smiled back, “oh, well Aelan’s the name, if it please. I was born down in Maidenpool. Spent half m’life looking at those salmon banners, though I never much care for the taste o’ the fish itself,” he laughed in a nervous voice as his eyes drifted off to the left.

“Maidenpool,” she rolled over the word, pondering it aloud, “and yet you serve the Lannisters?”

His eyes flashed to the left again ever-so-slightly, but it was enough for her to tell. “Well, aye. I was in King’s Landing ’round the time the war started. Call went out for more Goldcloaks and I needed some work and some coin, so I signed up. Saw myself through the Blackwater and soon enough traded my gold armor for crimson. Now here I am,” he explained.

“Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” she nodded at him and turned to walk up the stairway toward the rookery. He’s lying. She knew the signs: the quivering of his voice and shift in his eyes. But why? Where was that raven going? Something is not right. The rookery would not hold the secrets she wanted to reveal, but this ‘Aelan’ would.

Arya considered following the man, hiding in the shadows and watching his movements. She could watch the others too, Ryn Hill and his Lannister men. They were up to something, no matter what they said. Another raven quarked in the rookery far above her. Then another. Suddenly Arya knew what to do and who would help her uncover her enemy’s intentions.

She made her way across the far end of the yard, away from where Brienne and Pod has resumed drilling the women. Her leather boots slipped against the firm ice that extended from under the snowbanks packed against the walls, but she kept her footing. Another moment saw her through the archway that led to the godswood.

As she entered the clearing, a cold wind brushed across her face, pulling at her and fur cloak. It had always been warmer in the Stark’s sacred grove. The hot springs beneath Winterfell kept the ground clear of snow and ice. At least they had in ages past. Something was different now. The
wood was less welcoming now, as if some unseen presence were leeching the heat from the ground itself. Ice clung to the upper branches of the barren broadleaf trees and snow blanketed the pines. Ice and snow covered the ground in patches and piled against the trunks of the outer rim of trees.

Arya moved forward across the ground toward the heart tree, her boots pressing again thin sheets of translucent ice that cracked softly as she walked. The godswood pools that had so often steamed in the winter air were subdued today, with only faint wisps rising from the black water. She felt another gust pull at her cloak. The cold air stung her cheeks and whispered a nameless threat in her ears.

She felt something then, pressing against her mind. As soft as a pillow, it was, but neither as warm nor as comforting. She looked around. *What is it? Who is it?* “Bran?” she called out, looking for her brother. “Bran where are you?”

Another breeze, gentler this time, rustled the red leaves of the weirwood that hung over the grove. Arya felt the presence abate, replaced with a warmer feeling that made her feel at ease. “Here,” a lifeless voice drifted from the other side of the heart tree. Arya circled the massive white trunk and saw her brother come into view.

He sat limp in his rolling chair, covered in fine furs. His face was pale, almost as white as the carved face at which he stared. *He looks weak,* she thought. Not just in the chair, though. Arya could not recall seeing her brother eat more than a small bite of food at any meal. Arya stood motionless an arm’s length away, hesitant and unsure what to do. Finally, he turned his head and looked at her, his blue eyes meeting her grey ones.

“Why have you come?” he asked. *Hello, brother. Good to see you too. Are you warm? Are you well? Can I fetch you anything from the kitchens?* A thousand retorts sprang into her mind, but she stopped them all from escaping her lips. Bran was different now, she knew that. He spent all his time out here by the heart tree or else in his chambers. He seldom took visitors, preferring instead to wander in his visions. It still made her uncomfortable, watching his eyes turn white and his body fall limp as he journeyed where no one else could join him.

Yet she could not deny the usefulness of his power. He had seen Littlefinger’s treachery in his mind; had helped his sisters deliver justice to the man who had betrayed their parents. “Three-Eyed Raven”, he called himself. *Whatever that means.* Yet somewhere beneath those furs and that pale, gaunt flesh, Brandon Stark still stirred. Perhaps she could reach him.

“I need your help Bran,” she said softly as she decided on a response. “I need to know what those Lannister soldiers are doing. Something’s wrong.”

He regarded her with a curious look. “No,” he stated with no hint of anger or authority.

“What? What do you mean ‘no’?” Arya shot back, the peacefulness of the godswood leaving her like a startled pack of birds from a tree. “They’re up to something, Bran. I know they are. Just like Littlefinger and the others,” she explained, frustration coloring her voice. “You can see them. You can watch them. Find out why they came to Winterfell and what they want.”

“I can’t,” he said again, sounding more exasperated now.

“You can!” she insisted. Bran slowly shook his head.

“No, I need to focus. I need to see. He’s getting closer,” he began to explain. “I can’t have any distractions right now.”
“Distractions?” she almost spat the word, “this is our family. Our home. Something is wrong and I need your help. You saw Littlefinger’s betrayal and me in the Riverlands and everything else, why can’t you see this?”

“I can’t,” he said against, barely above a whisper. A rare hint of emotion colored his voice. He sounded almost like Bran again. “It’s harder than it was. It gets harder every day. To find what I need. To see…” he breathed out the last word, the air misting in front of him. Arya moved to put a hand on his covered shoulder and gave him a reassuring squeeze. “I cannot help you. I’m sorry.”

She sighed, knowing now it was no use to argue further. Whatever his task, she knew she would not sway him from it. Bran might have helped, but the boy before her was only part her brother. I have no more true brothers, now. She said nothing else, only gave him a quick hug. Then, she moved off to the heart tree and cleared a bit of snow from one of the low branches and sat.

There she remained for a good, long while. She could not say how long in truth. She watched the wind push and pull at the tops of the trees, watched the pale sunlight dance across the blood red leaves of the weirdwood, and watched as Bran’s eyes flashed white and blue and white again as he once again left Winterfell for his visions.

After a time, she felt her stomach rumble and decided it was time to go. Arya considered asking Bran if he was hungry, but thought better of it. Best not disturb him anymore. She pressed her palms into either side of the great white branch and deftly lifted herself from her perch and onto the forest floor. Swift and silent, she made her way back across and out of the godswood.

Back in the castle yard the training group has dispersed. Brienne and Pod were nowhere to be found and the women had all returned to their tasks. Soldiers in half a dozen different surcoats streamed inward from the inner gates, their arms all full with bundles of spears and swords or small crates. Other men rolled barrels across the frozen ground while serjeants shouted directions. Arya stepped back to take in the flurry of activity as still more heavily laden soldiers and servants carried the supplies in through the gates. Light reflected off a bundle of weapons in one man’s arms. Arya narrowed her gaze and saw that he was not carrying steel. Dragonglass, she knew. They’ve brought the dragonglass.

They had been expecting the Manderlys to bring the southern supplies for days now. The trip up the White Knife was easy enough, but transporting the weapons and food overland was the toughest part of the journey. Arya walked over to where one crate lay cracked open. The inside was filled with dry straw that cradled small daggers made of chipped dragonglass. She plucked one from its resting place, turning over the curious weapon in her hands.

“What sword, that,” a raspy voice proclaimed from behind her. It sounded cold and fatigued, yet amused too. She knew the owner even before she spun on her heels to regard the half-burned face and dented armor of Sandor Clegane.

“Thought you were dead,” she said plainly. That was only a partial truth, of course. She had left the man to die outside Saltpans, after Brienne had bested him and tossed him off a cliff to die. In Braavos, she had thought him long gone. Yet when Jon and Jorah had spoken of their journey Beyond the Wall, they had mentioned the Hound among their number. She had felt strange when she heard the news and felt stranger still standing before the man now.

“Dead,” he coughed out a laugh, “my eyes look fucking blue to you?” She looked into his eyes and he into hers. What she saw there she could not name. Arya had hated the man once, had wanted him dead. Yet during their travels together something else had colored her feelings. Not love, not any sort of tender friendship or affection either. Acceptance? Perhaps that was the word for it.
“What happened to you?” she ignored his question and asked one of her own. He shook his head and looked off toward the keep.

“Some old septon found me. Fixed my leg and fed me. Then he died. I killed the men that killed him. Joined Thoros on his way north. Then he died.”

“And now you’re here,” she finished his terrible story for him.

“Aye, now I’m back here,” he sighed. “We’ll see how that goes. Seems every new place I go has someone dead in a fortnight,” he said grimly. *That’s not a surprise.*

“I’ll make sure it’s not you,” Arya said with a hint of a grin on her face.

Sandor laughed and looked back at her, taking in the sight of the young woman that stood before him. “New dagger,” he said, pointing with one mailed hand to her side where the Valyrian steel blade was secured to her belt. “That one got a name yet?”

“No yet,” she responded, “not sure it needs one.” Sandor nodded slowly and grunted in amusement.

“Killed anyone with it?”

“Just a little bird,” she said cryptically. That got another laugh from the man.

“Might be you could teach this lot a thing or two, then. Only things they’re like to kill are themselves,” he complained, turning and nodding behind him to the stables. Arya took a sideways step and looked beyond to where the Hound had gestured. A dozen men in aquamarine surcoats were dismounting their horses. *Manderly men,* she knew as she recognized the merman emblazoned on the cloth coverings.

There was another man among them, with broad shoulders and thick muscles bulging from underneath his dark brown leather clothing. Even from across the yard, she recognized the build and the short-cropped black hair. Arya nodded at the Hound as she swept past him and across the yard to say hello to her old friend.

She watched him clumsily swing his leg over the back of his mount and step into the straw covered mud of the stables. He turned then, his deep, dark blue eyes locking with hers as she approached. He was taller than she remembered. Indeed, he seemed to be bigger in a number of ways. She felt her eyes wander from away from his for a moment, taking in the man before her, with his strong jawline covered in a growing beard of black hair. Gendry cocked his head to the left as he looked her over. “Ary?” he sounded surprised.

Arya swallowed. She wanted to speak, but her throat felt to dry. *What’s wrong with me? I knew where he was, that he was coming here.* Finally, mercifully, after what seemed to be forever, the words came forth. “Arya,” she corrected him.

“Er, right. Sorry,” he said sheepishly, raising a muscled arm and awkwardly scratching his head. “You look well,” he said while trying to smile himself. He looked well himself, tall and strong as befit someone who used to carry around that old bull’s head helm.

“What happened to you?” she asked, stepping closer to him. Her voice was higher than she intended it to be, a girlish, mouse-like squeak. Her arms felt heavy and useless at her sides and she crossed them across her chest. *But no, that doesn’t feel right.* She dropped them to her sides again. *What is wrong with me?* The question repeated itself in her mind.
“It’s a long story,” Gendry laughed, a booming, mirthful sound that overpowered the neighing of horses and murmur of voices all around them. Arya laughed too, realizing the absurdity of the question. *It’s been years.* She looked back into his eyes and smiled.

“Mine too,” she offered a response. Her voice was her own this time. An awkward silence fell between them, filled by the sounds of Sandor Clegane bellowing orders at the men organizing the supplies in the yard. Arya strained for something else to say. She was happy to see him, she knew that. She felt it, truly. Yet words failed her still. *What is wrong with me?* “I saw Hot Pie,” she offered with a smile.

He chuckled. Even his lighter laughs were deep. “Hot Pie…” he looked off into the yard with a smile on his face, “still around then, is he?”

“Right where we left him, though he grew a bit,” she heard herself giggle, the sound mixing in with Gendry’s renewed laughter.

“That’s alright then,” Gendry said warmly. Again, she grasped at something, anything, to continue talking with him. She saw him glance about the yard again as two soldiers guided a horse-drawn wagon laden with foodstuffs through the inner gates. Another wagon followed a moment later, this one rattling from the steel held within. “I suppose I should get back to seeing the weapons properly stored,” he said, his words trailing off into the yard even as he spoke them.

Without thinking, she stepped forward against and pressed herself against him, wrapping her arms around his torso as she hugged him. Her face pressed against his chest and she could feel the firm muscles underneath his leather jerkin. Gendry let out a small gasp of surprise at her advance, but then lowered his arms too and embraced her, though she thought he seemed to be holding back his own strength.

It felt good to hold him. He was a friend, perhaps her only friend. They had traveled and fought and suffered together. She wanted to stay there a while longer, but knew it would not do. Pulling away, she looked up at him. Gendry wore a confused but calm look on his face. “You should eat with us tonight. Bet whatever you’ve brought with you is better than what we’ve been eating,” she half-joked, silently willing him to accept the invitation.

“At feast, is it?” he laughed, “will I have to wear proper lord’s clothes, m’lady?” he said, grinning and tugging at the frayed ends of the ill-fitting, grey woolen undershirt that stuck out from beneath his jerkin. She punched him, a playful jab that bounced off his lower torso with little lasting effect.

“Call me that again—” she began.

“—and what, I’ll earn another punch? Good thing you have that steel there. I don’t think those fists will do much good against them White Walkers,” he grinned. She scowled at him. Gendry seemed to understand her intent. “Alright then, supper it is. After I see these weapons properly stored.”

Arya nodded and turned to walk out of the stables and toward the keep. As she reached the last stall, she turned to look at Gendry, but found he was already looking at her.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she nearly shouted the words to make them heard above the other noises. Gendry offered another smile and nod before turning and walking out the other side of the stables.

Arya crossed the yard, weaving between rolling barrels and piles of small crates and the occasional wagon.

A slow, cold wind began to blow as she reached the center. The winter breeze plucked at her hair and cloak. Snow began to fall. *A storm,* she knew. The flakes were light, as they often were in the first hours. The dark grey sky above threatened heavier flakes. Arya glanced off to the battlements...
as a fiercer wind picked up speed, stirring the direwolf banners from their slumping slumber and making them wave wildly.

A chill set in amidst the wagons, horses, and men. She could see the soldiers’ breaths mist more clearly as they worked. The snow had begun to stick to the tops of the crates and barrels. It had started to cover the ground as well, save those patches close enough to the lit braziers that guarded the main pathways around the keep.

As Arya reached the great doorway to the keep, she looked back and found the Hound lifting a crate as large as she was from the back on a wagon. Behind him she saw Gendry overseeing the offloading of another cart, calling out faint instructions to the men. She felt a sudden warmth in her breast as she stared. Her cheeks felt hot. No, her whole body, really. The snowfall thickened and the air grew colder still, but Arya Stark felt naught but warmth. Perhaps, she said to herself as she watched the snowflakes fall, I’ll stay outside a moment longer.

Chapter End Notes

How about those Yankees?

So I know people basically want Jonerys and nothing else, but this story has sort of evolved from that. While that is obviously the focus here, it is my hope to deliver a book-like experience that continues where Season 7 Episode 7 left off. The story thus far has been pretty standard and in line with expectations. That will change. I’ve got a number of cool and (to my knowledge) unique ideas that should place our characters in some interesting situations while still remaining true to Martin's tone and style.

The next few chapters should come a bit quicker hopefully (more than one per week). We get to explore a new perspective next time...
Jaime I

Chapter Notes

As promised, I'm picking up the production schedule. Here we explore Jaime's perspective.

Gotta say I'm a little disappointed that no one called out my Podrick joke last chapter.

Jaime had never seen this much snow. During the winter of his youth, it had snowed a few times at Casterly Rock, though never more than dagger’s length in any one storm. It was different here. Even from his narrow tower window he could see the curtains of heavy snowflakes covering the North in thick white blankets. The sole window, more an arrow slit in truth, faced eastward in order to capture the dawn’s light, though Jaime had not once seen a proper sunrise since he had been escorted up into his new chambers. Each morning was greyer and bleaker than its predecessor.

Yet morning had come and gone. This one had been as dull as all those before it. Jaime had been given books and trinkets to amuse himself, but nothing more. Now evening’s dim light was settling in amidst the shadowy towers and white capped walls of Winterfell. He could not mark the hour at which the sun sank below the horizon as he could not see either.

Not that views mattered with everything buried under several feet of snow. The normally sharp angles of the crenellated battlements and tower roofs opposite his own were shrouded with heavy white hoods. He could not see much farther than the outer wall, but he assumed the Daenerys’ camps were near buried as well. Men labored in the yard below to pathways clear of snow, but the efforts were mostly in vain. Even as they added to the massive snowbanks against the walls, new powder covered the ground they had just cleared. *We can’t even fight the snow*, he mused as he watched a team of Stark men, spades in hand, battle the elements for control of the castle yard.

A bitter cold wind blew from the east. The gust forced Jaime to retreat from his perch by the window as a thousand heavy flakes invaded his sanctum. Thankfully, the fire that the servants kept blazing in his hearth melted the flakes quickly enough while Jaime swung the window shut and latched it tight with his hand.

Winterfell was certainly different now. The last time he had traveled North had been as a knight of Robert Baratheon’s kingsguard. Their column had stretched back almost a mile along the kingsroad. Jaime remembered the sight of wagons and horses snaking their way through the summer hills and farmsteads of the North. Winterfell had seemed familiar then, the castle cast in the dark greys and greens one might find in any southern keep. Now winter had come.

*Everything is different.* When Robert had been king the realm had been whole. *Was it I who broke it? When I pushed the boy from that broken tower window?* That had been the been the first arrow loosed. He knew that now. Blaming Tyrion, Lady Stark had taken his brother captive and Lord Tywin had burned the Riverlands in retribution. Then Robert had died, his old friend Ned following him swiftly to the grave. Then, bit by bit, the realm has fallen to pieces. *Everything is different now. Everything is broken... Even me.*
Jaime moved to sit upon a fine cushioned stool by the hearth. Reaching near the crackling flames, he picked up the iron prod and stoked the fires, pushing the spent logs aside to make room for fresh ones. The prod felt strange in his hand, weighty and uneven. It had been years now, yet still nothing felt proper or right when he grasped it, not even his Valyrian steel sword.

He reached to the side of the hearth where a dozen or so split dry logs were piled. The wood felt rough in his hand. Taking care to avoid the flames, he placed the fresh bit of wood atop the others, lurching backward as its weight broke the blackened log beneath and sent up a cloud of fiery embers with a threatening crack.

Jaime looked into the brightening flames as they consumed the fresh sacrifice. He could smell the scents of burning pine as dark smoke wafted from the hearth and dissipated in the air around him. But no, it was not just pine he smelled. It was ash, dirt, and blood. Burning flesh and boiling water and melted steel. He could still taste them in his mouth. He heard the screams of burning men echo in his mind.

The commander of the Lannister armies had been haunted by his experience on the Blackwater. It had all seemed so easy until then: outwitting the Blackfish for control of Riverrun; convincing Lord Tarly to join their cause; sacking Highgarden. But that day upon the river had left a burning scar in his memory. The screams... those terrible screams. The Dothraki had been terrifying to behold in their own right, but the dragon? That great black menace of despair had turned hundreds of good Lannister lads into cinders. Fire was power. Fire was death. How do you win a war against that?

Yet now they faced something equally as terrifying, if the Stark bastard, Targaryen girl, and Tyrion were to be believed. One hundred thousand dead men marching down upon the realm out of the frozen lands Beyond the Wall. Or what had been beyond it. As far as he understood it, these ice demons of legend had shattered the ancient barrier, or else found their way past it. Ordinary steel was no use, they had said. Only dragonglass and fire could vanquish these dead men. I suppose fire is life too.

And what have I brought to help? A sword and one hand to wield it. The thought lit a fire inside him, a slow burning rage that started in his heart. I could have brought more, could have brought five thousand men from the capital and the Westerlands. Maybe more. Food and supplies too. It had been his sister who had promised their forces to the Starks and Targaryens, and it had been his sister who had forsaken their honor and reneged on her oaths to the realm.

Do I hate her? He was not sure. Jaime remembered his shock at seeing the ruins of the Sept of Baelor upon his return from Lord Walder’s victory feast at the Twins. His rage had burned low and constant like the smoldering embers atop Visenya’s Hill. And our son... Tommen had thrown himself from his royal chambers in shock and grief. Jaime had not even had a chance to see his child’s body before Cersei had burned it and scattered the ashes about the shores of the Blackwater Rush.

Not that he wanted to see his second son’s broken body. He had watched Joffrey choke during his own wedding. And Myrcella... His only daughter, sweet and beautiful and kind. She had been poisoned even before they left the shores of Dorne and died in her father’s arms mere moments after learning the truth. No. Tommen’s body would have been too much.

Was she to blame? Perhaps. His sister’s claiming the explosion as some treacherous act of fanatical Sparrows was a farce. Lords and smallfolk alike had seen through that as they might a toddler’s first lie. He had thought to remove her when he had learned the truth, to escort her back to Casterly Rock. It would have been for the protection of the people of King’s Landing, yes, but also for her own. How many lords had she killed in that tragic accident? How many families in the Reach and
Crownlands now plotted against her? Fear and shock had kept them silent, but that was no way to rule.

It had taken him months to speak with the various lords and gain their support. Politicking had never been his forte. In the end, it did not matter. Not three moons after his return Qyburn had delivered them a scroll from the east, rolled parchment sealed with a crimson elephant. “A message from Malaquo Maegyr,” the man had explained, “Triarch of Volantis and friend of the crown.”

“Friend of the crown?” Jaime had almost laughed out the words. They could not rely upon the lords of the Crownlands to support them. How had they managed to befriend a rich Volantene half a world away?

“In a sense, yes. Maegyr has lost much in Daenerys Targaryen’s liberation of Slavers’ Bay and his ships do good trade in Lannisport and King’s Landing besides,” Qyburn prattled in his wispy voice. “He writes that hundreds of ships have docked in the harbor of his Free City to take on water and fresh foodstuffs—”

“Ships,” Jaime spat out the word sarcastically and caught a vicious look from his sister in return, “who cares about some ships?”

“Ships, my lord, boasting the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen, the golden rose of the Tyrells, and speared sun of the Martells of Dorne,” the former maester had finished with a queer look.

“Traitors all,” Cersei had lowered her glass of wine to utter a silent curse. “We must prepare our armies to march on Highgarden and Sunspear. Qyburn will send word to the Freys to prepare the Riverlands for war as well.”

And that had been the end of it. End of any plans he had set for his sister’s removal were irrelevant in the face on imminent invasion. It had not been for any great love of Cersei or his own house that he had stayed in the capital. No. It was about survival. He had known that even then. Daenerys Targaryen sailed for Westeros to retake her family’s throne. I killed her father. What will she do to me should she win it back?

So, Jaime had remained in King’s Landing, rallying the Lannister armies and readying the kingdoms for war. He was comfortable in that regard, commanding men and preparing for a fight. Perhaps he had been too comfortable. Only a week after they had heard the news of the Targaryen girl’s journey westward, Jaime had fallen back into bed with his sister. And now she is with child. My child.

To say it had been easy to leave her would have been a lie. Jaime loved her still, or else still felt some attachment to his sister. He wanted nothing more to see another child of his blood born into the world. And yet she betrayed me. He had stood by her side when Sandor Clegane had kicked over that crate and loosed that blue-eyed corpse upon the Dragonpit. One hundred thousand, Tyrion’s queen had claimed. How could she deny that?

Yet she had. Cersei had denied the truth and denied the realm the aid of the Lannister armies. Jaime had tried to reason with her, to make her see the sense in sending their men north to fight. One way or another, a powerful foe would sweep down through the Neck and Riverlands and onto the capitals. Dead men or dragons, the remaining forces of the southern armies stood little chance. Their unborn child would stand little chance. How had she not seen?

Of course, some southern men had made their way north to Winterfell. Ryn Hill and two dozen other Lannister men-at-arms and gold cloaks from the capital. He did not recognize the name of the
so-called captain, but he was thankful nonetheless. Two dozen swords were useful and gave his own appearance at least some legitimacy. He had neither seen nor spoken to the men, but Tyrion had told him of their arrival.

Indeed, Tyrion had told him of many goings on in Winterfell. Whereas his chambers only had a window that pointed eastward, Jaime’s little brother gave him news from the west, south, and rest of the North. He came with food and drink at least once a day, normally with old, bitter wine near enough spoiled and some heavily salted beef and veal alongside warm brown bread from the kitchens. Jaime had spit out the wine when he drank from a silvered goblet, but soon enough the northmen had brought fresh supplies from White Harbor and the two Lannister brothers had enjoyed a good earthly brown ale instead.

Each visit brought with it a different conversation. They had of course discussed politics and warfare and the future of the realm. They had discussed Cersei: her betrayal and unborn child. They had discussed father, and mother, and minor branches of House Lannister still tied to the queen in King’s Landing. Yet the conversations that Jaime enjoy most were the foolish ones, where he and his brother could act like they had the last time they had been in Winterfell together.

It was last night that Tyrion had walked in with a cask of wine he claimed to have pilfered from the cellars, though Jaime knew it was equally likely he had simply threatened some poor spit boy or serving girl with dragonfire in order to procure the drink. Clever as Tyrion was, Jaime still knew his tricks. His brother, clearly already drunk, had cracked open the cask and poured himself a healthy measure of sour red. “Last sour we’re like to taste for years,” he said as he raised his goblet and sat back on a low cushioned chair.

“Last sour we’re like to taste ever,” Jaime had replied as he grasped the small barrel’s top with his hand and tilted the wooden tap toward his own cup, the dark red liquid splashing wildly as it hit the bottom of the goblet. Tyrion had raised another mocking toast to that. Jaime joined him and drank deeply. The wine awakened something inside him, a long-buried memory that seemed not entirely his own.

“How do you remember,” he began as he set the wine aside and leaned toward his brother, “the Maiden’s Slumber?” Tyrion sat upright at the mention, a curious look upon his face. It had been years since they last joked about it.

“A fine ship,” his brother said.

“Not as fine as the wine it carried, though,” Jaime replied. A grin broke across his brother’s face. Maiden’s Slumber had been a fitting name for the ship, for its crew had been either woefully innocent or all asleep when the two Lannister boys, together with a squire being hosted at the Rock, had snuck aboard the great cog and stolen away with two casks of Arbor gold from the captain’s own quarters.

“My very first taste of Lord Redwyne’s finest vintage;” Tyrion said wistfully.

“Your very first taste of wine at all, if I recall,” he corrected his brother. That was not entirely true, of course. Lord Tywin had permitted his children a glass or two of wine at dinners and feasts, but never more than that. He would not suffer his sons and daughter to act like fools.

“I spent the entirety of the next day retching into my bedpan,” he laughed, “two casks, was it? And I had more than half of one myself! Who was it that was with us on that daring mission?”

“Darl Crakehall,” he reminded Tyrion.
“None So Fierce!” he spoke the Crakehall words as he raised his cup again in a salute to the Lannister bannerman and forgotten squire. “What even happened to dear old Darl?”

“Knighted, I think. Then slain when Robb Stark fell upon Uncle Stafford’s host at Oxcross,” Jaime replied, the memory of the wars past making his own wine seem ever more bitter.

“Ah…” the single syllable slipped from Tyrion’s mouth slowly, tumbling from his lips like water from a cliff. *Or wine from a cask*, Jaime mused as he finished his drink, placed his empty goblet upon the stone floor, and clumsily poured himself another. “That’s a pity.”

They sat in silence for a moment, both lost in waking dreams of the past. Jaime watched his brother pour himself another measure of red and grasped at a subject to discuss. “What news of Winterfell and the North?” The words came unbidden to his lips. *It always comes back to this, doesn’t it?*

“Of Winterfell? There is not much to discuss. Some grumbling over food. Some concern over pilfered maester’s stores.”

“Stolen stores?”

“Oh, nothing too exciting. Some mushrooms gone missing and some healing herbs as well. Enough smallfolk have fallen ill and medicines are in short supply,” he explained.

“I see. Anything else I should know?”

“Of the wider world? I wish I knew,” Tyrion had sighed, “no ravens can fly in this storm and Bran has seen nothing of note in his visions,” he finished simply. *Brandon Stark…* Tyrion had told him of the boy’s visions. It seemed incredible, even though he did not truly understand what it meant. *Can he see me even now? Can he see that it was I who placed him in that chair?*

“I see,” he offered his brother little in response, “so just snow, snow, and yet more snow.”

“Some ice and wind, here and there,” Tyrion retorted, “and problems with Snow to be sure.” He smiled. Jaime had never had his brother’s wit, but he still understood the meaning there from the faint twinkle in the man’s eyes. Jon Snow had come to speak with him only once, the evening of his arrival in Winterfell. The young lord had thanked him for coming north and delivering the news of Cersei’s betrayal in person and had assured him he would be well fed and treated properly, as befitt a man of his station. Jaime had thought he seemed distracted as he delivered the assurances. *And the last time I saw Lord Eddard’s bastard…* He could recall the conversation clearly enough, though it now brought a deep sense a shame when called forth. He had mocked Jon for his decision to join the Night’s Watch. He could still hear the venom in his voice as he thanked the bastard boy for his service protecting the realm from the perils Beyond the Wall. *Look at us now.* Jaime had abandoned everything save his sword to ride North and fight beside the man against those perils.

“How do you mean?” he asked, grasping at Tyrion’s obvious bait.

“Our Lord of Winterfell is not all he seems,” Tyrion said cryptically, his speech beginning to slur as he reached for the cask and poured himself another goblet. “His… brother’s tree visions… well.” He gathered himself and looked at Jaime, his mismatched eyes meeting Jaime’s own light green ones. “I need your help.”

“With Jon?”

“With both of them,” Tyrion said softly, taking another deep gulp from his goblet.
“Both of…?” Jaime raised his hand and stump in unison, inviting his brother to explain himself. What is he talking about? His brother was thoughtful and clever to be sure, but most of the time Jaime knew him well enough to catch his meaning. This time though...

“Jon and Daenerys,” he sighed, “I need you to convince the boy to wed the queen.” Wed the queen. What’s stopping him? Daenerys is beautiful. Is the man an even bigger fool than he proved himself to be at the Dragonpit? Jaime had guessed the two were attracted to each other, if not already in love. Younger folk often thought themselves sly and subtle in matters of love, but one look could tell all. Jaime had seen that look from Daenerys at King’s Landing, a flash of desire from behind a regal mask. And Jon? Well, Jaime knew men well enough to see where Jon’s heart was bound to lead him.

“And what will I tell him? What’s stopping our young Lord of Winterfell from following his heart and taking the queen to bed?”

“Well, she’s his aunt, for one,” Tyrion said dryly. Jaime spat out his wine. Aunt? He struggled to understand his brother’s meaning.

“The boy’s a bastard. Eddard’s son,” Jaime responded, challenging his brother’s pronouncement.

“Rhaegar’s son, it would seem,” he raised an eyebrow, “Brandon Stark saw the ‘Last Dragon’ wed Lyanna Stark in his visions. Jon Snow is their son. Taken north by dear old Ned at the rebellion’s end.” Jaime raised his own goblet to his lips and drank slowly, pondering Tyrion’s revelation. Was it true? He remembered Rhaegar well enough, though the prince had been away from the capital for the short time Jaime had served as a member of Aerys own kingsguard.

Why not? Jaime laughed. This is ridiculous. Secret Targaryens and dragons and dead men on the march. “And you want me to convince him to agree to a wedding? To make sure he takes the Targaryen girl to bed? Why?”

Tyrion sipped from his goblet as he considered Jaime’s words. “Not to bed, he’s already taken care of that bit,” he shook his head as he spoke. He disapproves, thought Jaime, so why are we talking of this? Then he rose from his seat and stood as tall as he could, looking directly at Jaime. Tyrion’s legs and eyes wavered. The wine had gotten to him. “Strange at it may seem, it’s the truth. Jon Snow is Rhaegar’s son and heir. He’s having some trouble accepting that. Sullen morning rides through the wood and all.”

“And you’d like me to lead him and the girl before a septon, is that it?” Jaime responded, growing impatient.

The shadow of a grin crossed Tyrion’s face. “You, dear brother, are rather adept at keeping certain family secrets, well, secret.” Jaime inhaled sharply. Of course, Tyrion knew. He had for years. Yet not once had he addressed the issue so openly. Perhaps the thousand odd leagues between he and Cersei made things different. His brother continued to explain. “The realm shall continue to see Jon Snow as Eddard’s bastard son and Lord of Winterfell. Jon and Daenerys will wed, joining north with south and securing our queen’s claim to the Iron Throne. I would see it happen soon, before this war with the dead comes to our gates. Should Snow fall in battle, we would still have the support of the North.”

“I’d imagine you’d have their support anyway, given its our sister you mean to march against next.” Tyrion nodded in agreement.

“Be that as it may… should his true identity become common knowledge, we must have his claim supporting hers through marriage,” he finished simply. “It need not be a heroic speech. Just give
the lad a shove in the right direction,” he mimicked a pushing gesture with his hands, almost losing his balance in the process. Jaime’s temper flared for a moment. *Shove, is that it? It’s always some game with you.*

“Very well.” He would speak with Jon, he owed Tyrion that at least. *But what do I say? How to pull aside the lord and speak of secret lineage and marriage? Would he even listen?* Tyrion nodded in thanks as he unsteadily resumed his seat. “How am I to go about speaking with him? I’ve sworn to keep to these quarters.”

“On the morrow, Jon intends to hold a war council in the lord’s solar. A small group. I’d imagine we’ll be discussing what to do once this storm has passed. I will ensure your attendance and you might find time to talk with him then,” Tyrion explained. Jaime simply nodded and spoke no more. Tyrion understood the gesture and made his way to the door.

Thus, a night and a day had passed with snow continuing to fall and Jaime considering what he might say to the Lord of Winterfell. In truth, he did not really know. *His aunt…* he thought. *Why does that bother him so? My own father married a cousin. He was sure Jon’s Stark lineage contained similar matches. And the Targaryens…* Well, he was all too familiar with the sort of relationships that Aegon’s heirs had kept.

Jaime spent the day suffering through dull boredom, once more looking out into the yard from his tower window. In the morning, a serving girl had entered his chambers and lit a fire in the hearth. The guards had brought him a hot morning meal and half a chicken near midday. At least it had felt like midday; the sun was nowhere to be seen. Tyrion had left him a number of books and scrolls to read, but Jaime had never been interested in such.

After what seemed like hours, a knock jarred Jaime from his thoughts. “Enter,” he called out over the muffled thuds of someone’s fist against the thick oaken door. A Stark guardsman pushed the door open and walked forward into the orange glow of the hearth. The man was massive in all the wrong ways. His torso sloped downward from fat chin to rounded belly in a way that made Jaime want to laugh.

“If this is what we’re working with, we may consider surrender instead.”

“You were wanted in the lord’s solar, m’lord,” the man said. Jaime nodded wordlessly as he stood and gathered himself. He looked to the bedside table where his golden hand sat, straps hanging from its sides. He looked from it to his stump and back again before deciding against the gesture and following the man out of his chambers and through the grim grey halls of Winterfell. They passed the lord’s chambers on the way. Jaime was surprised to see Daenerys’ own sleeping quarters were so close to his own. *Perhaps they trust me more than I thought. Or else they’re just fools.* He prayed it was the former.

Yet as he entered the lord’s solar through the opened entryway, he was met with a wall of distrusting stares. The gathering was small, as Tyrion had said it would be. He saw Ser Jorah Mormont far to the left-hand side of the room, laying out a sheepskin map of the North across a low table. The knight raised his head and looked right into Jaime’s eyes.

*I remember those eyes.* He had seen Mormont’s northern blue-grey eyes twice before. Once on Pyke, when they had fought as allies against the rebellious Greyjoys. Then once again as foes during the victory tournament at Lannisport, where Jaime had broken nine lances against the man to no result. King Robert had awarded Jorah the victory. Jaime looked at the knight and nodded before breaking his gaze and surveying the rest of the room.

Next to Jorah there stood two copper skinned figures garbed in black leather and furs. The man was clean-shaven a near bald, though he wore a fine, silver dragon brooch upon the center of his upper chest. *An Unsullied, perhaps the commander,* he thought. Jaime had learned much of the
fighting prowess of Unsullied over the years. They were vulnerable as individuals, lightly armored and not equipped for single combat. But rank upon rank of the slave soldiers were near impossible to defeat. Their discipline was legendary.

A woman stood next to him, her skin the same darker tones as his but her hair far different, thick black curls that seemed frozen in the air. Definitely not Unsullied, he mused. Perhaps one of the queen’s advisors from the east? He had seen her at the Dragonpit but could not place the name.

His own brother stood directly across from him, garbed in a fine woolen doublet and a small black sable cloak that had no doubt been made special for him. Jaime matched gazes with him for a moment before taking in the rest of the scene. He saw Ser Davos Seaworth and Varys seated in cushioned chairs made of some dark wood. The old smuggler grasped a white and grey horn of ale in his good hand. Varys had nothing to drink. Ever plump in the Red Keep, he now seemed more gaunt and hollow than before. His grey woolen robe was lined with furs on the inside, but even the thick material could not hide the diminished look the eunuch wore upon his shrunk face.

To his surprise, Jaime saw the two Stark girls huddled in the corner of the solar. Sansa wore a black woolen dress and cloak while Arya was garbed in grey furs and brown leather. The younger daughter of Eddard Stark met his gaze for a moment, her eyes an impassable wall of cold emotion. He saw her right hand drop to fiddle with the pommel of a thin sword that hung at her side. Jaime could not rightly say why Jon or Tyrion wanted the two girls at a war council, but it was not his place to question such decisions.

Finally, Jaime set his green eyes on Daenerys Targaryen. The queen was robed in a thick woolen dress of the deepest black. He could see grey and black furs stitched into the interior for warmth. She turned and looked at him in turn; her violet eyes flashed with anger and suspicion. Rightly so, he mused, I killed her father. I tried to kill her. He recalled their brief argument in the yard the morning he had arrived at Winterfell. He had taken and knee and sworn his sword, yet was met with harsh glares and harsher words. He hoped this meeting would ease the tensions though that remained to be seen.

Jon remained to be seen as well. Rulers and advisors had assembled in his solar yet the young lord was nowhere to be found. Jaime looked around the room once again and found an open seat next to his brother. He awkwardly crossed the room whilst dodging the glares of the others and sat himself down upon a wooden chair with thin black cushions upon its seat and armrests. Jaime sat back. This is as comfortable as I’m like to get.

Another moment went by in relevant silence as the Stark girls murmured to each other and Ser Jorah rustled with the maps. He sat back and looked past the assembly to take in the details of the solar. The change in location was a welcome one after days spent in the dreary confines of his own chambers. Grey light filtered in from the large chamber’s windows, struggling through layers of ice and snow that were piled outside the glass panes. A large hearth stood at the end of the solar where Jorah stood, though Jaime could feel its warmth from his seat. The fires cast orange and scarlet light upon the long, faded tapestries that hung about the walls.

All eyes shot upwards as voices echoed from the hall. Jaime leaned right, his elbow pressing against the soft woolen coverings of the armrest. A stabbing pain shot through his as it so often did, but he ignored it. Down the hall he saw Jon walking beside a figured being pushed forward in a large wooden rolling chair, its wheels clacking loudly against the uneven stones on the hallway floor. Jaime froze where he sat. He knew who it was, though he could not yet see the face. It had been years since he had last seen Bran Stark.

Is this why they’ve brought me here? Has the boy told them the truth? Panic froze him in his
leaning position for a moment, his eyes flashing between the other people in the room to see if some plot was afoot. No one looked his way as Jon, fur cloak billowing behind him, swept into the room. A large man dressed in blacks pushed Bran into the solar and set his chair beside the long table that Jorah had covered with maps and wood figurines. The door closed behind them.

Jaime looked at Jon and he at Jaime. His own green eyes flashed between the two Stark men, still wondering what trap had been set. “Ser Jaime,” Jon addressed him, “I’m glad you could join us.” Cordial enough. He rose briefly and gave Jon a deep, courteous nod. Jon turned to Daenerys, an odd look in his eye. Ah… there it is. Tyrion was right. Jaime could see it all too well now. That desire simmering under a hardened, emotionless mask. How many times had he worn that face when looking at Cersei in the Red Keep?

He turned his head toward Daenerys to catch her reaction, but the moment had passed. Jon opened his mouth to speak again. “We’ve had no word of the enemy since the return of the Umber men from Last Hearth,” he began, moving around to the map covered table and gesturing at the far edge of the sheepskin.

“Forgive me if I’m mistaken,” Tyrion began, rising to his feet, “but Lord Bran can, well, see these things, can he not? Is there no way to track the dead through these visions? He once sent us a raven when he saw the dead near Eastwatch.”

“No,” the broken boy’s voice was cold and bloodless as he answered Tyrion’s question. He provided no explanation. Jaime caught Jorah’s eye as the small assembly looked around in confusion. The old northern knight wore a confused grimace on his face.

Jon sighed as the large man beside him spoke, “it’s… well… I suppose it’s like two swordsmen at odds. You can swing your sword, but the other man can just as easily parry the blow,” his voice quivered with his jowls. Visions as swords. This is all starting to make sense, Jaime mocked his own ignorance.

“So Sam is right,” Jon continued, “Bran’s visions may have their uses in the war to come, but right now we need to know where the enemy is and where he is headed.”

Jorah cleared his throat and moved to stand by Jon. “It would seem the Dreadfort would be the next target, no? Unless this Night King means to march against Karhold.”

“Dead men aren’t interested in castles and keeps,” Sansa spoke from the corner of the room, “they attacked Lord Royce because he was escorting thousands of people to safety. They’ll go wherever people are.” Jaime raised his hand to his chin in a ponderous gesture. That makes sense. He would not have expected as much from the timid girl who had arrived in the capital so many years ago. So much had changed.

“Which is why we have the men preparing Winterfell for siege,” Jon responded. Jaime had heard the hammering and shouts day in and out during his confinement. It was his understanding that the southern men who had marched north were assisting the preparations. “There’s more, I’m afraid. Sam tells me we’ve had no word from the Wall or the Watch. I had hoped the brothers might have joined their strength with ours, but by now there’s no hiding what this means.”

Silence overtook the room for a moment as some bowed their heads in acceptance of lives lost. Jaime felt a renewed guilt rush through his mind as he thought again of his mocking words to Jon Snow so many years ago.

“This storm is almost over, but another approaches,” Jon said, his tone grim but authoritative. “I mean to send out scouting parties. Swift riders and sure eyes who know the north and the enemy.”
Murmurs swept across the solar as the council took in his meaning. “I had hoped Ser Jorah would lead one party northward along the kingsroad,” he looked at the knight who nodded in acceptance. “I’ve asked Sandor Clegane to lead another party eastward to the Hornwood lands…” he paused to draw breath, “and I will lead the last party toward the Lonely Hills south of the Last Hearth and Last River, near where the men say they were attacked,” he finished.

“No,” Daenerys spoke at last, her tone firm and cold, “I forbid it.”

Jon sighed as he turned to face her. “Your Grace, we need to know where the Night King is—”

“No, I will not have Ser Jorah and you riding off into the snows,” Daenerys interrupt him. “Set one of your lords to this task, or else I shall ride on Drogon with Rhaegal by my side,” she tried to reason. Jaime might have laughed then if the subject matter were not so serious. She’d prefer to risk herself flying into the snow than have her man ride beyond the castle walls.

“And I will not risk a dragon on such a mission,” Jon responded. Jaime looked between the two. Daenerys’ eyes narrowed in frustration but he could still see the tenderness shining there. Jon’s own grey eyes were wide open. ‘Will not risk a dragon’ he had said, though Jaime was not sure whether it was the dragon clad in black scales or black furs to which the Lord of Winterfell referred.

“I must agree with Jon on this count, Your Grace,” Tyrion threw himself into the fray, “your dragons are our most dangerous weapons, yes, but also our most vulnerable.”

“Your Grace…” Jorah spoke softly from across the room, his gruff voice giving the honorific an oddly musical tone, “this must be the way of it. You saw what we saw Beyond the Wall. Riders are the best way.”

“Then let us send out my bloodriders. The Dothraki are the finest horsemen in the world,” she argued.

“On the plains of Essos and in summer, perhaps, but not in the North. Not in winter,” Jorah’s rebuttal was calm but commanding.

Daenerys relented. Jaime saw the queen’s lips tighten in frustration. Her eyes shone with fire. “Very well,” she spat out her acceptance. “What other matters have we to discuss?”

“News from the south, Your Grace,” Varys stood from his cushioned seat to address the queen. “As Ser Jaime said some days ago, Euron Greyjoy has ferried the Golden Company from Essos. Some ten thousand seasoned fighters in full. My little birds report that she has made entreaties to the Windblown and Long Lances as well.” He paused for a moment as hesitant to continue. “Cersei has also promised lordships and land to any man who brings her the heads of Your Grace, the Lord of Winterfell, and her two brothers,” he finished ponderously.

Daenerys looked about the room. “She shall have them, in time. I will deliver them to the gates of King’s Landing in she so desires, alongside the greater body of my armies. We will march south in strength once we defeated the Night King.” She paused for effect and, for a moment, it was not a young queen that Jaime saw. A Targaryen, truly. She spoke again, this time to Jorah. “And we’ve dealt with sellswords before. How much gold would it take to convince the Golden Company to abandon the Lannister queen?”

“More than we’re like t’have, Your Grace. The Golden Company has never broken a contract. Their word is good as gold,” Davos responded before any other advisor could answer the queen’s question.
“More heads for Cersei, then. One way or the other,” Tyrion quipped. A sudden laughter from the darkened corner shook sullen air from the room. Jaime turned to see young Arya grinning beside her rather distraught looking sister.

“If that’s all, then,” Daenerys said sternly as she looked around at the group. No one else spoke. She nodded wordlessly at the two copper-skinned figures across the room and the three made to exit. Jaime watched the queen’s gaze as she walked, her violet eyes fixated on Jon. He looked to Jon then and saw the young lord’s grey eyes meet hers. *Perhaps this is when I’ll find the time to speak.*

Jorah, Varys, and Tyrion followed their queen out of the solar. Jaime’s brother paused at the threshold to glance back and give him a knowing look and a wink. The Stark sisters swept out of the solar next, the older one ignoring him entirely and the young glaring with an intent that felt all too familiar. Davos stood a moment later and left the room as well.

Then it was just Jon, Bran, Jaime, and the fat fellow Jon had called Sam. *Now’s like to be the best time I’ll get.* Jaime stood and looked to Jon, but was too late. “Sam, might I ask you see to Bran this evening? I’ve something else I’d like to attend to,” he said.

“Oh, well,” Sam’s small black eyes shot toward Jaime, “of course Jon,” he finished. Jon turned and swept out of the room before Jaime could even stand to address him. Pushing off the chair with his hand, he moved to follow the man, but was interrupted.

“Ser Jaime,” Bran’s monotone voice cut through his thoughts, “I had hoped to speak with you.” He drew in a sharp breath and froze. Jon was walking away. Bran wanted to speak. He did not know what to do.

Jaime often acted without thinking. He had been a warrior, a knight. He charged into the fray without regard for himself. *I did as much upon the Blackwater.* In war, a heartbeats’ hesitation might mean death. Better to swing at your foe than doubt the strength of your own arm. Doubt was death upon the battlefield. Yet now doubt clawed at him. Dread hung over him like a cloud of descending slowly arrows.

He turned to regard the Stark boy in his wooden rolling chair. Jaime took in the sight in full, his eyes wandering over Bran’s pale, gaunt flesh and withered features. His furs had slipped off the side of the chair, revealing withered, useless legs; monuments to Jaime’s sins.

“Alone, Samwell, if you would,” Bran turned his head and regarded the fat man with a curious gaze.

“Right,” he said nervously, “I’ll be just down the hallway should you need me.” He turned and left the room, his footfalls surprisingly light and swift for a man of his girth.

“My lord,” Jaime began to address the boy.

“I’m not a lord,” Bran corrected him, “not since I fell from that tower.” *Does he not know? Has he not seen it in his visions?* Jaime breathed a silent sigh of relief, hoping that this conversation might concern other matters. “I don’t blame you for what happened,” he said simply. That fleeting sense of relief followed Samwell out the door. *He remembers.*

Jaime swallowed hard, wondering what he would say next. *Northerners meet out justice harshly,* he knew. It had been a northern man who had taken his hand. Perhaps Bran would have his men take the other in revenge. *Best get on with it, then.* “I... I’m sorry,” he said meekly. The words felt odd in his mouth. Jaime had never apologized for anything. He did what he thought to be right and
lived with the consequences.

Bran ignored the apology. “It’s odd, isn’t it,” his voice was odd and airy, as if he was not truly sitting before Jaime in his family’s own solar, “how maiming the body grows the mind.”

Jaime cocked an eyebrow and looked at his own stump. “I suppose it is…” he wondered where this conversation was going. Not where I expected to be sure.

“I would never have become what I am had I not lost my legs. And you,” he tilted his head and regarded Jaime with a piercing gaze, “well, the man who stands before me is not the same man who cast Brandon Stark from that tower window,” he said again, as if speaking of long forgotten heroes’ tale and not his own crippling. What sort of man is that?

“I crippled you, push you from a tower, and you’re not angry?” he almost spat the words, angry that Bran was not angry at him.

“Once, but not anymore,” his gazed off into the hearths’ dying fire. Low flames struggled to break free of their blackened wooden cage. They seemed to gain strength as the cold air flowed across the room, like an old man’s heart fighting for one final beat. “I wanted to thank you for riding north to join us,” his blue eyes met Jaime’s own. Thank me? “I know it was not easy.”

“I did what I thought was right,” he said. I always have.

“When the time comes, you must do it again,” he offered cryptically, resuming his tilted view of the dying fire. Jaime accepted his silent dismissal.

Jaime had no words for the boy. He nodded, turned, and left the room. His thoughts raced ahead of him, down the passageway where he had seen Jon walk a moment before. I promised Tyrion that I would speak with him. Which way were his chambers? Down a few floors? Up? He did not know.

Jaime meandered about the upper reaches of the keep for a few moments, looking into quarters of various lords, hoping to find Jon. His efforts met with failure. Perhaps in the morning, then, he thought as he made to return to his own chambers. The keep was quiet at this time of night. The other inhabitants had returned to their own quarters. Outside, the snow absorbed any sounds that might come from beyond the grey stone walls, save for the howling of the vicious northern winds.

Jaime turned a corner, then another. He walked up a winding stone stair and got lost down a narrow corridor. He doubled back the way he came and recognized his own hallway from the different vantage point. Had I been given leave of my chambers beforehand this would not be so difficult.

Dull thuds echoed from around the corner, marching his own footfalls in rhythm. A fist on wood. Knocks. A visitor to my own chambers? He wondered. His answered turned and looked at him for a brief moment as he rounded the final chamber and beheld his own oaken door. Jon Snow stood down the hall, waiting patiently outside the queen’s own chambers. Jaime stared back, meeting the lord’s gaze and nodding simply.

He knew that look: shame and desire and longing all wound tight with thick cords apprehension. He silently wished the Lord of Winterfell well on his quest, knowing that he himself would play no part in it. Seems Tyrion has misread this situation entirely. I am not needed after all.

Then he entered his own chambers and latched the door shut behind him. Jaime walked across the carpeted floor and stopped for a moment by the fresh, roaring fire some unseen servant had lit in his hearth. The warmth felt good on his face and hand. He sat upon the edge of his bed, watching
shadows flicker off the wall as the orange flames danced among the burning logs. Outside of his tower room, the snow continued to fall.

Chapter End Notes

Fear not, for Daenerys is up next. My favorite character to watch and to write (apart from Tywin, my actual favorite. Everyone gets confused by that)

By the end of the next chapter, we'll have wrapped up "Act I" of this tale. Exciting things are coming.

Thank you all for the comments and please continue to leave your thoughts below. They're all super helpful!
Daenerys III

Chapter Notes

As promised, the next chapter from Daenerys POV is below.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Patience did not come easily to Daenerys Stormborn. It never had. When she wanted something, truly wanted something, she took it. Of course, she had never been like Viserys, who demanded everything be done now. Her brother had been like a brushfire: unwieldy and dangerous if left untended, but easily extinguished. Hers was a silent desire, burning slow and strong. Anything else would be unbecoming of a queen.

Yet patience was now what was required of her as Missandei undid her elaborate braids and readied her for bed. Her fingers ghosted across Dany’s scalp as she unwove strands of silver hair. She felt gentle tugs backward as she combed through the loose strands with a fine ivory handle brush. After years of practice, her handmaid and dear friend was quite adept at preparing Daenerys for an audience or day ahead. This ritual of theirs was one of her favorite times of the day; a time in which two women could speak plainly of life and love.

“Has Grey Worm returned to the camps?” she asked her question to the silvered mirror set upon the table before her. It was old and faded, having no doubt seen the reflections of half a dozen Lady Starks in its time, but she could still look into Missandei’s almond eyes through the silver fog. Her handmaid met her reflected gaze then looked away, her cheeks flushed and darkening.

“The snows, Your Grace,” she mumbled sheepishly as she finished one long brush stroke and began another, “I thought it easier if he remained in the keep tonight.” Dany smiled at that.

“Of course,” Dany smiled into the mirror. *Were it so easy for me.*

“I’ve never seen so much snow, though to hear it from the older lords in the keep this is but a small storm,” she said, a hint of awe in her voice.

“It is wonderous, isn’t it? Though men will always seek to impress us with boasts of how big something is, even if it is only the memory a storm,” Dany laughed softly as Missandei joined in with a subdued giggle. “He will stay with you tonight, then?” she continued after their mirth had subsided. She saw her friend nod as she finished her task and set the brush on the table. Daenerys felt her slowly back away and stood to regard her, long silver locks flowing freely as she moved.

“Go to him,” she said in a kindly tone, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Are you sure?” Missandei’s voice was colored with concern. Daenerys looked around the room for a moment, her violent eyes taking in its features. Then she breathed deeply. “I see no Sons of the Harpy hidden here,” she said playfully. “I shall be fine tonight,” she insisted as she dismissed her friend. Missandei bowed deeply and exited the lord’s chambers, closing the door slowly behind her and leaving Dany alone in the room.

There was only one person whom Dany truly wanted beside her tonight. She had stood by him when Bran revealed the truth. Jon had been distant to her and everyone else, or so it seemed. She seldom saw him, for meals or at any other time. Indeed, the gathering in the lord’s solar earlier that
evening had been the first time she seen him today. Dany had promised to herself to give him the time he needed. So now she waited. *Patience*, she reminded herself.

Strange as it seemed, Dany understood. She knew what it was to have your identity ripped away in an instant, to have your world contorted and ruined and remade. She had felt it once, when Drogo died and his *khalasar* had ridden away, leaving her with the bodies of her dead husband and unborn son. For a day and a night, she had been no one, another nameless widow on the far side of the world.

Then she had placed those bodies upon the funeral pyre beside that accursed witch and watched them burn. She could still recall Mirri Maz Duur’s screams, the acrid stench of burning flesh, and the soft *crack* of the first egg amidst the fire’s blazing heat. Then she had stepped forth from the ashes, reborn as something greater.

Ever since, Daenerys had known who she was and had faith in herself. She was the last scion of House Targaryen and the Mother of Dragons, those beasts of legend who had twice brought entire continents to heel. *They will grow as big as Balerion the Black Dread*, she had thought then. *And when they are as big as he, who will stand against me?* One dragon could turn the tide of any war. She had hatched three.

The fire she lit that night still burned inside her, driving her onward to her destiny. Even when she faced the worst, she had faith. She believed in Daenerys Targaryen. Whether outside the gates of Qarth or inside Daznak’s Pit or facing the *khals* in Vaes Dothrak, fire had burned her doubts and her enemies as one. She could recall parts of her first conversation with Jon, too. The anger she felt at his obstinacy and insistence on some far away threat to the north had burned hot like a brazier’s embers.

Yet now she faced that threat alongside him: a foe whom fire could not truly harm; a foe with legions beyond counting; a foe who had killed one of her three dragons as easily as a hunter might skewer a boar. She remembered it still. Viserion had let out one final, terrible screech as he plummeted down and shattered the ice of the lake. Dany’s confidence had shattered too.

It had taken her days to gather herself enough to face Jorah and the others for more than a few moments. She had taken to sitting by Jon’s bedside in silence, waiting for him to wake up. That had been for her sake as much as his. She had seen his scars when they stripped him bare, had seen the proof of Davos’ words and his own sacrifice. That had made her feel even worse at first. *Have I been wrong this whole time?* Doubt and fear had crept back into her heart aboard that ship, making her question her every decision.

And then, like that night upon the Dothraki Sea, her doubts and fears had been burned away. That first night with Jon and all the nights after had slowly filled her with hope. And that morning in the godswood, when Bran had told them the truth… *We are meant to be*, she had thought then. She was not the last Targaryen. There was another. By some odd circumstance her brother’s son had become her partner and lover. *All that has happened was made so to bring me here with him. I will make him see.*

Dany believed in that. She believed in them. Two Targaryens alone in the world but for each other. He was a part of her confidence now.

She wanted to be part of his, too. It seemed a cruel irony that the moment that had restored her faith had seemingly crushed Jon’s own. At first, she had been angry that he was avoiding her bed and riding off into the woods, but what was she to do? Sometimes she had fumed inside, only to be calmed when her eyes met his grey ones as they exchanged looks at some gathering. *He just needs time, as I did,* she knew. Thus, she decided to wait, as unaccustomed as a queen was to such an
activity. Ruling demanded patience. So did love.

Dany paced about her chambers as she thought about herself and Jon. She had slipped out of her fine dress and winter cloak into something more comfortable, a thin yet warm dress that she would wear to bed. She stood barefoot upon the great fur rug that sat before the hearth. The hide was of some thick white fur; she could not name the beast it had once belonged to. Dany burrowed her toes deep into the rug, warming herself even as the hearth heated the room.

Then she heard a knock at the door. For a moment, she thought it Missandei returning on some errand. But no… She knew her friend’s sounds: those gentle footfalls and quick, light raps upon the door. This was someone else’s fist sounding dull thuds against the wood. She moved to raise the latch and welcome her visitor, though in her heart she already knew who it was.

Dany slowly opened the heavy door and beheld Jon waiting beyond the threshold. He wore a lighter garb than usual: a brown leather jerkin and woolen breeches. He was without his much-loved padded armor or gorget. His hair was done in a loose bun behind his head. Jon did not move from his position in the hall. This was their ritual, played out time and time again on the boat and journey north. He would call at her chambers in the evening and she would invite him inside. Yet this time was different.

Jon wore an odd look upon his face. His mouth was pressed tight in nervous apprehension. His eyes shone with… what? Confusion? Sorrow? Desire? Emotions swirled in his grey eyes like a winter storm. She met his gaze with her own and, slowly, reached across the threshold to take his hand in hers. He wore no gloves tonight. His hands felt soft. Wordlessly, she pulled him into her chambers and shut the door behind him.

“Daenerys…” he began to speak, his voice raspy and low from disuse. She squeezed his hand tight and looked into his eyes. He swallowed hard, preparing to speak. He did not have a chance to explain himself. Dany pressed her body against his, pulling him close and kissing him even as he opened his mouth to explain himself. She did not want to hear it just yet.

Jon seemed to freeze as she pressed her lips to his. I'd almost forgotten how soft his lips are, she mused as she tasted him and felt his beard scratch her own smooth skin. Then, recovering from the surprise, he kissed her back. It was not a messy affair – that would no doubt come once she had him on his back – but it was full of passion and meaning.

Daenerys pulled away and looked up at him, amethyst eyes looking into grey ones. She noticed his pulse had quickened at her advance. He swallowed again and parted his lips to speak. “Daenerys,” he began again, his tone tender and soft, “I’ve been a fool,” he finished, keeping his gaze on her.

“I know,” she responded simply. She pulled back from him but kept his hand in hers. She turned her left shoulder and slowly led him away from the door, across the hide rug and to the side of her bed. Dany saw him swallow again, nervous and apprehensive as he stood an arm’s length away. I will show him, she repeated her thoughts from a moment before. I will make him see. Words would not do that now.

Wordlessly, she slipped out of her evening bed gown and small clothes to stand naked in front of him. Her long silver hair fell brushed against her skin as she removed the garments. The air swirled around her, making her shiver from the cold seeping in from outside.

She looked at him again, desire now writ plain on his face. His eyes were grey and glassy as they drank in the sight of her body. She closed the distance once more and placed a light kiss on his lips before retreating to the bed, crawling on top of the furs and looking at Jon with a curious yet playful gaze. Recognition washed over his solemn face as he began to fumble with the laces and
straps of his own jerkin. Jon’s actions were clumsy and hurried, almost panicked, as if his clothes were alight with dragonfire. Dany might have laughed at the sight, but her own needs had driven all other thoughts from her mind.

Soon enough, Jon’s clothes lay discarded on the cold stone floor and his hair hung loosely at his sides. He made to join her in bed. She spread her legs, inviting him forward. He settled on top her, his arm and legs bracing his weight against the furs so as not to crush her. Even so, his bare skin pressed against hers, the warmth of his body melding with hers. He remained there for a moment, just looking at her.

Then he was kissing her. It had less than a fortnight since they last shared a bed, but by his passion Dany thought it might have been half a year. She held him close, running her hands across his bare, muscled back, feeling him on top of her. *This is right,* she knew, Jon trapped in her embrace and she in his.

She closed her eyes and sighed with pleasure as he moved on from her lips, kissing the sensitive areas of her neck. Slowly, almost frustratingly so, Jon made his way down to her breasts, then her navel, planting wet kisses as he went. Then, finally, he positioned himself between her legs. Dany sighed again, eager for him to kiss her again. It was a selfish desire, to be sure, but it felt *so good.*

Dany let out a quick gasp that turned into a low, throaty moan as Jon kissed and licked her. Words began to elude her as Jon continued his attentions. She even tried to say his name allowed, but could only manage a soft, desperate whimper. *Yes.* She reached down with one hand and ran her fingers through his hair. Her hips began to move against his mouth, seemingly of their own accord. She was losing herself to his touch.

She felt Jon slip his fingers inside her. Her skin felt hot. Warm, tense pressure was building between her legs as Jon continued his attentions. It took all her willpower to stay somewhat silent, to not gasp out his name and wake half the keep. Her hips kept an eager, unsteady rhythm. Her fingers clenched in fists, one buried in Jon’s black hair and another grasping at a bundle of furs to her right. Finally, she let out desperate moan as waves of pleasure rolled over her.

She felt warm, her head buzzed with the sweet feeling of release. She lay there for a moment, feeling Jon moving, positioning himself and preparing to claim his own pleasure. She was content to let him lead.

Daenerys gasped again as she felt him slip inside her. She opened her eyes and looked at his own grey pair above her. It felt so right, Jon atop her and inside her and with her. The fires from the hearth and dancing flames on a dozen candles seemed to burn brighter as the pair made love. Dany gasped out his name, enjoying the wonderful sense of fullness.

Soon, Jon’s thrusts grew as uneven as his breathing. She could tell he was getting close. She pulled him to her body, his chest pressing against hers. Every movement was pure ecstasy. Then he tensed and she felt him pulse inside her. She held him firm as he came, a long wavering moan escaping his lips as he spilled his seed inside her. Dany felt warmth spread through her body as Jon slumped down beside her, spent from his efforts.

Dany could not rightly say how long they had lain there, listening to the winds howl outside the walls and the hearth’s fire crackle softly while wrapped in each other’s embrace. Jon was playing with her hair, twirling the silver strands about his finger. She was resting her head on his chest, right above his long, curved scar. She could feel his heart beat steadily while her own finger idly traced circles on his bare skin.

She looked up at him and he down at her. The dim orange firelight cast dancing shadows across
his face. She reached up and grasped his hand, pulling it away from her hair and holding it tightly. He gave her hand a tight squeeze. She smiled. It all felt so right: his naked warmth, his hand in hers and his seed drying between her legs.

*It would never quicken*, she thought as a sudden pang of guilt took her from her blissful moment. *I was the mother of dragons, but I can never be the mother of his children.* Jon’s children would be the future of their house, she knew. He was the future of House Targaryen. *I cannot ask him to give that up.*

As the haunting words of Mirri Maz Duur rang in her head, Dany questioned herself. It had been on a night like this, with her in bed beside Jon, that she had seen that vision of a family. *Our family.* Once, Daenerys might have thought visions as prophecies of the eyes, winds and words and wisps of fantasy that held no meaning. *But Bran has visions. True visions. Might he see what I cannot? I must talk with him…*

“We should pull up the furs,” Jon said, his soft tone mercifully driving her thoughts from her for but a moment. Dany realized he was right. She tiled her head and saw that the fire burned low in the hearth, struggling to breath under layers of spent logs and blackened ash. The fire’s warmth slowly retreated across the room, a disorganized route that left the lord’s chambers abandoned to the cold air just now seeping through the old stones of Winterfell’s walls.

She looked back into his eyes and murmured a tired half word of agreement. Jon reached to the foot of the large bedframe and pulled the thick furs over their intertwined naked forms. She felt the hairs of the thick blankets tickle the skin between her shoulder blades as Jon let the furs settle across their bodies and resumed his reclining position against the pillows.

Dany let out a weighty sigh as she retook her position beside him. The silence invited further doubts into her mind. Thoughts piled against her mind like falling snow against the keep’s walls. What had she been thinking before he came calling at her door? The last scions of House Targaryen. *The last member of my family. We are meant to be.*

And were they not? Jon was a part of her destiny. Perhaps he always had been. If Rhaegar had triumphed upon the Trident and slain the Usurper, Jon would have been called Aegon and named trueborn heir to the throne. As a princess near his own age, Dany might have been raised alongside him on Dragonstone or in the Red Keep. In time, they might have married…

“Marry me,” her thoughts burst forth as words upon the midnight air, yet she had still delivered them with a queen’s confidence. *Yes… Of course, this was right. Had she not sworn to herself to do this earlier? Before she had Jon had entered the godswood? What reason did she now have to alter her course?*

Jon froze for a moment, then sat up straighter in bed, his movements causing the furs to fall to his waist as he repositioned himself. His grey eyes were wider than usual, awash with shock. He swallowed and spoke a raspy, uncertain word: “marry…?”

Dany pushed against the feather mattress and brought herself upright to sit along Jon. She stared intently into his eyes, willing him to see what she saw. “Me. Yes,” she said emphatically.

“Right now?” he smiled, uncertain.

“Soon enough,” she returned his smile, a sure and true gesture.

“Well, my queen, I’m not sure of the custom in Meereen, but in the North the bride normally wears something,” Jon laughed, a light chuckle that betrayed his nervousness. Dany watched his gaze fall
to her breasts and she stifled a laugh herself. Then he looked at her and she at him. There was something in his eyes. **Doubt? Fear?** “Daenerys I-”

“-Marry me,” she repeated the offer, almost a command really. **We are meant to be. I shall make him my husband and we will rule together.** She left all that unsaid, of course. Jon had been overwhelmed enough these past few days. There was no need to burden him with anything else. All she needed was a yes.

“Well there was some other lover you had in mind,” she teased. Jon offered a weak smile, but his eyes remained cold and lost. **I must make him see.** She grasped his hand again and adopted a more serious yet caring tone. “I know it has been…. Odd. Learning the truth from Bran. Here and now of all the times to do it,” she said softly, not once looking away. “But you must see it now, that I love you. That you feel the same for me. We are meant to be, Jon Snow,” she looked intently into his dark grey eyes as she let go of his hand, moving her own to brush lightly against his deep scars. His normally cold, impassable, unknowable expression softened as she repeated her offer once more: “marry me.”

The words woke something in him. She could see it in his eyes. His lips parted ever so slightly and he whispered his consent with a hushed ‘aye’. Daenerys smiled, her amethyst eyes shining with affection as she gave him a light, tender kiss and moved back to warm herself under the furs and beside her husband to be.

The wind howled outside as the two lovers lay idly beneath the furs, safe from the snows still falling outside. The fire had died some moments before, though thick tallow candles still lit the room with their flickering light. The chamber’s timbered roof creaked every so often, complaining of but never failing in its task. The bedroom felt safe and, just now, so did Dany.

There was so much Daenerys wanted to say, to speak of, yet it was not the proper time. **Should the snows continue he’ll be trapped in this chamber with me,** she mused. They would talk of the wedding, of course. **Something small and simple, though I must take the vows in front of the Seven if I am to one day rule all of Westeros.** She knew lords could be petty and foolish in matters of faith.

There were other matters as well. That she was his aunt by blood had not once bothered her. **I used to think that I would marry my brother.** Judging by his most recent carnal display, Jon had come to terms with their relations as well. She was his family.

That discussion would have to wait for another time. His breathing had slowed and his eyes were shut. Dany suppressed the urge to wake him. She wanted to speak to him of much else as well, to tell him stories she had once been told of Rhaegar and the Targaryen kings of old. She wondered whether he would take interest in his own history. Then, considering her oldest brother’s memory, a strange thought entered her mind. **I have two dragons now, one named for Drogo and one for Rhaeger, whose blood and seed now sleeps beside me.** Her green dragon had never taken a rider. Indeed, he had scorched any man who had dared to tread to close. **Drogon had sensed something in Jon, allowed him to touch him too. Might Rhaegal?**

A thousand other thoughts raced through her as a tingling warmth crept through her limbs. She looked at Jon once more and made to rest her eyes for a moment, just a moment, before she would sort out the rest of her thoughts and…

… she opened her eyes to a cold and dark room. **I must have fallen asleep.** Even her thoughts sounded sleepy. Dany yawned, careful not to make a sound and she shifted herself and pressed her body closer to Jon’s still form. His naked warmth felt good against her skin.
The candles that had been lit just a moment before now burned low, their wax drooping over the sides of their wooden fixtures in a farcical imitation of Winterfell’s threatening icicles that hung from the tower roofs. *It’s late,* she knew as she considered her surroundings, *or early.* It was hard to say in the North. The sun rose late and set early, so much so that Daenerys found herself carving the night in half: a first night’s sleep followed by a few hours of reading and thinking, then another bout of sleep before the morning came. And, of course, when the morning arrived there was still no pale winter sun to be seen.

She felt Jon stir beside her and decided to let him rest. *A return to the solar would be welcome,* she thought as she considered where to spend the midnight hours. The servants always kept warm fires burning there and in the great hall. She might find some ancient book or scroll to read, or else stare out the solar’s colored glass windows into the storm beyond.

Daenerys shuffled under the furs and moved toward the edge of the bed, but as she made to swing her legs onto the floor she felt a hand grasp her own and draw her back. “Forsaking your duty, then?” his voice was groggy and muffled, his mouth half covered by a pillow as he lay in bed.

“My duty?” she wondered aloud as she moved to rejoin him beneath the furs.

“Is it not the duty of a wife to warm her husband’s bed?” Even in the darkness she could see the playful twinkle in his one open eye.

“Hmmmm……” she pondered his question as she brought herself closer to him, “for a wife, perhaps, but I am a queen. It would seem a lord’s duty to make certain his queen did not freeze on one of these cold northern nights of yours.” Jon murmured in agreement, placing a muscled arm around her waist, drew her body closer to his.

They lay in silence for a moment, listening to the elements batter the outside of the keep. Then she spoke. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, “I did not mean to wake you.” That was only half the truth, of course. She had not meant to wake him, but she enjoyed his conscious company.

“I wake easily. We learnt to sleep light on the Wall,” he explained, yawning midsentence as he adjusted his body to fit more snugly against hers.

“Ah, the Wall,” she teased, “you must have learned a great deal there.”

“No really. I mostly trained with tourney swords in the yard. Sam did most of the learning, he and old Maester Aemon…” his voice trailed off as silence settled in between them. When he failed to offer further conversation, Dany pulled back slightly to look into his eyes, hoping to find what troubled him.

“What is it?” she asked, concerned and curious in equal measure.

“Maester Aemon,” he repeated the name, “I don’t know why it took me until now until to realize it.” That was not an answer, but Dany waited patiently for his thoughts to turn to words. He looked at her, wonder showing in his eyes. “Aemon Targaryen, he would have been called before he took the black. He served as Castle Black’s maester for decades…”

Dany exhaled slowly as she considered the name and its place in their family’s history. *Aemon… Maester Aemon…* She could only recall one. An Aemon had been the third son of King Maeker, the First of His Name, but that had been over a hundred years ago. There was little chance this man was the same person. “Tell me of him,” she said, hoping to learn more.

“He was old, very old. One hundred years or near enough.” A silent ‘oh’ parted Dany’s lips as she
realized she had been correct. “Blind and frail too, but wise. And a good friend,” he smiled
wistfully as he continued to describe their ancient relative.

She felt a twinge of jealously as she considered his words. Jon had always had a family. He had
thought himself a bastard, it was true, but he had a father and sisters and brothers aplenty. He had
sworn his sword and life to the Wall, but even there, at the frozen edge of the world, he had family
in the men he called brothers. \textit{I only had Viserys, and only then for a time.}

“He might’ve been king, once,” Jon continued, “the high lords offered him the crown, but he
refused it and the throne passed to his brother Aegon.” \textit{Another Aegon.}

“I’ve heard it said that Aegons make fine kings,” Dany smiled at him. She had meant it as a jest,
but even as she said the words she knew it would not have the intended effect.

“No.” Even though he lay beside her he sounded distant. “‘Aegon’… I know that’s the name I was
given, but it’s not mine. It’s not me.”

That’s fair, she thought. Bran’s revelations might take years
to unravel. Daenerys wish she could make it easier for him. She had pledged herself to him, months
ago aboard that boat and not a few hours past when she had offered her proposal. Their burdens
would be shared now.

There were no words she could offer that would put his mind at ease or drive the doubts from his
heart. In time, he would accept who he was in full. She would help him. For now, there was only
one thing she could offer him apart from the comforting warmth of her body. She inched closer and
cupped his cheek with her hand, guiding his gaze to hers. “I love you, Jon,” she whispered.

He gave her a tender look, his eyes shining in the dim light and his mouth curving ever so slightly
upwards. “We’ve still got quite a while until dawn,” he said softly as he guided them back down
onto the mattress and adjusted the furs. She murmured a tired word in agreement and settled in
next to him, darkness pressing at the edges of her vision.

Daenerys awoke once more to the sound of a crackling fire. Orange and scarlet light danced about
the walls while the pale grey light of the morning struggled to break through the clear glass
windows. Some unseen servant had no doubt risen far earlier and slipped into the room to light and
feed the fire. Taking care not to disturb Jon, Dany sat up and leaned on one elbow to peer out
through the narrow window nearest the bed.

She could not see much. A small snowbank had formed against the glass, leaving her to only half a
window through which to look. The snow continued to fall, though the flakes seemed to be fewer
and lighter than they had been last night. \textit{Perhaps this storm will end soon}, she thought as she took
in the sight of Jon’s prone form, his chest rising and falling slowly.

The snows continued for three more days. The light flakes that Daenerys had seen the first morning
after Jon had called at her chambers had proven to be deceptive, for the last three days of the storm
were the fiercest. Dany watched it all from the windows in her chambers or the solar. Bitter cold
northern winds howled about keep and whipped the thick white curtains of snow every which way;
against the keep for one heartbeat, then towards the godswood for a moment, then against the old
grey stones of the gatehouse towers.

The awful storm gave her three blissful days. Trapped indoors by the elements, Daenerys felt like
she was back on the ship sailing to White Harbor. She and Jon spent most of each day and night
together. And of course, like the ship, there were only so many ways to pass the time in the keep.

Sometimes they gathered in warm solar beside the roaring fire the servants kept burning day and
night. Someone had piled a misshaped pyramid of wood near the hearth so that the heat might dry
Jon and Samwell often stood over the table nearest the hearth, pouring over old, faded scrolls about the lands north of the Wall while she perused the extensive collection the Stark’s had amassed over the centuries.

Thick woolen blanket, a cup of hot mulled wine, and a seat close enough to the fire as she read the first few pages of *A History of the Kings of Winter and their Wars of Conquest in Northern Westeros.*

It was a dull book, boring and dry, though it became less so after she turned a page too quickly and spilled half a cup of warm burgundy liquid across the page detailing King Tallon Stark’s short-lived reign. Sam had looked on in horror as she fumbled with the ruined red bits of parchment, pressing the edges of her own black dress against the pages in a futile effort to save the book. Jon had simply looked on and laughed.

Their other activities were, well, less scholarly but far more entertaining. Dany and her husband-to-be spent a good deal of their time in her chambers. One evening, after supper had finished and the lords had all retired to their respective quarters, she had ordered a fat flagon of wine brought to her chambers. She and Jon had both had their fill of the sweet red as they slowly undressed.

Emboldened by the vintage, she had shown Jon a number of new approaches to the art of lovemaking, all things she had learned in Meereen. He, in turn, had surprised her with his quick mastery of the new techniques. *It’s lucky we have the storm winds howling outside the walls,* she had thought the first night, *elsewise the garrison might hear us.* After all, she had been particularly vocal one evening.

The morning after that evening was a less pleasant affair. Dany had arisen early to retch into small washbasin that sat beside their bed. Jon had awoken to the sounds she made and scurried to her side, holding her loose silver hair back as she heaved. In truth, her sudden sickness had taken her by surprise. She had only had a few cups of wine the previous evening and felt none of the usual trappings of overconsumption. Indeed, Daenerys had never fallen ill, even when exposed to the elements. *Perhaps it was something I ate,* she reasoned, but even then she was not sure.

The second time she had awoken retching, Dany had asked Winterfell’s maester for a cure to her ailments. The man called Wolkan had assured her that such internal activities were “perfectly natural” whilst he brewed a pungent concoction to ease her digestion. She consumed the bitter cure with apprehension, but the following morning had been free of vomit.

Elsewise, they weathered the storm with a forced patience. Their meals were simple enough, soups and stews for the most part. They had sufficient stores of finer foods, but it would not do to hold feasts every night while the men encamped outside the walls ate gruel mixed in with melted snow. On one evening, the men had butchered a destrier that had died in the snows. Most of the men shied away from the tough horseflesh, but Daenerys ate the poorly seasoned meat with gusto. Arya had looked on in wonder as she had cut a choice part of the flesh and devoured it in a matter of moments.

Jon’s half-sister – well, cousin – remained a curiosity. Dany had seen the girl speaking with Jorah or else wandering the halls, always clad in her grey fur cloak with sword and dagger at her side. They had only spoken a few times, but Daenerys enjoyed the younger Stark sister’s company. On the penultimate night of the fierce winter storm, Arya had dragged an oaken chair beside Dany at the high table and struck up a conversation.

“So you conquered all of Slaver’s Bay?” the girl had asked incuriously without meeting Dany’s gaze. “-Your Grace!” she had sputtered through her soup soon thereafter, forgetting her courtesies.
Daenerys had laughed.

She smiled, looking directly at the girl as she delivered her response, “my freedmen and soldiers did the conquering,” she explained, “I simply helped them along.” She left it at that before continuing. “I’ve heard you spent time in Essos as well?”

Arya looked up from her meal and met Dany’s gaze. Grey eyes… like Jon’s. She smiled briefly before her lips parted to allow her a response. “Braavos, Your Grace, where I trained with the Faceless Men.”

Braavos… Dany had spent much of her childhood there, safe in the arms of her brother and Ser Willem Darry in the house with the red door. She remembered it still, and the cobblestone street that ran outside her old home’s vine covered façade. She could recall faint memories of skipping down old Braavosi streets to behold the old harbors of the secret city and the Titan guarding over its single naval gate.

And Faceless Men? She knew the name, legendary as it was throughout the eastern world. The Faceless Men were hired blades, daggers in the darkness that were as capable as they were expensive. Cersei might have hired a single Braavosi assassin for all the gold she had spent procuring the Golden Company. It might have proven more useful, she mused darkly.

“The Faceless Men,” she offered the girl, impressed in her own right. “That must have been… interesting.”

Arya smiled. “It was,” she managed as she shoveled another mouthful of thick stew into her mouth. “Not without its lesson, though.” I should hope not.

“Well,” Dany smiled at the girl, “I would hope your talents prove useful in the wars to come. Sharp daggers and sharp eyes are as useful as dragons with enemies like ours.”

Arya looked at her and nodded, the slightest hint of a smirk evident upon her lips. She fell silent then, continuing to shovel the stew in her mouth. Dany continued to watch the girl’s grey eyes, noticing they kept rising toward the righthand table where Ser Davos sat, horn of ale in hand, talking among the guards. The young bastard sat beside him. Gendry… that was his name, no?

It must have been Gendry. Jon had taken a liking to the man during their time on Dragonstone after the parley in the capital. A bastard looking after another bastard, she had thought then. Now she knew it was true. Jon had entrusted Gendry to see the supplies of dragonglass to Winterfell itself. Yet, Jon was not the only Stark to take an interest in the young smith. Just now Dany watched Arya eye the muscle-bound man with a look she might have recognized once, had she the ability to look upon herself gazing at Jon Snow some months ago.

Arya’s eyes flitted to meet Dany’s once again and the queen saw a red flush creeping up the girl’s neck. She smiled inwardly and spoke a word of assurance. “I won’t be angry if you choose to dine with someone else for the rest of this evening’s meal,” she said slyly, inclining her head toward the right side of the hall. Arya smiled, a blush blooming across her cheeks as she bowed slightly and made to join Gendry at the lower table. Dany smiled again as he looked up and fumbled to make room for her as Davos, hiding his own grin, made off to tend to some made up errand.

On the third and final night of the storm, Daenerys had taken Jon to her chambers earlier than usual. She had pleasured him with her mouth, keeping her composure even as he lost his amidst bucking hips and whispered cries of her name. Dany enjoyed those moments of lovemaking perhaps more than any other. He was under her control, responding how she wanted him to when she wanted him to. Afterward, she had washed the taste of his seed from her mouth with a goblet of
sweet, golden wine and settled in beside him. It had not taken long before he was ready to begin anew.

In the morning, the pair had arisen to find pale sunlight streaming through the windows. The world outside the keep shone white and the sky an icy blue. It was good to see the storm ended at last, but Daenerys knew what the better weather meant for her time with Jon. As they dressed, Dany had tried to convince Jon of the folly of his impending scouting mission. He was stubborn and continued to insist on personally leading a party. Frustrated as she was, Dany understood. Even so, she challenged his ideas and plans, insisting that Bran’s abilities were far safer and more effective than were small parties trudging through the snow and ice. If we are to marry and rule together, we must learn to argue and agree.

In the end, Jon had conceded ground and consented to speak with Bran later that morning. What the boy would say in response to their questions neither Jon nor Daenerys could rightly say. For now, for one more morning, she had him and he her. And, for now, that was all Daenerys wanted.

Chapter End Notes

So one of the things that I’m trying to do is show the reactions to Jon’s true parentage from multiple POVs. Jon is angry that he was lied to, Tyrion rushes to identify the political implications, etc. I included mentions of the aunt/nephew dynamic, but in the world of Game of Thrones it’s not an uncommon pairing and therefore undeserving of the dramatic elements so folks want to attribute to it.

I’m not really sure what classifies something as "smut" and I’ve tried to focus more on the story here, but I deemed it important in this chapter and gave it shot. Who knows.

I’m also running out of music to listen to as I write, so if anyone has a solid movie soundtrack to recommend then tee it up.

Finally, thank you all for the kudos and comments. Keep ’em coming!
His stomach grumbled like some cornered beast on a hunt as the smell of hot stew filled his chambers. Sansa had brought the bowl some time earlier, when the fire in his hearth had burned brighter than it did now. Bran’s sister had taken to spending time in his chambers as the snows fell outside.

Sansa’s visits reminded him of the times that Bran’s mother, Lady Catelyn, would wait on him when he had fallen ill as a boy. Her visits were frequent and often brought with them some wooden bowl of Old Innis’ winter stew or a fresh load of warm baked bread.

“You need to eat, Bran,” she had insisted as she offered him the bowl that just now sat beside him, vapor rising off the greasy surface. “I’ve only seen you take a meal once during this storm,” concern colored her tone. Her blue eyes, the same sky-blue shade as Bran’s, shone with a rare tenderness she reserved for family alone. He had simply nodded in acceptance and taken the bowl from her. Sansa had known what that meant.

Of course, Arya was his most frequent guest, but he quite enjoyed her company. She would come early in the mornings, well before half the castle had risen. He was always awake to greet her. It had become a little game of sorts; the first he had played in many years. She would find purchase on the edge of his bed while badgering him with questions and requests, most of which were some variation of using his sight to spy on those Lannister men who had ridden north.

Once, she had entered his chambers later in the evening, presumably after supper in the hall. He had thought her diminished in some way, not her normal self. She had asked him to use his sight, but not on any southern enemy. “Please, just this once,” she had asked, her voice strained and raspy as she whispered. “I just want to know… where he’s been, what he did since I last saw him,”

“I can’t.”

That was his response then as it had been near every time someone asked him to see. For he had other visitors too, now. Word of his sight had spread throughout the keep and tales of ‘the Stark boy’s’ abilities seemed to grow with each telling. Indeed, some of the Stark smallfolk had even found excuses to visit his chambers.

A guardsman had entered past midday of the storm’s second day, stumbling upon Bran’s chambers whilst ‘making his rounds’. Unfortunately for the young sentry, the Three-Eyed Raven was not altogether willing to use his sight to find out if that fat Umber man was cheating at dice.

Another time, an older serving woman had begged him to find her son, bringing a sweet roll from the kitchens as some sort of bribe. “Bonal were his name, m’lord. But we called him Bones, we did, for he looked it. Skin and bones and a bit o’brown hair a top his head,” she had described her son with a longing ache in her voice. “He marched south with King Robb some years ago, m’lord, but I know he’s alive, somewhere south. I can feel it,” her voice quavered with age and emotion. She had paused then and, after some hesitation, placed a withered hand on Bran’s own. “Could
you… can you see him? Can you find him?” He had sighed and shaken his head no, much to the old crone’s quiet despair. She had left the roll on his table.

His stomach growled again, fiercer this time. These days, he ate as much as he slept, which was to say almost nothing and not at all. His own teacher had been sustained by that great weirwood, but Bran’s body still required physical sustenance. He reached to the table beside him and grasped the edge of the bowl. The stew was still warm. He took the silver spoon beside it and began to slowly guide bits of overcooked meat and soggy winter yams to his mouth.

The taste woke something within him. Bran hated stew… He remembered with a feeling of mild disgust as he slowly ate from the bowl. Bran hated a great deal after he fell. The boy whom Jaime Lannister had cast from that tower had suffered a slow death. He had lost his legs first, then his father and family, then himself. He lived still within the Three-Eyed Raven, making himself known in conversations with his sisters or the Stark smallfolk; but the Bran Stark who had once called this room home was gone.

He had seen his fall in a vision. It had been a curious accident during a time when he could not truly direct his sight. He had half expected himself to hate Jaime Lannister when he saw the man once again within Winterfell’s walls. Bran certainly hated him. He could feel the boy’s anger making his heart beat rapidly, like a man trapped beneath a sheet of ice, pounding at the walls, fighting to be free.

There was much else he wanted to see; so much he wanted to know. There is no time, he knew. His task grew harder every day as he drew closer. When his teacher showed him how to open his eyes and truly see the world around him, it had proven easy and wonderous. Though he could not always control what he saw, he had always found it easy enough to reach out through the trees and see.

Then, after the Wall had fallen, it grew more difficult. Day by day, he felt the other’s presence pressing against his mind. It took more time to see what he needed to see. It felt like he was straining his arm to reach some object that was just beyond his grasp. Only beside the heart tree did he have the strength to see. That’s where I need to go.

If only the snows had not been so deep. He had been trapped inside these walls for days. On the morrow it would clear, he knew that. He had reached out to the west, from whence the storm had come, and seen clear skies and fields of fresh fallen snow beyond the white curtains that surrounding Winterfell. On the morrow he would venture out to the godswood and resume his task. I need to know…

His dreams were troubled that night. They were troubled every night now. As he slept, he saw what he had seen before: stars. Thousands upon thousands of stars, more than he had ever seen even on the clearest night. They hung in the black sky above him, but around him too, specks of light swirling about the air. They shone a cold, icy blue, the same hue of the Wall at twilight.

He moved among them, his feet pressing silently against the snow. He could touch them, he realized, and he did. Reaching out, he ran his fingers through the wisps of cold blue light that danced about him. One by one they turned from blue to white then back to blue, flashing between the two colors. A thousand thousand points of light began to move about him, rolling in waves against each other in some discordant dance. Blues crashed against whites and white and blues, merging some into brighter stars while others were torn asunder in the collisions.

The world spun with the stars and a pale, full moon rose overhead. But no, it was full at one moment and new and black the next. In the blink of an eye it passed through a fortnight’s phase, shining brightly all the while. White light filled his vision, though from the moon or the stars he could not say. Then the scene gave way to a mighty, silent flash of pure light. White. It was all
white. He shut his eyes, desperate to escape the blinding light… and he woke.

Pale sunlight shone through his windows and another bowl of stew sat at his bedside along with a cup of cool, clean water. *The storm is over. I must return to the godswood.* He had been away too long. Much might have changed since he had last seen.

He heard footsteps in the hall and cried out for aid. The footfalls were heavy and loud as they hurried toward his chamber door. He looked up to see Samwell Tarly, scrolls in hand, standing beyond the threshold with a concerned look on his face.

“What is it, Bran?” he cocked his head as he asked the question. “Can I fetch you something?”

“I must return to the godswood,” he repeated his thought aloud. “Might I ask you to accompany me?”

“Oh, well, of course,” the large man shuffled his feet as he gave an awkward answer, “it’s only, well…” he raised his hands at his sides and turned his palms over, gesturing at his own girth. “I’ll find someone to help us. Gilly!” he shouted the name. Another pair of footsteps echoed from the hall and he saw the wildling girl appear beside Sam in the doorway, her straw haired son sitting in her arms. “Might you keep an eye on Bran whilst I find a guard or two?”

She looked at Sam apprehensively before nodding and stepping into the room. “M’lord,” she had mumbled into her cloak as she found a place to stand in the sunlit corner of the room closest to the windows. He tried to offer her a reassuring smile.

“How fares young Sam?” he asked politely, inclining his head to her son. Her eyes brightened at mention of the boy.

“Well enough, my lord. He enjoys his time with big Sam and has been spending more days with the other free folk,” her words were nervous but sweet as she talked of her son.

“And you?” He was not a lord, not anymore. The more time he spent in his own mind the more difficult even basic conversations became. Even so, he remembered his lord’s courtesies.

“Sam has set me reading an entire book!” she nearly shouted in her sudden excitement, before putting a hurried hand to her mouth and settling down again, *Beyond the Wall,* it’s titled. It’s a history of the free folk from, well, since there were free folk,” she explained.

“That’s good,” he tried to smile again. Their conversation withered then, as he stared off into the yard and she excused herself to tend to the weakening fire in his hearth. Samwell returned a moment later with two burly guards in tow. They helped him dress and make his way into the great rolling chair.

A few moments later they had him on level with the rest of the yard. Sam dismissed the guards and told Gilly to wait as he grasped the wooden handles and began to push the chair across the frozen earth to the godswood archway. The going was easier than he had expected it to be. Servants and sentries had cleared away snow from the footpaths, though elsewhere Winterfell’s walls peaked out from massive mounds of snow.

A warm breeze caressed his face as they entered the godswood. The snow had fallen heavy here too, but the relative warmth of the soft earth had melted most of it by now, leaving only patches of thin ice and dirty snow behind. Sam wheeled him to the base of the great weirwood at the center of the grove and, nodding, turned to rejoin Gilly in the keep.

The Three-Eyed Raven felt stronger here. He drew a deep breath, taking in the scents of the black
pools and moist rot and mossy earth. He drank in the sight of the heart tree before him, its white branches like a hundred boney fingers grasping at the blue and grey sky. His own pales fingers reached out and touched the bark.

His eyes flashed white and he felt himself pulled through his own body and into the tree, into the earth, and beyond. Darkness overtook him. For a single heartbeat, or hour, or year, he stared into a black void. Focus... the familiar, boyish voice whispered inside him. Focus and see.

The Three-Eyed Raven reached out, far to the north and into the past. He flew over the hills on a raven’s black wing, the sun and moon spinning overhead. The earth and sky swirled around him. Summer storms raged over the Wolfswood, thunderbolts crackled as they struck and split trees in bouts of blueish white fire. Snows fell heavy on the hills, burying the landscape in white. The Wall loomed across the horizon, shrinking lower into the earth even as he flew toward it.

As he crossed beyond, the massive structure melted away. The lands below him were green and fertile. The trees looked young. He blinked, once, twice, and found himself among them, deep in some forest far to the north. Green, snow-capped mountains rose up between the thick trunks of broadleafs and looming soldier pines. Green reigned above him in a thick canopy and green covered the ground below him.

He turned and beheld a shock of white against the dim forest where a grove of small weirwoods grew in an uneven crescent. Blood red eyes stared across the clearing and met his blue ones. They seemed different than the eyes of Winterfell’s heart tree. The carved faces looked clean and fresh cut. Above him, crimson leaves stretched over half the groves, battling the greens for control of the canopy. Soft, golden light fell over the wood. The Three-Eyed Raven felt at peace.

A twig snapped behind him. He spun on his heel to saw a group of men emerge from the underbrush. They whispered in some guttural tongue, the syllables of their words as thick as the mud clumped on their boots. They were ten in total, ranging in size from a skinny boy of an age with Bran to a burly, broad chested bear of a man. Each wore an assortment of leathers and light summer furs that covered only parts of their bodies. Their bare arms and shoulders were covered in swirling images painted on in blue woad. Half the group had half their faces dyed in the same fashion as their arms.

The largest of them had burnished copper disks sewn into his own chest piece. The metal glittered in the dappled light of the grove. A large, bronze sickle hung at his side. The man stepped into the center of the clearing and looked around, inhaling deeply and taking in the scents of the forest. He looked at the grove of growing weirwoods and grunted at the group.

Another man stepped forward, gripping a small bronze axe in his right hand. His pale skin was unblemished, clear of markings and dye. He wore a sash of dyed woolen cloth from hip to shoulder, bracers of some fine brown fur, and grey leather breeches. The Three-Eyed Raven looked at his face, recognizing something in the man’s sad, brown eyes. His nose was long and sharp, almost hooked. His short, curly hair and trimmed beard were the color of overripe barley.

He stepped across the grove and toward the white trees. As one, the group followed him. “First Men...” he wondered aloud as he gazed upon the group. The ancient wind carried his words into the past, pushing a whispering breeze among the trees. Ten men froze where they stood. He could see the sudden fear in their eyes as they formed a circle facing outwards, grasping at spears and swords and axes.

A moment passed in silence. Then another. Finally, their muscles relaxed and breathing slowed. The youngest lad even let out a nervous laugh as the tight formation fell apart and they again faced the trees. The Three-Eyed Raven kept his gaze on the man with the axe. There was something
about him, something familiar. *I must know…*

The man moved toward the closest weirwood and, grasping the wooden grip with both hands, raised his axe behind his right shoulder. He moved to swing the bronze blade against the bark, but froze mid stroke, his arms trembling but still as stone. His eyes flashed with fear for a moment, the turned white.

And then the boy who had been Bran Stark was not in the grove, but in a small village beside a low, blue-grey river filled with reeds and singing white birds. He looked through eyes that were not his own, seeing a small boy with barley colored hair running across a small garden toward his waiting arms. His eyes flashed again, and this time he was in the throes of love atop a woman with green eyes and hair the color of a dying fire. Then again, faster this time, the images flashed before him like lightning in a midnight storm. A fire set to clear the land. A stone hoe against rocky earth. An attack from those creatures in the woods beyond their lands; the beasts by their side. A call to arms from their chieftain. A journey into the wild lands of the North beside nine others from the lands around his own.

His eyes flashed white again and he was back in the young weirwood grove, looking at the man whose mind and memories he had just invaded. Fear shone plain in his brown eyes as the nine other warriors looked on in confusion and moved to help their panicked comrade.

The wind blew again, whispering silent threats as it rustled the red and green leaves of the grove. The Three-Eyed Raven heard them before the men did, the soft sounds of light, padded feet against old leaves and soft moss. Though there were only five, they surrounded the grove.

The men recognized the wind’s warning to late. The Children of the Forest opened with a salvo of obsidian tipped arrows launched from small recurve bows made of fresh green wood. The shafts bounced off of the hardened leather some of the men wore but otherwise found purchase in unarmored areas. Another wave of arrows followed before the men collected themselves and reformed a ragged circle in the groves center.

“**Taom!**” the massive man shouted a command to his comrades. The men moved closer together, tightening their defensive circle. Those with shields tried to shelter the others from the arrows falling from the dark underbrush beyond.

Ten pairs of eyes shot upward as the forest canopy came alive with a hundred cries of *Taom, Taom, Taom*. A black cloud burst from the trees and swirled overhead. *Ravens*, the Three-Eyed Raven saw then. They echoed the man’s words as one as they flew overhead. Another volley of arrows fell upon the group, but the warriors caught the shafts on their shields. The ravens began to swoop downward, their sharp talons clawing at the scalps and shoulders of the men.

Golden eyes flashed behind a thin brown trunk. He had seen them. So did one of the men, the skinny boy who had been laughing a moment before. He broke from his companions and rushed toward the edge of the clearing to fight his attacker. Another pair of eyes flashed in the dense underbrush and a shadow leapt from the thicket. Yellow fangs flashed as a great direwolf leapt from the trees and ripped the boy’s throat from his neck in one terrible motion.

Blood dripping from its great jaws, the great beast turned to the rest of the men circled tightly in the center. Half of them turned to face the wolf with weapons at the ready while the other four batted at the ravens with spears and swords. He saw the man with the bronze axe move to flank the wolf.

The beast lunged again, snapping at the sword hand of the biggest man. Two screams rent the air as the massive man fell to the mossy earth, blood pouring from the red ruins of his arm. The
direwolf cried out as well as the other man stepped forward and buried his axe in the creature’s spine.

The human’s cohesion dissolved then as chaos fell upon the grove. Two more wolves, smaller beasts than their fallen cousin, emerged snarling from behind the weirwoods. Two Children emerged beside them clutching long spears with sharp points of obsidian woven into the wood itself. Taom, taom, taom, the ravens continued to call overhead, filling the forest with harsh noise and making orders between the men impossible to understand.

The three other Children emerged from the opposite side, short black daggers clutched in their small hands. As one they fell upon the terrified group of warriors. Bronze and obsidian and bone flash as men screamed in agony and beasts howled in rage. Though they fought savagely, one by one, the men were overcome. One short but muscled man with his arms painted entirely blue dodged a wolf’s lunge and charged forward, driving his sharp bronze spear tip into the exposed gut of one of the Children. Its companions called out in an otherworldly, mournful song as the small green figure collapsed.

Another two wolves emerged from the deep of the wood and joined the fray, but by then it was already decided. Soon, nine men lay dead upon the ground, their blood turning the dirt into crimson mud. One by one, the Children dragged the corpses to the base of the various weirwoods. One by one, they sang out some strange melody to the trees as they drew black daggers across the men’s throats and let the rest of their blood nourish the roots of their gods.

Only the brown eyed man remained alive to see the fate of his friends. He was surrounded on three sides by armed Children and the remaining wolves. The Three-Eyed Raven watched as the Children took him prisoner, binding his arms behind him with thin, twisting green roots. Wolves pacing beside them, they marched off into the deep of the wood, leaving him alone. The man turned once more to look at the nine corpses and, for a heartbeat, his angry brown eyes met the seer’s blue ones.

The Three-Eyed Raven turned to behold the carnage the ambushers had left in their wake. His blue eyes met the blood red ones of the closest weirwood. White light flashed in the grove, though he could not tell if it was he or the tree that caused it. But no, he was not in the grove anymore. The weirwood as which he stared as older, its bark aged and gnarled. He was back in Winterfell.

He slumped back in his rolling chair pondering what he had seen in the visions, though deeper in his memory he already knew. That was him… before.

“Bran?” the shout stirred him from his thoughts before they could settle. He sensed four presences entering the godsdowod. Craning his neck about his chair, he saw Jon, Daenerys and the great white direwolf Ghost approaching his own position. “Bran,” Jon said warmly as his grey eyes settled on his cousin, “we’ve a question for you.”

“Jon, Daenerys,” he inclined his head toward the pair. He had not seen them together since their last conversation on this very spot, some time before the storm buried the keep in a fresh layer of snow and ice.

“We need you to, well, try to see,” Jon attempted an explanation of his request.

He sighed softly as he looked at the pair. “I told you earlier… it’s not what it was. It grows harder with each passing day.”

And he had told him earlier, when Jon had sat beside him in his chambers and urged him to try. Bran had reached out into the world with his mind; casting his consciousness out upon the North in
search of one hundred thousand dead men. North was all he knew. North and east. He tried to go further, to see, but pain there was always pain. The moment he glimpsed a blue eyes corpse, some unseen forced drove a jagged, icy dagger into his mind, shattering his thoughts and blinding him with pain. He had told Jon then as he told him now: “I cannot see.”

Daenerys stepped forward then, standing in front of Jon and adopting a regal but kindly tone. “Perhaps we can be of some assistance, then? Whatever you need, you have only to ask, Bran,” she gave him a curious gaze.

He laughed softly, his mirth sounding like the rustling of leaves in the wind. “Thank you, but I don’t think it works like that,” he tried to explain. I cannot have these distractions. I must see. I must learn.

The queen sighed and Jon stepped forward again. “Are you certain, then? You can’t see the dead like you did before?” When he shook his head, Jon looked back at his lover. Concern shown in her eyes.

“Scouts it is, then,” Jon muttered into the moss and mud. He looked at Daenerys, waiting for her to join him at his side as if this was the outcome they had been expecting. The silver queen looked from Jon to Bran and back again.

“I would have a word in private with Bran,” she said to Jon, “I shall join you in the yard shortly.” He watched her smile at Jon, her violet eyes radiating a rare warmth. Jon nodded and walked off toward the archway, Ghost padding along at his side.

Daenerys looked at him again and spoke. “I know this sounds, well, foolish, but I was wondering… your visions,” she paused as if preparing herself for the sheer ridiculousness of her impending question, “can you see the future as well?” Her eyes shone with a quiet hope.

“In a fashion, I suppose,” he said as he considered her query. “They’re more dreams than visions, and strange besides. Like listening to a language when you don’t know the words.”

“Oh… I see,” she sounded crestfallen. “And these dreams, do they always come when you’re asleep? Or have you seen, well, things before you as clear as I am now?”

Odd… he thought as he considered her words. “Always during sleep,” he answered simply. He heard her sigh as she released a pent up breath.

“Well, thank you Bran,” she said, sounding disappointed.

“Did you have a vision?” he blurted out the question as she was turning to follow Jon back to the castle yard. “A vision of the future?”

Daenerys’ eyes widened as she looked at him again. He could see sadness and hope filling her with equal measure.

“I… I don’t know what I saw,” she admitted. “It was some time ago. A dream,” she shook her head slightly, “nothing more.”

“There’s always more,” he responded. Daenerys looked confused and at a loss for a response. She forced a smile and turned away to walk back toward the keep. Bran remained beside the heart tree. There was always more to see.
I can neither confirm nor deny that a fat doobie may have been ignited prior to penning this chapter. Method Acting.

Many thanks for all the comments. Y'all are writing solid reviews which do help me consider my outline and story overall so please keep that up.

I've picked up the pace, but probably no writing this weekend. I'm off to enjoy the Third Saturday in October and then recover from the trappings of over consumption.
Jorah

Chapter Summary

Scouting parties ride out from Winterfell

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for the soundtrack suggestions! I've got hours of music ahead of me.

I wanted to clarify the Three-Eyed Raven's vision from the previous chapter. He sees a vision of the Children of the Forest battling the First Men in their ancient war. All the men are killed save one, the man who the Raven briefly wargs into for a moment. He is captured by the Children for a specific purpose...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The walls of Winterfell rang with the neighing of horses. Close to one hundred had been assembled in the yard, most of them northern garrons. The smaller horses were no match for a destrier on the battlefield, but they were surefooted and used to the snow and ice. The men selected for the three scouting parties were readying their mounts, securing saddlebags filled with food for the ranging.

Each party had a mix of men. Nearly a third of the men were wildlings; those who had fled southward beside the Umbers and tasked by Jon for this mission. They knew how to travel and track in the winter. Better still, they knew the enemy best. The others were a mix of Umber, Cerwyn, and Glover men.

With one Mormont among them, Jorah mused as he stood by the brazier closest the great doors to the keep. He had prepared his own mount some moments before and now stood warming himself as he watched the others of his party prepare for a fortnight’s ride into the wild. All of Winterfell seemed to be preparing for something these days. Women prepared food for the soldiers and healing poultices for those fallen ill. Lords prepared battle plans for the wars to come. Sentries and guards prepared the walls of the great keep for siege.

In truth, it was Ryn Hill and his Lannister men that led that effort. The irony of two dozen Lannister men preparing Winterfell’s defenses was not lost on him, but the men were experienced in siege craft and worked hard. They had already readied barrels of pitch, identified weak spots in the walls, and seen hundreds of trees brought in from the Wolfswood to shore up the battlements’ defenses.

The Lannister men were not permitted weapons of course. Not even Ser Jaime had been granted his sword back. The North might need them, but it did not have to trust them. Trust. After years away from his homeland, the word had a new meaning for Jorah. Even with dead men on the march, Umber still feuded with wildling, Stark with Karstark, and Lannister with everyone else. He wished he could make the common soldier see his folly. Only last night, one King’s Landing man had been set upon by three Dustin men-at-arms and, having no weapon to defend himself, suffered a
grievous cut.

Just now, Jorah watched five of the Lannister men handling bundles of dragonglass arrows and carrying other crates of weapons to the covered battlements. Suspicion lingered in his heart as it always did when supposed enemies were about, but he drove the thoughts from his mind to refocus on his task.

Jon had asked him to lead one of the parties northward along the kingsroad. The Lord of Winterfell would lead another toward the Dreadfort whilst Sandor Clegane led the third eastward to the Hornwood. Jorah pitied the men tasked to accompany the man. For all his skill with a sword, Clegane made for a poor companion on any journey, and the low hills across the White Knife would be choked with snow and ice. A *miserable journey with a miserable man*.

He watched as Clegane emerged from the stables leading a larger horse by the reigns. No garron would bear his weight. He stood still for a moment, a grim look upon his face as he surveyed the yard from opposite Jorah’s own side. The other men gave him a wide berth as they led their own mounts to and fro.

Yet Jorah watched as one man made for the large knight. He was clad in black leather and black furs and was nearly as large as Clegane, though in all the wrong ways. *Samwell*, Jorah recognized his peculiar walk and messy hair. The man had saved his life some time ago, when he had made his way to Oldtown in one desperate attempt to obey his queen’s command and cure his greyscale.

He had traveled across much of Essos in the hopes of finding a cure. Even with the saddle bag of gold Daenerys had given him to aid in his final quest, no healer would touch him. ‘Garin’s Curse’, many had hissed as they shooed him away. In the lands beyond the Narrow Sea, greyscale was seen as a divine sentence, not an accidental affliction of the flesh. Eventually, he had spent the coin on passage back to Westeros, hoping at least to die in his homeland and see his queen land on its shores. Then, by some miracle, Samwell Tarly had appeared in his chambers and performed a procedure that, with one slip of hand, might well have given him the affliction he sought to cure.

Jorah had been surprised to find the man in Winterfell when he arrived, but happy too. They had shared a horn of ale one evening as they talked about the maesters of the Citadel. By Sam’s own accounts, the archmaesters had ignored the North’s pleas for aid. “Their minds are as mortified as half your chest was,” he had complained into his cup. Jorah had laughed softly and murmured in agreement, simply letting the man vent. He owed him that much at least.

Sometime later, he had told Daenerys that it had been Samwell Tarly who had saved his life. He had hoped she might reward the man, or simply thank him for her service. The news had brought an odd smile to her face. *Happiness*, he could recognize that in his queen’s visage, *but something else too*… Of course, they all had other things on their minds these days. Even still, he wondered about her reluctance to approach the man.

Harsh laughter rang across the yard as Sam approached Sandow Clegane, a long bundle of oily cloth in his hands. The man gingerly drew away the brown covering to reveal a massive, two-handed sword. Jorah could see the pale sunlight reflecting off the dark, rippled steel. *Valyrian steel*?

“That’s a big fucking sword,” Clegane grunted, clearly amused by the sight of Samwell wielding the blade that exceeded his own strength.

“Aye, well,” the wind carried his quivering words across the yard, “I supposed that it might suite you well for the ranging. Heartsbane, it’s called. It’s made of Valyrian steel,” he offered the hilt to the other man. Sandor took it with both hands, a rare look of wonder in his eyes. “It should prove as
useful as dragonglass should you encounter, well, any of them,” he finished. Clegane grunted his thanks as he examined the greatsword.

“I’ll see it comes back to you,” he nodded at Sam.

“See that you do too,” Sam offered a nervous smile, “with your eyes colored as they are now,” he ventured forth with a jest. Clegane laughed again at that before the two men walked their separate ways. Jorah watched the man pulled a squire aside to help affix the sword to his back, the only way to properly stow and carry such a weapon. Valyrian steel would prove welcome on the ranging and in battle. Though they only had a handful of the blades. Most of the men were still armed with regular steel.

His sword hand dropped to his side, feeling the ragged edge of the small dragonglass blade he wore. Jorah still kept his steel on him, but knew it would do no good against the dead should it come to battle. The other men in his party had all acquired similar daggers, alongside dragonglass spear tips, arrowheads, and odd wooden cudgels with dark bits of the black glass sticking out of the wood like massive thorns. Each group had been given three ravens with which to send word back to Winterfell. They carried torches too, five well-oiled ones to man, and provisions enough for a fortnight. He hoped that would be enough.

“Off at it again, I see.” Jorah turned to regard Tyrion waddling toward him from the far end of the yard. The snowbanks piled against the walls were near thrice the dwarf’s height. Jorah regarded him with a plain look.

“Aye,” he responded. Theirs was a strange relationship born of a strange beginning. He had taken the dwarf at sword point and sailed him halfway across the world into slavery and madness. There was no forgetting that. To his credit, Lannister often liked to joke about their misadventures, reminiscing as if they had been two friends off on some quest. To say that he liked Tyrion Lannister would be a lie, yet he did not dislike him either. They were both the queen’s men.

“This served you well once before,” the Queen’s Hand offered him a grin and a small coin as he approached. Jorah knew what it was before his eyes could make out the harpy engraved on one side of the silver piece. He hesitated before taking it, noting that he had carried the coin beyond the Wall when Daenerys’s dragon had been slain. He drove such foolish thoughts from his head at once. Superstition, nothing more.

He smiled at Tyrion in turn, extending a hand to accept the token. “I suppose it did.”

“Yes, well, fortune is a fickle thing, isn’t it?” he asked rhetorically as he stared off into the yard. “Though, should you meet this Night King again, you might try to buy him off.” Jorah gave a hearty chuckle at that. Annoying as the man sometimes was, he had a certain dry charm to him. When he isn’t drinking, that is.

They both looked up as Daenerys emerged from the base of the tower where she kept her chambers. His silver queen wore a grey dress of some fine cloth, though most of it remained hidden beneath her black sable cloak. Her hair was a shock of silver against black. She made first for her two advisors.

Jorah met Tyrion’s knowing eyes for a moment. “See that she’s protected whilst we’re away, hmm?”

“Oh, of course! It’s little known that my true worth is in battle… my enemies never see me coming!” Jorah looked at him, trying to impress the seriousness of his request on the man. Tyrion sighed as he took the man’s meaning. He reached out with one hand and shook Jorah’s own. “You
need not worry, ser, she is safe here.”

Their conversation ended as their queen approached. She smiled as Jorah as her violet eyes met his own. Emotions swirled inside him as he looked at her. Love, he knew, but doused with pain and tempered with acceptance. She loved him too, of course, but as a friend and advisor. She had never wanted him the way he had wanted her.

And he had wanted her, still wanted her. He could well remember that brief time, after Drogo’s death, when he had urged her to sell the dragons eggs and run away with him to live a life of wealth and splendor on the far side of the world. Instead, she had walked into the fire with those eggs and emerged with three living dragons upon her shoulder and about her breasts. He remembered that night and that pale, ashen dawn. Until my last breath, I will remember.

It had been from that moment that he truly loved her. He had said as much of the bluffs above Vaes Dothrak. Desire was fickle and fleeting, he had seen that with his own one-time wife. But love? It burned hot and deep like a dragon’s fire. He had been with her in Qarth, in Astapor and outside the yellow walls of Yunkai. And, of course, in Meereen for a time.

The shame of his betrayal still weighed heavy on him, still ran in his veins like a lingering poison. What I did, I did for love of home and family, surely she understands now. The irony of Varys’ allegiance to the queen only made things worse at first. The man had served her own royal father and then Robert Baratheon before silently pursuing the man’s downfall. The eunuch had his uses to be sure, but Jorah had sworn to himself to watch the spymaster. And yet, if she trusted the man, Jorah would try to as well.

“I trust you’ll be riding off soon?” she asked, her concern apparent in her tone.

“Aye, Your Grace,” he responded, “just a few final preparations to make before we’re on our way.” She nodded and stepped closer, reaching out to hold his hands in hers. Tyrion stepped back from the pair, giving them room and privacy as they spoke. Jorah silently thanked the man for his tact.

“Be safe,” she spoke the words softly, more a request than a command. He could see in her eyes that she meant it.

“Aye, Your Grace,” he said again, his response was near a whisper. She gave his hands a tight, affectionate squeeze before turning away and striding across the yard to where Sandor Clegane was instructing his party to form up. Jorah watched as she offered the man some unheard word of encouragement. To his credit, Clegane nodded deeply and thanked the queen for her concern.

Finally, he watched her make her way to Jon Snow, just now saddling his own dappled grey and white mount close to the inner gate. “She’ll miss him most,” Tyrion stated the obvious as he retook Jorah’s side and looked on across the yard to where the young couple stood speaking softly. Jorah did not respond.

Tyrion had approached him some time ago about marriage arrangements between the two. He had refused a role in the scheme, insisting it was not proper for a knight of the queensguard to play a role in such machinations. He had used the title as a shield, yet he had seen the wisdom in the plan, even come to accept it. Jon Snow was a good man.

He had once regarded Jon with suspicion, thinking him another Daario entranced by Daenerys’ beauty and power. He knew the look the man gave her when her head was turned for it was the face he wore for years in Essos. The queen’s desire for the man had been abundantly clear the moment he had first seen the together. Her forwardness was almost shameful, though not as shameful as Jon’s apparent inability to read the signs laid out before him like unraveled scrolls.
The two northerners had grown closer on the journey northward. Jon was Eddard Stark’s bastard, natural born son of the man who had sought his head. Yet for all the tension between them, Jon had his father’s sense of honor. That had been apparent when he offered Jorah the ancient sword of House Mormont. *Or what was our sword.* Jeor had given it to his own foster son in the Night’s Watch. Jorah had seen his father’s will done, insisting Jon wield the blade himself and pass it to his children after him.

To say refusing Longclaw was an entirely selfless act would be a lie. There was little mistaking who might bear Jon’s children should they prevail in the coming battles. Thus, Jorah silently willed that a piece of his life and legacy might be with his queen and her heirs for generations. It was all the knight could hope for.

He and Tyrion looked at each other as the queen placed a swift kiss on her lover’s lips. Half the yard had seen the display of affection, but each man pretended otherwise, raising the tone of his conversation or humming some drummed up tune louder than was proper. Though something had driven them apart for a few days after arriving in Winterfell, their relationship was the worst kept secret in the realm.

“Well,” Tyrion breathed out an exasperated sigh, “in a fortnight, then,” he nodded at Jorah and moved to return to the keep. One of the guards opened the great doors to allow him entrance. Jorah made to walk to his own horse and prepare his party for the beginning of their ranging north along the kingsroad. A few of the men looked on expectantly as he strode across the frozen mud of the yard.

There were nearly two dozen in his troop: wildling scouts and Umber warriors and a few Glover woodsmen who knew the reaches of the Wolfswood. They would all serve him well on this particular quest. Their task was simple enough. Jon and Samwell had let each man know what to search for.

“One hundred thousand at least,” Jon had told the men in the hall during their gathering last night, “that many wights will leave traces in the snow. Look for tracks and footprints or other signs of a passing army. Should you see a storm on the horizon, mark your position… then flee,” he instructed grimly. Jorah remembered that unnatural storm that had come upon them north of the Wall. *Fleeing might not do any good.*

As he approached his men, he heard another voice call for him. He saw a short figure in the corner of his vision and thought Tyion had returned with some other morsel of wit or wisdom. Instead, he saw his young cousin and Lady of Bear Island walking toward him, her own black furs bundled around her.

“I hoped to catch you before you left,” she said, softer than her usually harsh tone. Jorah did not truly know what to make of the girl. She had been but a babe when he fled Westeros and had treated him with something less than cool courtesy before. He could not blame her, knowing his name and actions had cast a shameful shadow across the Mormont family.

“My lady,” he inclined his head to greet her.

She pulled a long, black dagger of dragonglass from the folds of her furs and, turning it over in her hand, offered it hilt first to her relative. It was similar to his other weapons made of the brittle glass, but of a finer make; its hilt reinforced with steel lines that ran halfway again up the length of the blade. “I know you’ve got some already,” she explained, “but I had this made special.”

Jorah took the gift in one gloved hand and regarded the girl with a smile. She smiled back, or at least gave the friendly gesture an attempt. “See that you come back with it, ser,” she ordered before
turning to leave. *Perhaps that was the way of it now.* Though only a child, Lyanna had no doubt seen a dozen relatives and friends march off to war and never return. Attachment was too risky. It seemed a cruel way to spend one’s childhood. No doubt there were thousands like her across the North.

A few moments later saw one hundred men mounted and riding through the gates of Winterfell. Lords and smallfolk alike watched the men ride off into the wilderness. *For that is what the world has become with the Wall fallen.* Some women wished their men well. Lord’s nodded grimly at their most trusted warriors. A few children looked onward, tears rimming their eyes as they waved farewell to fathers and older brothers.

Jorah looked to Daenerys, but she had eyes only for Jon. The Lord of Winterfell gave his love one look before nodding to his men and turning away toward his mission. That he set himself to his duty so resolutely was admirable, but Jorah would have just as soon had the man beside the queen instead of leading a party himself.

As he passed under the gates and into the outer yard, Jorah glimpsed a few of the Lannister men watching the column depart. Their eyes were curious, almost eager. Their gazes unsettled him, though he could not truly say why. They passed through the Winter Town, with its newly built hovels spewing smoke from their chimneys. Beyond the town sat the encampment of Unsullied, their black tents barely visible from beneath the massive piles of snow that ringed the camp. He saw Drogon flying off against the western horizon, no doubt searching for some poor beast to eat. Part of him wished they would have the great black dragon alongside them as they went on.

Onward they rode, off the north and east. Clegane party was the first to break from the column, his group of garrons winding its way eastward to the Hornwood lands and forests. The other two parties kept pace for a time before Jon directed his own men off the kingsroad and toward the upper reaches of the White Knife some leagues in the distance. The two men shared a knowing look as each passed from the other’s sight.

Then Jorah was alone with his men, some two dozen warriors and scouts under his command. Theirs was treacherous route along the span of the road that wound through the eastern reaches of the Wolfwood. Any enemy they encountered might fall upon them with but a moment’s warning. Jorah prayed to the gods of the North that he would not find any dead men in the forest, for if he did it would mean only a few leagues of soldier pines lay between Winterfell and the army of the dead.

The going was slow even along the kingsroad. Little enough of the snow had melted from the storm some days past. Bitters cold winds pulled at their cloaks and stung their exposed skin as they rode. Surefooted and steady, the garrons trod forward at an uneven pace, sometimes moving along thinner bits of snow, sometimes carefully placing each hoof upon old ice and wet snow.

Soon enough, the tree line of the Wolfwood rose up to meet them like some line of rank of stalwart spearmen awaiting his party’s pitiful charge. The trees loomed larger as they approached, dark green pines cloaked in white, casting shadows about darkened underbrush. As the northern sun sank toward the western reaches of the woods, Jorah ordered them to make camp at the forest’s edge. On the morrow, their ranging would begin.

It proved a remarkably dull affair. All Jorah saw for the better part of three days were snow covered trees and ice choked streams. The air in the Wolfwood was cold, though the trees mercifully blocked the bitter winds that had so tormented them on the first day. On occasion, the men heard the hoot of an owl or howl of a wolf, but otherwise the wood was silent, almost eerily so.
The first accident came on the third day of their journey, when a garron lost its footing on a loose ledge and tumbled down a sloping ridge, taking its Umber rider with it. Jorah have driven his sword into the beast’s heart to stop its terrible death throes while the others pulled the man from underneath his mount. By some stroke of good fortune, the man’s leg had not been crushed but instead cut open along his outer thigh by some razor-sharp rock hidden beneath the snow. Two of his men tended to the wound whilst a third rummaged through his own saddlebags for the healing herbs they had been given for the journey.

Jorah watched as the other men set the wound and bound it in linens lined with the odd bits of crushed, dried leaves would keep out the rot while cuts healed. He had approached Winterfell’s maester himself to procure the proper supplies for the journey. And thank the gods I did, elsewise this man might have followed his horse to the grave.

Unfortunately, Jorah knew that they carried only enough of the stuff for another injury or two. Wolkan had not had the supplies to equip three full parties for a ranging, let alone one. Jorah remembered his visit to the maester’s chambers, old books and vials and jars lining the dark timber shelves.

“Ah, is it mint you’re looking for? Or… No! Definitely not that,” he had snatched a jar of brown toadstools from the knight’s hands. “This won’t do you any good if you’re looking to heal wounds,” Wolkan chuckled, “Greycap. I had to procure some fresh supplies from the edges of the godswood just yesterday. Some fool broke into my stores during the storm and no doubt mistook the toadstools for medicine!”

Jorah had heard murmurings of missing herbs and supplies, but it seemed a minor scandal; a snowflake in a storm of petty crimes. Soldiers and servants alike had been lifting bits of grain and salted meat from the larder. Was it so strange to think some serving girl had stolen a few bits of comfrey to help an ailing family member?

“Of course,” the maester had continued as he set the jar back upon a shelf, “the only thing this is like to cure is a sane mind. Greycap will only produce wild hallucinations if consumed. It has a few common uses and is poisonous if properly prepared, mind you, but it takes a good deal of time and expertise to create the true toxin from the mushrooms themselves.” He looked at Jorah for a moment. “Anyway, you won’t be needing any of that on your ranging unless you mean to assassinate these dead men. Here,” he said, handing the knight a small satchel of dried leaves.

Thankfully, that satchel was all they needed. Five more days passed in the shadowy gloom of the woods. Once or twice the party lost their way on the snow-covered road, veering off into the woods and happening upon some abandoned crofter’s village. There were no signs of life – or death – anywhere in the forest. Jorah hoped that the other two parties had met with similar luck, or else escaped the enemy unscathed.

On the ninth day of their journey, the party passed the shores of the Long Lake. The great northern lake was frozen solid and covered in so much snow that Jorah had thought it a vast field before one of the Umber men had warned him against riding to close to the icy shores. All the villages they passed along the lakeshore were empty.

That he had made it this far north without a trace of the enemy made Jorah consider turning back. Another day’s ride would see them at the Last River, the northernmost boundary of their ranging. He would sooner turn now and save two day’s riding and supplies in order to return to Winterfell and Daenerys, but he had promised to see the task through to completion.

As he predicted, they reached the frozen shore of the Last River on the tenth day of riding. The men were tired and frozen, their beards covered in hoarfrost that most had neglected to remove
after the first week had passed. Their weapons hung useless at their saddles’ sides, long abandoned after a threat had failed to show itself. Only the wildlings held their spears and bows close. With the river in sight, it was time to turn back.

To the men’s collective disappoint, he ordered them broken into three smaller groups. The first would make camp just beneath the outward most trees with the other two probed into the river’s southern shores to the east and west for any signs of the enemy. After all, it had been at the river where the dead had fallen upon Lord Royce’s host.

He led one of the groups himself, nine men in full, with seven astride garrons and two of the wildling’ on their bear claws, wide shoe-like bits of wood strung together with strips of hide and bone studs. The wildlings both held the short hunting bows their people favored. Each man had a heavy quiver slung across his back, each full of dragonglass-tipped arrows in turn. The rest of the men carried their daggers, spears, and torches. They would take no chances on the final day of the ranging.

The first hour of their ride along the river’s shore was as dull as the past ten days had been. Silence hung over them like a storm cloud. And yet something else hung in the air… Jorah smelled it before he saw it, a light and smoky scent… *Fire.* Soon enough, Jorah saw a flash of orange flame through the woods. At first he thought it the torches of the other party converging on his own position. *But no, they road west and we east, and the sun is still too high besides.* Then he heard the words drifting through the tree.

“Lord, cast your light upon us,” a bodiless voice called through the wood. “Come to us in our darkness and show us the way. Show your servants into the light.” The fires he had seen seemed to spread with the words, burning brighter in the gloom of the forest. Jorah signaled a halt to the small column, but the rest of the party were already frozen, looking about for the voice’s owner. *It couldn’t be…. ?*

Slowly and with much caution, the two wildling scouts crept forth on the snow. Their bear claws pressed silently into the forest snow. Jorah watched with bated breath as the men moved among the trees toward the fires. He could see them still, though the smaller flame has been extinguished.

Then his scouts disappeared beneath a snowy ridge. Silence pressed in heavy against him. Only his heart seemed to make any noise. It beat in his chest so loudly he thought it might bring some unseen foe down upon them.

“Ah!” someone shouted through the trees. More voices joined the first. Jorah tilted an ear toward the sound and looked at his men, confused looks upon their faces. *Yes… They heard what I heard: laughter.* He gently spurred his own mount toward the noise as further laughter and soft words drifted through the trees. The light from the fire was burning lower as he approached the clearing.

And then he saw them, perhaps thirty men garbed in black furs and grey. They stood huddled around a charred pile of wood, a dark form burning in its center. *A funeral pyre, he knew. And that voice…. *He scanned the crowd for the man and found him in the center, a patch covering his right eye. Jorah dismounted and strode forward.

“Beric,” he heard the surprise in his own voice as he addressed the man, “you’re alive?”

“By the Lord’s grace,” he responded. He looked gaunt, diminished even, as if time in the woods had done what six deaths could not. The rest of his party were similarly weakened. Jorah looked around for other familiar faces and saw a few wildings and black brothers of the Night’s Watch huddled together. A shock of fiery red stood out from the blacks and greys. Tormund Giantsbane was alive as well.
“Fetch water and food from the horses,” he commanded his men. A few nodded solemnly and began to rummage in their packs for provisions. He turned back to Beric then, curious and eager to know what brought the man here.

“What happened to you?” he asked, “we heard nothing from the Wall after the reports of the breach near Eastwatch.”

“Aye,” the man said grimly, “those of us that survived fled west toward Castle Black only to find it a charred ruin....” he paused for a moment to collect himself. “Then we gathered what we could from the ashes and began to make our way south toward Winterfell. Brothers who survived the attack on Castle Black joined us along the road some days ago. We made good progress on foot, until the storms trapped us here.”

“Lost a man every day, sometimes two,” one of the black brothers explained as an Umber man reached him with salted beef and a skin of fresh water.

“Attack on Castle Black?” Jorah questioned, “is that where the dead are now?”

“Only the one came west to Castle Black,” another man of the Night’s Watch spoke then, his brown eyes sunken, tired, and full of fear. “At first… well, we thought it the dragon queen come to aid us. But then…”

Realization dawned slowly on Jorah Mormont. I saw it clearly as they did, Viserion falling from the sky. But he fell below the ice… Yet he knew the power of the enemy too; had seen it as clear as the burning blue eyes of the corpses they had fought on that lake. He looked to Beric, but it was Tormund who spoke at last, confirming his fears.

“They’re marching south,” he said grimly, his voice tired and raspy, “the dead, the Night King, and his dragon.”

Chapter End Notes

Jorah will not be a regular POV, but this little expedition proved a good chance to explore his thoughts and feelings while bringing in the final group of northern characters we need to continue.

Now a brief note on Bran. Think of Bran as you might Luke at the end of Return of the Jedi. Sure, he can call himself a Jedi and has matured a lot, but when it comes down to it he still gets rekt by Palpatine (who has UNLIMITED POWER). The Night King’s powers far exceed Bran’s own, but that’s not to say he can't learn to use them better and become a weapon in this fight. He just needs to figure out how to apply himself.

For the purposes of this story, Bran saw the Wall in ruins, but not its actual breaking. As the dead draw closer it gets harder for him to see properly.

Next few chapters should be exciting!
Jaime II

Chapter Summary

The Lannisters explore Winterfell.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jaime placed his hand upon the stone battlements of Winterfell’s inner wall. The single black sheepskin glove kept out the damp chill of the snow as he brushed it off the crenel, establishing a perch from which to look out over the edge of the Winter Town and camps of Daenerys’ armies beyond.

A good deal less impressive whilst trapped under snow. Both the Unsullied and Dothraki were fearsome forces, to be sure, but eunuch soldiers and horse archers fared as well as peasant levies against the elements. Just as useful in other ways too, he mused while watching a troop of black-clad soldiers wielding spades as they cleared away snow from the side of a makeshift barracks.

For years he had heard the thinly veiled threat of House Stark’s words. During the storm, with the winds howling about his window and down his hearth’s chute, he repeated had repeated them oft enough. And yet, after all that talk, the results of that great winter storm were somewhat less impressive than Jaime expected. True, it had gone on for days and buried the keep in feet of heavy snow and ice, but the end result was just large mounds of dirty snow piled against the keep’s walls and towers after the servants and sentries had cleared the yard.

Of course, Jon Snow had joined in the effort, taking a spade in his own gloved hands and clearing a way along the battlements. It had been an odd scene: the Lord of Winterfell stooping over layers of fresh power amidst stable boys and laggard sentries. It had been his bastard upbringing and time at the Wall that drove him to labor beside his people, Jaime knew. What Tyrion had told him about the man’s true parentage had made the sight even more amusing.

Even the keep itself seemed immune to the storm’s lasting effects. Jaime would glimpse a massive pile of discarded snow on his way to sup in his tower chambers and find the snowbank greatly diminished by the time he rose the next morning and re-entered the yard. He knew hot springs ran deep beneath the keep and bubbled up to the surface in the black pools of the godswood, yes, but Winterfell seemed almost alive, immune to winter’s wrath.

Outside the walls, the snow had not stopped the Northerners from going about their tasks. The village hummed with activity as two dozen columns of dark grey smoke snaked their ways skyward from the wooden roofs, joining the dark grey veil of clouds that hung over the land day after day.

The snows had not even stopped the Lord of Winterfell’s plans for a ranging to find the enemy. Jaime admired Jon’s determination, yet found himself wondering whether sending scouts into the wilderness was the proper course. They had lost a dragon fighting the enemy, yes, but reconnaissance and combat were entirely separate military matters. The great black or smaller green would have no trouble flying high above the North and spotting a horde of corpses from leagues away. That was one of Jon’s mistakes. *His feelings for the queen already cloud his command.*
The scouting parties had ridden off five days ago. It would be another five until the closest returned, he guessed, perhaps even double that number. Even with garrons and wildling scouts, the men were like to be slowed by the winter terrain.

Jaime turned around to glimpse the goings on of the inner yard. A few soldiers milled around the base of a tower while a line grew from the doors to the great hall. The Starks used their hall to host lords and knights, to be sure, but they had to be pragmatic as well. The long, high ceilinged room was perfect for serving food to those who slept within Winterfell’s walls.

He noticed Davos walking from the far side of the keep. Jon’s advisor was easily visible by his fingerless hand, which always looked to be clenched in half a fist. The man sensed his gaze and looked up to meet Jaime’s eyes. No true smile greeted him, but there was a nod of acceptance as he moved from his position and made for Jaime’s own.

A moment later, the man was climbing the stone stairs to stand beside him. He placed his own mutilated hand on the crenel beside Jaime’s own perch and drew a deep breath as he looked out over the town, camps, and white landscape beyond.

“I’ve seen some strange things since I first came North with King Stannis,” he said, the hint of a grin spreading across the side of his face, “but I never thought t’see Dothraki in Winterfell.” The man’s Fleabottom accent reminded him of Bronn.

Jaime smiled. “Count yourself lucky if that’s the strangest thing you see in the coming weeks,” he retorted. The older man laughed for a moment before an odd silence settled in between the two men with two hands between them.

“You were Hand to Stannis Baratheon, no?” Jaime broke the silence with a question. In truth, he was curious. The smuggler had saved Robert’s younger brother from starvation during Mace Tyrell’s siege of Storm’s End. He had served the man thereafter, on Dragonstone and beyond, when Stannis declared himself king and made war upon Jaime’s family.

“For a good while, aye,” he said, the grin slipping somewhat from his face. Some memory pains him… Jaime searched around for another subject, but he might as well have been using his stump to grasp at a conversation. He could find nothing else to say to the man, so he spoke his thoughts from earlier.

“You think they’ll be back within a fortnight?” he asked, nodding out over the walls to the Wolfswood where Jon, Jorah Mormont, and Sandor Clegane had ridden some days ago.

“Tougher than ya think, marching in snow,” Davos regarded him with an interested gaze. “Snows did Stannis in as much as anything else, though with proper horses and rangers it’d be an easier task.”

There’s no getting around it then, he thought. “Did you march with him to Winterfell?”

“Partly, though we were caught in a storm much like this past one on our way south from the Wall,” he said grimly. “Stannis sent me back t’Castle Black for supplies, and, well…” Stannis died, Jaime finished his thought for him.

“You commanded his ships along the Blackwater as well, I’m told?” he switched the topic as best he could, though they still spoke of the dead king.

“Aye,” he shook his head again, “it was your brother and father that did us in there.” An esteemed pair. He raised his head to look at Jaime, an odd mix of pain and melancholy reflected in his eyes.
“Many here think Jon Snow or the queen to be stubborn, but they never served Stannis, never knew
him as I did,” he paused for breath. “When your brother set the Blackwater alight with wildfire, the
man simply rowed through the flames with the other half of his army and stormed the shore.”

*Tyrian and his ships. Cersei and the Sept. It would seem Aerys left quite the impression on my
family. Burn them all,* a voice whispered in his head.

“And that’s where my father caught him,” Jaime said. He could recall the rumors clearly enough:
Stannis marching on the capital with eighty thousand men; his brother, sister, and children trapped
within the walls. He had waited for weeks to hear news of the battle, losing his hope and his hand
before Roose Bolton told him of their victory.

“Aye, that’s where Lord Tywin fell on him,” Davos sighed, “we had thought your father was
marching west to deal with the Stark host. A poor welcome that was.”

“But he continued fighting,” Jaime said, urging the man to continue his tale, “you all made your
way northward, no?”

“Hired sellswords from Essos and smashed the wildling army north of the Wall before riding
through the snows to Winterfell,” he said grimly. “Like I said, he was a stubborn man and weren’t
like to let snow stop him from his duty.”

*Duty.* It was an empty word. *Did I do or forsake my duties when I killed Aerys? When I protected
my children with lies and pushed Bran from the tower? What of my duty to my family? Tyrian is
here and Cersei with child.* No man could truly do his duty. Jaime had learned that years ago. *For
every oath I swore, there was another promise already set against it.*

“Duty,” he said allowed, a biting tone in his voice. Davos gave a mirthless chuckle.

“Duty,” he agreed. “Lords always talk of it, and honor and courage, don’t they?” the smuggler
mused grimly. “Great houses boast their bravery on their arms and in their words, even sew them
on cloth banners and carry them into battle. But battle’s where all that ends. Green boys drop their
banners for spears and shields, and drop their spears and shields to flee the field. Duty and loyalty
ring hollow against the screams of a thousand burning men.”

Jaime could recall those screams easily enough, for he had heard them upon the shores of the
Blackwater Rush some months earlier when the Dothraki had fallen upon the supply train. “That
they do…” he spoke softly.

Davos let out a pent-up breath. “I don’t mean to dishonor the man’s memory. He was my king. He
raised me up from nothing,” he looked away over the walls again, “but there are some things ya
just can’t forget. Or forgive.”

He considered the man’s words. He knew Stannis, remembered him from his days as Master of
Ships on Robert’s small council. He had always been stern and serious, never laughing at Renly’s
japes or Littlefinger’s crude stories.

Yet it was not Stannis’ face he saw in his mind’s eye, but his own sister’s. *Some things you can’t
forget or forgive.* He recalled the smoldering ruins of the Sept and the great cloud of ash that had
hung over the city for days. How many had died when she burned half of Visenya’s Hill,
committing the very sin he had forsaken his kingsguard oath to prevent? *Burn them all.*

“I suppose not,” Jaime gave him an answer. The two men stared off into the distance in silence for
another moment before Davos dismissed himself with a half-hearted quip about joining the men for
a midday meal. Jaime was not hungry.
He remained upon the battlements for a while longer, looking inward upon the yard instead of beyond the walls. Lady Brienne were gathering some of the castle's women for more training. It seemed a foolish thing to him. *If it the battle comes to maids and crones, then we will already be lost.*

*And a one-handed knight will be far more use,* he caught himself in his own arrogance as his hand reached to where his sword should have been. They had taken Widow’s Wail when he arrived in Winterfell. To his relief, he had seen no one else wielding the blade.

Jaime walked down the stone stairs and into the yard where Brienne stood assembling her charges. She gave him an odd look, both raw and tender at once. He noticed young Arya Stark was not among the women. The younger Stark sister had seldom uttered a word in his presence and always regarded him with her icy grey gaze and an idle hand thumbing at her dagger.

Yet Lady Sansa stood watching in a covered walkway above the yard, observing the beginnings of the training. Clad as always in her black wools and furs, the Lady of Winterfell stood as still and silent as a gargoyle. *Though far more beautiful, I should say.* Her auburn hair was a flash of warm color against her own clothes and the dull greys of the keep. Her blue eyes met his for a moment. Jaime thought he saw a knowing smirk flash across her face.

He noted Lyanna Mormont too, preparing to spar. Even Alys Karstark, who looked thinner than the quarterstaff she held, had seen to join the group.

“Ser Jaime,” Brienne met him near the center of the yard, squaring her massive shoulders with his as if to block his path.

“Lady Brienne,” he breathed out his greeting, “an army of one today? I don’t see Arya here.” Brienne’s lips tightened into a thin line as she dropped her gaze off to her right, as if she expected the girl to leap from a corner in ambush.

“I have not seen young Lady Stark since supper two days past,” she explained coolly, “ill, perhaps.” *Curious.* The girl’s bedchambers were near enough his own, but he had not seen anyone coming or going, not even the maester.

“I’d offer to spar with you, but, well,” he raised his stump and offered a feigned frown, “I fear I would be less of a match than I was in our last duel.” She gave him that odd grimacing smile of hers.

“Afraid of a woman, then?” she huffed. *Yes, actually. Plenty of them.* His mind raced from Cersei to Daenerys to the unseen Arya. Each had her reasons to want him dead.

“I always did confuse fear and wisdom,” he sallied forth with a retort. *Though I never had much of either.*

“Well, this lot will show you proper courage, if you’d care to join,” she boasted with a proud glint in her eye. Behind her, the small host of Winterfell’s newest sentries stood in rank and file, ready for war.

Jaime smiled at her and bowed his head low. “Perhaps another time. I fear I’ve misplaced my sword at any rate.” Her eyes flitted to his stump and then his barren left hip. An odd look overtook her then. *Pity?*

“I would be honored to speak with Lady Sansa myself if…,” she paused, “a knight should always have a sword.”
“Thank you, Brienne,” he gave her his honest appreciation, “as long as I see it returned before any dead men arrive at my chamber door,” he shrugged and smiled. She smiled too. With that he walked off as Brienne turned back to begin the lessons.

He considered his own position in the yard and that of the pale sun in the sky. It always felt good to see the sun these days. Between the grey storm clouds and the grey walls, the North was dreary enough. The silver-gold light streaming through the clouds reassured him, like the smile of a lover or wave of an old friend. The south had been dreary too, of course. Flurries of snowfall had harried Jaime all the way through the Riverlands.

Winter is coming. That was partly true. He come to winter as much as it to him. No small part of him had expected to ride over some frozen ridge and behold Winterfell in flames or under siege, its walls hidden under a press of corpses. Instead he had come upon camps of bored soldiers, throngs of gaunt old women and sickly old men, and a collection of lords more concerned with the honor of commanding the center in battle than seeing to their own survival.

Even free from the confines of his chambers, Jaime thought the days were dull. Sometimes, Jon would gather the lords and counselors in the hall or solar to discuss defenses and plans. The practice had quickly become obsolete. Plans required information and they had little enough of that. *At least Jon realized that much. Though the man rode into the snows himself, trading a warm bed and beautiful girl for a thin bedroll upon frozen earth. Jaime thought that a peculiar decision. Though perhaps if his command instinct’s follow his cousin’s, we shall see ourselves through this fight.*

A dozen other thoughts swirled in his mind as he slowly paced about the inner edge of the yard and made his way to one of the keep’s many doors. The thinly built sentry standing guard opened the door for him. Jaime heard the man utter ‘kingslayer’ under his breath as he passed into the dimly lit foyer. *I shall never be welcome here,* he thought. Not without proving myself trustworthy and loyal… and how do I do that?

He began to wander the keep’s many halls, searching for some morsel of entertainment. Drink would not do, not this early. He was not his brother. And yet after a few wrong turns Jaime considered a horn of ale to ease the frustration caused by his failed navigation of the keep. *Perhaps we should just hole up within these walls, the dead won’t be able to find us.*

The keep had been designed that way, of course. Most of the older castles were well equipped with false passages, winding hallways, and uneven steps so as to confuse attackers. *Might confuse the guards as well… How long would it take them to find me if I shouted for aid just now?*

Finally, he found a hallway with a few thin windows lighting the hand side of the passage. He knew where he was and followed his memory down the hall, his footfalls echoing softly off the vaulted stone ceiling. A moment later, Jaime stood before the opened door of the lord’s solar. There were books aplenty in the room, alongside scrolls, maps and fine tapestries depicting scenes from Stark history. *Had things turned out a bit different, ‘The Whispering Wood’ might well have been woven and hung upon these walls.* He stepped forward and entered.

“Ser Jaime,” a voice sounded from his right. The tone was rigid and unwelcoming. He turned to behold the violet eyes and silver hair of Daenerys Targaryen. The queen sat upon a plush cushioned chair, a small leather-bound tome open across her lap. She wore a dress of some fine fabric with a high collar that sloped narrowly and parted at the front. A silver dragon brooch was pinned above her right breast.

“Ah, Your Grace, my apologies I-”
“-sit,” she commanded, motioning to a far less comfortable looking chair across from her own. Jaime nodded solemnly and made to join her. His eyes strained to read the title of the book, though Daenerys caught his gaze and spoke the name aloud.

“\textit{Vestriarzira hen vēzendio Dārīh}” the Valyrian flowed from her lips like a bird’s song. It was a beautiful language, suited for poetry, though Jaime had never deigned to learn it. “Tales of the Sunset Kingdoms, you would call them,” she explained, “a book from across the Narrow Sea.”

Jaime looked at her and gave a polite smile. “Learn anything interesting?”

She raised an eyebrow. “I was reading of Derwyn Durrandon, a Storm King from before the Conquest. Derwyn the Dancer, they called him. It would seem the man would twirl about his foes in fights.” \textit{Fascinating}, he wanted to say, but she continued to speak. “His kingdom spanned from Crackclaw Point to the Red Mountains of Dorne. Quite impressive for the time, really, but he wasn’t content with that. King Derwyn raised forty thousand levies to march on Highgarden. Some maesters say it was the largest army Westeros had seen until your ancestor met mine on the Field of Fire.”

Jaime nodded. “And how does Derwyn’s conquest of the Reach compare with old Aegon’s?”

“Poorly,” the corner of her lip curled upwards in a smile. “Derwyn insisted on wearing a full set of plate mail on the march westward. Men will always insist on such foolish displays of leadership....” her voice drifted off and she paused for a moment. Jaime could tell she was not thinking of the long dead king. “His horse stumbled whilst fording the Cockleswent and he was thrown into the muddy depths beside the shallows,” she stopped again to close the book and set it aside, “and drowned. His men could not lift him from the river’s bottom in time to save him. He left an unborn heir at Storm’s End and his army fractured into a dozen camps. Derwyn the Denser, the bards named him thereafter.”

“An interesting tale,” he inclined his head.

“It is interesting, isn’t it, what happens to an army when its leader dies?” It was not a question. He supposed he would face her eventually, the last surviving child of old King Aerys. \textit{At least her dragons are not here beside her.} Even so, he felt dread seep into his bones.

“I suppose it it...” he ventured forth with a cautious answer.

“Your family nearly ended mine,” her eyes shone with a cool fire. \textit{And here we are.}

“Nearly,” he agreed. Daenerys rose from her seat and stood over him for a moment before walking to the other end of the long room and placing her book back upon the shelf. She looked back at him and thence to the fire burning in the hearth.

“For years I thought of this moment, what I would do to you when I met you. When I took the Seven Kingdoms with fire and blood. What my dragons would do to Lord Tywin and the Kingslayer, who murdered my own father,” she explained, an odd passion coloring her tone. “It would have been fitting, the Last Targaryen come from across the world to seek her revenge.”

Jaime nodded but did not make to interrupt her. “Only... like I just read, fate has an odd sense of humor. One Lannister sits upon my family’s throne, another serves as my Hand, and the third has abandoned him own duties to fight alongside me.” She stood across from him, glaring intently. A moment passed intense silence.

“Your Grace I-”
“-I can never forgive what your family did to mine,” she sighed as she interrupted him, “but I know what my father was, what he intended to do…” her violet eyes met his own and, for a heartbeat, understanding shone clear in them. That surprised him, though less than it should have. Tyrion had plainly told her about the wildfire and the pyromancer. *Burn them all.*

“Then you know I did what I had to do,” he said, a surge of confidence driving out his fears and doubts for a moment. She nodded.

“And, when war in the North is over, I will do what I have to do,” she sounded almost sad at the idea. “You understand what that means?”

He could hear those screams again, could smell the burning flesh, could taste the black ash. *Burn them all.*

“You burned thousands of men alive with dragonfire along the Blackwater,” he whispered, his soft with respect for the magnitude of that loss.

“As Cersei burned my men aboard their ships and my people worshipping in the Sept of Baelor,” her response was like cold iron. “Perhaps it won’t come to that. Perhaps your brother will find a better solution to all this,” she wondered aloud, “but if not, I must know where you stand, ser,”

*Ser.* Perhaps it was a meaningless slip of the tongue, but the word still held meaning for him. He was a knight. ‘Sers’ swore oaths. ‘Sers’ upheld them. He had pledged his sword to her father once, before driving the same blade through the man’s back. He had pledge Widow’s Wail to her outside these very walls…..

His prolonged silence said more than all the books in the solar could have. Their eyes met again.

“I see,” she intoned, “then we shall ford that river when we come to it, I suppose.”

“Just make certain you’re not wearing full plate, Your Grace,” he smiled as he attempted to lighted their conversation. She gave him a smile, a happy gesture tempered by some unknown sadness in her eyes.

The odd pair sat in silence for a moment, listening to the crackle of the fire and the distant shouts echoing from the yard beyond. Daenerys gazed out the window, every now and then letting out a soft sigh.

“He’ll be back soon enough.” Jaime felt his lips move and heard his voice speak the words. He had not even thought to do it. *Speaking to her of Jon… What am I doing?* He might have laughed at it all. *Lacking in wisdom and fear…*

He expected some sharp rebuke. The queen looked at him, truly looked at him, for just a moment. “I know,” her response was just a whisper, a frightened girl’s breathless wish more than a dragon queen’s confident assurance. With that, she left him alone in the solar.

The rest of the day passed much the same as had the ones before. Jaime remained in the solar for a while longer then took to exploring bits of the older parts of the keep. He took his supper in the great hall, sitting beside Ryn Hill as the southern men talked of their days. The two dozen men who had ridden north represented a larger share of the men in the hall tonight, given the three scouting parties were away in the wild.

Jaime could not remember Hill’s hazel eyes as being among his other captains and commanders, but there had been dozens of them, even hundreds in the lower ranks. He was a kindly soul, always sharing his officer’s portion with the men under his command. Jaime was less sure of the others.
Five or six of his family’s former levies sat together at the end of the table, talking softly in hushed tones. *Though, that’s not an oddity in itself,* he reasoned as he looked about the hall and saw a dozen other conversations being held in much the same manner.

Yet, finding himself curious about the discussion, Jaime leaned slightly and pointed his ear toward the pressed huddle. “We’ve not seen Aelan since supper two days past,” one said just above a whisper, sounding concerned. “What is they got him?”

“If they got him we’d all be dead. The boy’s probably fallen ill. Make no matter. I’ll not wait for him,” said another.

“We was given a task. Time we see to it,” said a third. The rest murmured their assent. Two of the men turned to regard Jaime with odd stares as the rest fell silent and buried their faces in their bowls and cups.

Later that evening, he had wandered through the darkened halls and come across one of the Lannister men, garbed in black leather jerkin and darkened wool cloak, walking toward him from the opposite side of the passageway that led to his own chambers. He had never seen any Lannister man in this part of the keep before.

The man looked into his eyes, his stare cold and foreign yet eerily familiar. He felt an odd sense of fear and apprehension grip him, making in stop his stride. “Wait,” he turned and commanded before he turned the corner. “What’s your name?”

The man froze in his stride before turning his gaze back to Jaime. “Names Aelan, my lor - m’lord,” the younger man spoke, the torchlight reflecting off his dark, greasy hair.

“And what are you doing here?” he asked.

“I rode north to help in the fight,” he both said.

Jaime rolled his eyes. “What are you doing in this part of the keep?’

“Oh,” Aelan said sheepishly, “I was lost, m’lord. Took a wrong turn out the hall. These northerners make the castles a bit odd, don’t they?” he laughed nervously. *I can understand that, at least,* he thought as he exhaled, letting go of that fleeting sense of apprehension.

“I see. Well, good night to you,” he called down the hallway. The man nodded and turned right. The wrong way, he mused. *He’ll be wandering the halls all night.* It gave him some comfort to see that he was not the only ones to have trouble with Winterfell.

Jaime passed the queen’s own chambers on the way to his own. Two Unsullied stood guard on either side of the thick oak door. He could feel their brown eyes track his every movement as he passed. A moment later saw him back at his own chambers. He froze for a moment at seeing his door ajar. He heard voices murmuring from within. *Not how I left it…*

Cautiously, he rounded the door and peered into his room. Davos and Tyrion sat gulping from ivory colored horns beside a roaring fire. The old smuggler looked up at him and Tyrion grinned.

“Thought our talk earlier was a bit grim,” the grey-haired man explained. “Figured we might have ourselves a better time,” he patted a small, dark brown barrel of ale with his shortened hand. Tyrion stood and offered Jaime his own seat as he moved to take up the padded footstool.

The rest of the evening was rather enjoyable. The smuggler told them stories of daring escapes from Tyroshi galleys and the time he rescued the men of Storm’s End from starvation. Tyrion
regaled them both with tales of his own adventures in Essos. Jaime simply listened and drank. The ale was brown and bitter, but it tasted good after a heavily salted supper.

Soon enough, the hearth’s flames were as low as the foam in the men’s ivory horns. Davos excused himself first as he stumbled from the room. Tyrion lingered for a moment, looking as if he wanted to say something, then left as well.

Then Jaime was alone. He stoked the embers of the hearth once more, trying to reignite the blaze to no avail. He would need more wood. He looked to his own supply and saw that the servants had seen fit not to give him any fresh logs with which to warm his chambers. Damn it. It might have been a simple oversight, but with the way most of the Stark smallfolk greeted him, Jaime surmised it was not.

He stood and glimpsed out the window. Later that I thought with little enough light to go by. The thin orange flames that usually lit the other windows of the keep shone no longer. No moon lit the grey walls of Winterfell tonight, or else it was hidden behind an impenetrable layer of clouds. He would have to navigate to the storeroom in darkness.

Jaime unlatched his door and walked out into the hall. A torch set in an iron sconce flickered across the way. Perfect, he smiled as he reached out for the torch, gingerly plucking it from the walls. The heavy iron felt odd in his hand, but the dim fire warmed the closest cheek and he was glad to have some light.

Right or left? He let out a frustrated sigh as he raked his memory for the location of the storeroom where servants piled split dry logs meant for the lords' fires. He turned right and began to walk down the passageway toward Daenerys’ room and beyond. He walked silently for a few paces and then made to turn the corner.

Something is wrong, he realized. It was too dark. No other torches lit the hall, though many still smoked and radiated with a faint heat, then he heard hushed whispers and the scuffle of leather on stone. Placing his torch on the ground behind him, he peered around the corner.

He saw a pair of legs clad in black. Two pairs. The Unsullied, he thought. But no… He saw three pairs of legs. Five? Another was approaching just now. Six. And two prone figures lying in pools of dark red on either side of the oak door that led to the queen’s chambers.

“Aelan!” someone hissed in a hushed whisper, “by the Stranger himself where have you been boy?” Jaime recognized the voice from earlier in the evening. “Ah, never mind it now. Time to kill the bitch and ride out before the castle wakes.”

“Damn things locked shut… no… ah! Got it,” another voice whispered. He heard the faint scrap of iron on wood and the creak of unoiled hinges.

“Hello?” Jaime called out, springing forth from behind his perch and raising the torch above his head and waving it in front of him. Orange light from his single torch glinted off glistening steel. He heard ragged breathing from down the hall where the figures stood, though with his torch now raised high he had lost his night eyes. Boots thudded against old stones. Eyes and blades flashed in the darkness as two of the figures rushed toward Jaime.

He saw the other three kick open the door and enter Daenerys’ room. No. I have to get to her. “Help!” he shouted, straining his lungs. “Help!” The thick footfalls echoed in time with his cries as two of the Lannister men ran at him. Jaime couched the iron torch and readied his arm, crouching low. No time to fight, he knew. As the first man stepped fully into the light of the torch, Jaime drove it fully into the side of his face.
The hot iron and flames produced a sickening *hiss* as fire met flesh. The man stumbled back screaming, but the second was already upon him. He raised his stump to block the man’s steel. Pain shot through his arm and he cried out in agony as the blade bit into his crippled arm, but he kept his grip on the makeshift iron mace, swinging it up at the man’s face.

His second opponents proved nimbler than the first and blocked the blow with his own arm, but the weight of the attack knocked him off balance and into the wall. Jaime rushed passed his two attackers and through the open doorway, dreading what he might see.

He stood in shock at the scene. Daenerys was awake and terrified, her silver hair amess and her silver evening gown ripped at her left shoulder, revealing one small pink tipped breast. She stood in the corner of her chambers, her back to the stone walls, wielding a small dirk with both hands. Even from the threshold, Jaime could see terror shining clear as day in her violet eyes.

The scene before him was stranger still. One man lay dead, his opened throat staining the white fur rug with blood. Two other assassins battled a third, daggers and fists flashing in the light from the hearth. Utter confusion stayed Jaime’s hand for a heartbeat. Then he dropped his makeshift weapon and picked up the fallen man’s dagger.

Charging forward, he drove the length of the blade into the exposed side of one man’s neck, huffing with satisfaction as the corpse went limp and crumpled to the floor beside the first. The second man retreated, placing his back to the large wooden wardrobe to face Jaime and the apparent turncloak.

Both of the queen’s defenders closed on the man from either flank. “Damn you Aelan, you fucking traitor,” he spat his curses at Jaime’s new ally. The man beside him only smiled.

“Look!” he heard Daenerys scream as the two men Jaime had fought in the hall barged through the doorway, steel in hand. Now they were outnumbered. The man they had just cornered rushed the traitor Aelan, driving his shoulder into the other man’s chest and knocking him to the floor.

The man whom Jaime had burned made for him, a thin steel dagger in one hand and a longsword in the other. He smiled cruelly as he approached. *Good lot this will do,* Jaime considered his own dagger for a moment, knowing it would not block a swing from the sword. He raised the dagger and threw it at the man, watching as it spun and pathetically bounced hilt-first off his black, boiled leather armor.

The assassin laughed, but that was all Jaime needed. He rushed the man, aiming his good arm and shoulder at his upper thighs. With a cry and a crash and a clatter of steel against stone, both men were on the floor, rolling and fighting. Three fists wailed against tired flesh as the men battled for position.

Jaime glanced to his right and saw the second man rush past Aelan and his foe, making for the queen. *No.* He struggled to break free of the other man’s grasp, but with only one hand he could find no purchase.

“Queenslayer, they’ll call me,” he heard the man laugh from the other end of the room. Jaime did not see his strike, but he heard Daenerys’ shriek. *No…*

He drove and elbow into the man’s groin and flipped his weight across, bringing himself to one knee and fumbling for a dagger. His fingers closed around the hilt of the blade on the ground beside him. Exhaling harshly, Jaime turned and drove the steel into the man’s heart as he struggled to regain position as well.
Turning, he made to defend the queen, but saw that Aelan had already dispatched his opponent and was currently opening the throat of the man who had attacked Daenerys. Jaime watched at the man drew his own steel dagger across the final assassin’s throat, a rush of blood bursting forth from the opening to further stain the white furs on the ground.

Jaime rose to his feet, making certain that all five men were dead. They were. The turncloak had a few scratches here and there and Jaime’s own right arm was bleeding from the wound he took in the hall. The pain had only begun to set in. Daenerys remained in her corner, her silver dress stained with blood. She had been cut, a thin gash across her left side, just above her breast. Good, he thought, we’ll surely survive these wounds.

Steel and voices rattled in the halls as the castle woke to the night’s commotion. A dozen Stark guards had stormed into the room a moment later, drinking in the sight of five dead Lannister men and two living ones. Spears and swords pointed forward, they drove Aelan and Jaime to their knees while other made for the queen. Jaime saw Missandei enter too, her expression a tired mix of fear and confusion. The copper-skinned handmaid rushed to her queen’s side.

“I knew it. I always said it,” spat one of the soldiers, “never trust a fucking Lannister.”

“Wait!” the man called Aelan called out to the guards. “Wait… Ser Jaime helped me kill these others,” he motioned to the five corpses piled upon the white furs, staining them with crimson blood.

One of the men laughed. “And why should I believe the word of another fucking Lannister?” Who do you think killed these men? He wanted to shout, but he held his tongue.

More accurately, his words caught in his mouth as Aelan slowly raised one hand and, grasping at something around his neck, pulled the skin from his own face. Jaime felt his jaw slacked and drop.

“Lady Stark?” Nervous murmurs filled the room.

“Arya will do fine,” she said simply. Jaime looked at her and she at him. Even through the blood spattered upon her face, he could see her gaze was different now. Gone was the icy glare, replaced now with something bordering on… what? Respect? “Ser Jaime is wounded, as is the queen. Go and wake Maester Wolken,” she ordered coolly. Two guards shuffled backward and ran down the hallway outside. Jaime could not blame them. Seven save me, what was that I just saw?

Arya Stark looked down at the five dead men for a moment, kicking one corpse with her foot as if to make sure the man was truly gone. Her loose-fitting mail jangled about her as she walked around. Jaime rose to his feet, unsteady and weak as he held his bleeding stump of an arm.

Daenerys stepped forward with Missandei holding her firm. “…” her voice shook, “thank you both,” she said just above a whisper. She was wounded as well, the assassin’s single blow had cut her, though it would do not lasting damage. He had seen enough battle scars to tell the difference between a scratched vein and mortal wound.

Arya looked over the queen, giving her a curious gaze. Daenerys gave the girl a faint smile as she stood taller… and then crumpled to the ground with a faint ‘oh’.

Arya’s eyes widened as she scrambled to the ground, grasping at one of the dagger the man held. She held it to her nose then threw it away, plucking another from a pool of blood and bringing it to her nose again, inhaling the coppery scents of spilt blood. Her eyes widened further in shock as she turned to the remaining Stark men standing uselessly by the doorway.
“Fetch the Maester now!”

Chapter End Notes

Quite the cliffhanger!

Thanks to all for the comments and kudos. If you're enjoying the story thus far, please do leave a comment. Each and every one helps me think about my writing and gives me that extra oomph to put pen to paper. Many thanks to the serial commenters for their feedback.

(An added note on the Unsullied:
The Unsullied are the finest soldiers in the world. They are trained to fight with spear, shortword, and shield. They are trained to fight in close grouped units (presumably in a phalanx). Their training and backstory is a historical mix of the Spartan hoplites of Classical Greece, the Sacred Band of Thebes, and the Mamluk soldiers of medieval Egypt with some janissary fun thrown in for good measure.

That said, there is are key and crucial differences between a good soldier and a good warrior. The Unsullied are the finest soldiers in the world. That doesn’t mean they’re a slam dunk in single combat. In this chapter, their basically ambushed 5 v. 2 in a hallway by people they assumed are friendlies.) Martin dedicates an entire Meereen sub-plot to the Unsullied getting ambushed...

That said, bonus points to whoever knows whom King Derwyn Durrandon is based on. On par with Attila the Hun’s drunken nose bleed for lamest deaths ever.

My pace of writing may slow as we approach the weekend. I've been assigned to a deal this weekend AND Stranger Things 2 is hitting Netflix soon. That said, the cool ideas keep flowing in. I've discarded a good number to the scrap heap because they don't fit with the story flow and outline, but I think there will be plenty of others that create some shock and enjoyment without people going "GRRM totally wouldn't do this."
Daenerys IV

Chapter Notes

Special thanks to KrimzonStriker and HornsOfAries for their comments. I think some people were concerned with inaccuracies/an unrealistic situation of having two Unsullied guards killed by five assassins. In my head and in my outline, I based this sequence on one of the Meereen sub-plots from the book and show, where the Sons of the Harpy meet with success launching nighttime ambushes against the queen's soldiers and supporters. At the end of the day, this is my interpretation of a rich fictional world. You might find yourself questioning my work when reading it. If you do, I encourage you to leave a comment. Criticisms help me think about the story. Now, I may challenge your thoughts and I hope you respond in kind, but I'll always appreciate it.

That said, I received some particularly helpful feedback on my writing structure and technique from one reader, most of it dealing with the lack of hinting at Arya's plans and the overuse of foreshadow in the lead up to the assassination attempt. Now I kind of realized this myself after a little while, but hearing from you all throws a flare on errors and poor practices. I've said it before and I'll say it again: I am a noob writer. A novice. This is my first story (save one smaller bit I did after Episode 6) and always looking to improve!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Daenerys opened her eyes. The rays of the morning sun were streaming through her chamber’s windows, casting their pale light upon the grey stone floors. She pushed herself up from the furs, feeling the chill morning air brush against her bare skin. She looked around. Someone had set a silver tray filled with rolls and other bits of food upon the table nearest the door. Dany could see the steam rising slowly off the small bowl in the tray’s center.

The rest of the room seemed to be in much the same state as she had left it the night before. Her fur cloak was draped over the chair that sat in front of the old mirror where Missandei often assisted her in the mornings. A fire was burning the in the hearth, casting its warm orange glow upon the pure white fur of the thick rug that occupied the center of the chamber floor.

Daenerys sighed softly and looked off to her right. Jon? Garbed in his typical attire of padded armor, her betrothed stood leaning against the stone wall closest the large windows. He wore a soft smile upon his face as he looked at her. He should be out with his men. How long have I slept? Perhaps he had returned sooner than expected or found some sign of the enemy.

She tried to say his name aloud, but the words caught in her throat. It did not matter. Words would come later. He was here now, with her. She saw that tender look in his eyes and smiled at him.

Jon seemed different this morning. She could not put a name to it, just as she had been unable to speak, but something was, well, wrong. The air around him shimmied like it had under the hot sun of the Red Waste, yet the air itself was cold. Jon had yet to speak a single word either. He was just looking at her.

She heard a knock at the door, heavy thuds against the thick wood. Missandei, she thought
instinctively. But no... the sound is all wrong. It echoed from all around her.

Suddenly the door burst open. Five men clad in black entered her chambers brandishing steel daggers and longswords. A bitter cold wind entered with them, extinguishing the fire in the hearth and the candles burning around the room. Dany instinctively clutched at the furs and drew them back against her chest. She tried to shout for help, but the cold air seemed to swallow her cries for help.

As the five men strode forward across the room, they changed. Their weapons grew longer and sharper. Steel turned to ice. Dany could see the fading morning light shining through the translucent blades. Five pairs of eyes burned blue as they stared at her. Their footfalls were silent as they fanned out in a crescent around her bed.

Jon charged forth to defend her. The one in the middle – the one she had seen before – regarded her love with a passive, unmoving gaze before he drew his long spear back and drove it through Jon’s heart. The weapon silently slid through her husband-to-be’s armor, passing through leather, muscle, and bone as it tore through his chest. The tip emerged from Jon’s back, dark red blood steaming on its edge.

Daenerys screamed.

The other four figures followed the first. One by one they drove their weapons into Jon’s gut. His body fell limply upon the side of her bed. Dany scrambled to his side, her hands slipping on the blood-slick leather armor as she struggled to pull him toward her. She cupped his face with her hands and watched as the light left his eyes.

A hand pulled her back with a vice-like grip. The figures were standing over her now, thin weapons raised menacingly. She raised her hands to shield herself and felt the first blade’s bite. Pain tore through her as all turned to black.

Dany opened her eyes, or at least tried to. The world around her was blacker than a moonless night; blacker than Drogon’s scales. She felt herself spinning as if she were atop her great dragon in flight. Voices whispered in the darkness, though she could not name their owners.

“She’s lucky you were here, my lady,” the first said. It seemed to come from all around her. “And you, Ser Jaime. The poison is easily cured, but I can only do so much for slashings and stab wounds. How is your arm, ser?”

“Well enough,” another voice joined the first, though Dany could barely make out the words. The two voices echoed off some unseen barriers and filled the void. Another wave of whispers came over her even as the first died.

“How is she?” someone asked. This one sounded familiar. Tyrion?

“Maester Wolkan examined her in some detail. The wound itself was but a shallow cut and the poison poorly prepared, or so he says.”

“And the assailants?”

“All slain, the rest of the southron men are chained in the cells below the keep....”

Darkness took her again. She drifted aimlessly through the void. Sometimes she heard other voices whisper and sometimes she heard nothing at all. Then, once again, she opened her eyes. Bright white light filled her vision. She blinked as she tried to clear her head.
Tyrion stood over her. Or, rather, beside her. He sat upon a low cushioned stool that had been moved to her bedside. Her wore a look she had never seen before, at least not directed at her. She heard him exhale slowly as if he was letting out a breath he had been holding for half the night. He pushed off the stool and moved to her side, placing one hand on her arm.

“How are you?” he asked. Fine, why are you here? She wanted to respond; but, even as she tried to think it a dull, thudding pain wracked her forehead. Dany let out a small groan as she realized where she was. My chambers? In the morning....

Memories flooded into her mind, mixing with the pain like blood poured into water. Last night... those men. She had tried to defend herself, had screamed for aid. One of the soldiers fought the other, and another man had been there defending her, no? And one had... her hand flew her chest. She felt fresh linens wrapped about her left breast, right above her heart.

“A slashing wound,” Tyrion explained, “though not deep enough to do lasting damage. They tried to poison you.”

“Jon?” she croaked out a question.

“Is still in the field,” Tyrion sighed softly as he gave her an understanding smile and squeeze on her forearm. “We received a raven from him not two days past. The morning after you were attacked. He rides for Winterfell as we speak.” Shock and relief overwhelmed her for a moment. Two days? I slept for two days?

“What... what happened?” She could recall flashes of the night: dark figures and shining steel blades.

“It would seem my dear sister is not content to let us battle the dead without some aid,” he said grimly. “The men she sent north to kill you disguised themselves as my family’s men. They joined with the others, simple soldiers looking to do the right thing.”

“And where are they?” she asked, recalling more of the attack.

“The would-be assassins? Dead by Jaime’s hand and Arya Stark’s...” he motioned behind him. Dany followed his gaze and saw the white fur rug had been stained a deep, faded shade of red. Blood, she knew the sight well enough by now. “The rest?” he continued, “chained and penned in the cells below the keep, awaiting judgement. Though I think it best to wait until the Lord of Winterfell returns to dispense the queen’s justice.” She nodded in agreement. “I've tripled your guard. Unsullied and Stark household men will patrol the halls, watch your windows, and stand sentry at your door,” he launched into an explanation of his plans. Normally she might protest. She was his queen after all. Yet at the moment she did not have the strength to argue with him.

Behind them, the door creaked open. Dany felt her pulse quicken in fear, only to feel the sensation subside as she saw Missandei entering with a tray of food and Maester Wolkan entering behind her, his great chain rattling as he walked. Tyrion ignored the newcomers as he continued to talk. “Of course, I’d prefer at least two men in the room with you while you sleep, but I don’t think our Lord of Winterfell would approve of such an arrangement. I’ve also asked the bastard boy, the smith, to help craft armor fit for a queen. He trained under Tobho Mott in the capital, same man who once crafted my armor. You might consider wearing it in battle.”

“Battle?” Are they almost here?

A shadow passed over Tyrion’s face as he caught himself in his own words. He wrung his hands awkwardly as he looked at her with sympathetic eyes. “There was a raven from Jorah. Your Grace,
He stopped talking as Missandei put a hand on his shoulder. Their eyes met and her handmaid slowly shook her head. Tyrion nodded in acceptance as some message silently passed between them. “Matters of warfare and state can wait, Your Grace. We need you to recover your strength.” With that he stepped back and let Missandei place the tray at her bedside. Wolkan approached as well.

“How are you feeling, Your Grace?” the older man asked. His face was red and windburnt but his eyes shone with care. He produced a small satchel from his robes along with a mortar and pestle. Carefully picking at some dried leaves, he placed a variety of herbs into the stone bowl and began to grind them up.

Daenerys considered her own body for a moment. Stiff would have been her first choice, though that was likely to be the result of two bedridden days. Her head still pounded dully. “Odd,” she decided on an answer.

Wolkan huffed out a chuckle. “I thought that might be the case. The wound above your breast is shallow enough, though it will need fresh bandages every day and there will be some scarring, I fear.” His tone grew softer as he continued. “Greycap is a weak poison, but not without its peculiar properties. Troubled dreams, I expect?” Visions flooded her mind. The walkers storming into the room and slaying her and Jon. She could not rightly tell between memory and dream. How does he know?

“Only a poison of the mind, of course,” he said while twisting his wrist and grinding some dried leaves with a small stone pestle. The man let out small puffs of effort as he labored. “It has no effect on the flesh, the heart, or the womb.” He delivered the assurance with an odd, fatherly tone. “The child will be just fine.

“Child?” she inquired. What is he talking about? Was there a child with me when I was attacked?

“Child, Your Grace,” he placed a hand upon the bed as if to reassure her the words she had just heard. “Of course, you’ll recall that you asked me for a brew but a few mornings past. A simple cure for the unpleasantness that can accompany the first few weeks of a pregnancy” he gave her a shrug and a smile. “It is good to have some fresh hope in these troubled times.”

Pregnancy? Her eyes widened in confusion, first meeting Missandei’s then Tyrion’s. Her shock was reflected on their faces. No. I can’t have children. The man was mistaken. She had been ill, that was all. And now there was some after effect from the attack. “That’s impossible. I cannot have children,” she whispered.

A flush crept up the man’s neck as he forced a hacking cough from his throat. He looked from Tyrion to Daenerys and back again. “Ah,” he said lamely, “I had thought that- well you had come asking for the brew and- I trusted you already knew…”

“I fear Her Grace cannot bear children, Maester,” Missandei tried to explain. Wolkan shook his head back and forth, his chain rattling again as he moved.

“This link…” the old man raised one hand and pulled at one of the metal bands. Dany could see the fine silver ring inlaid with pearl standing out among the various bits of bronze, iron, and gold, “is awarded to those maesters who study – in some detail mind you – the matters of fertility and childrearing. And of course, I have years of more practical experience in the matter.” He looked at her with a curious, almost amused, look upon his face. “I examined Your Grace in some detail whilst tending to your wounds. I am quite certain you are with child. A healthy young prince of
princess, at this stage. I shall oversee your care myself, unless you would prefer someone else.”

“Prince or princess…” Dany heard herself whisper the words. *This…. This should not be possible. I cannot have children.* Yet even as she repeated that curse in her mind, another word entered her thoughts: *Jon.* Her lover and her betrothed. Her family. *The blood of the Dragon. Might some magic have broken the witch’s curse?*

Wolkan finished his grinding and reached for a steaming cup that sat upon the tray Missandei had carried in. He dropped in the crushed herbs and mixed the cup for a moment before offering it to Dany. “A simple remedy for the poison’s lingering unpleasantries,” he explained. Dany sipped from the cup as he spoke. “I fear I must go now and attend to the burn wounds the men in the camps have suffered.”

“Burn wounds?” she asked. *What else has happened in my absence?*

Tyrion stepped forward to answer as Wolkan left the room. “Your dragons have proven to be, well, rather unruly since their mother was attacked. Rhaegal spits fire any man who draws too near and Drogon burned one of the makeshift stables the remaining knights of the Vale were making use of,” her Hand shrugged. “No one has died, thank the gods, but there are sure to be more burn wounds to come…”

“I will see them both calmed,” she assured him as she tried to rise from beneath the furs. Pain shot through her left side as she moved and her head began to pound again.

“Please, Your Grace,” Missandei pleaded, “there will be time for that later. You must rest.”

“You will need your strength for the coming days,” Tyrion agreed. The man turned to regard Missandei with an expectant gaze. “Might I have a moment alone with our queen?” The Naathi girl smiled warmly and nodded, though concern still shone in her eyes. Tyrion let out another bated breath as the door closed at the other end of the room, leaving the two together.

“What is it?” she asked him.

“You told me you could not have children.” He sounded almost amused.

“I can’t. I couldn’t…” her hand dropped to her womb. She might have remembered the signs from when she carried Rhaego in her womb. Dany tried to feel for a kick or a heartbeat. *Still far too early for that,* she knew. *But is it true?*

“Well it appears Jon Snow can,” he retorted. *He finds this funny.* Tyrion had always danced to close to the edge when it came to certain conversations. She had always beaten him back. This was their little game. Now, with her bedridden and weak, he pressed his advantage. She would have to sit and listen to him talk whether he liked it or not. “He won’t like the idea of fathering a child out of wedlock, even a royal one. If I might make a suggestion…” He let the words trail off.

Daenerys knew what he was about to say. She thought back to her own midnight proposal to Jon. “He has already agreed,” she said simply.

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“To marriage?” her response had caught him off guard. Now it was her turn to look smug and amused.

“I asked him during the storm, before he left,” she explained.

“I see…” Tyrion’s fingers stroked his beard in a ponderous gesture. “You might consider a wedding sooner rather than later. Better to see the child legitimized before anyone can see the
child.” She nodded in agreement and took another sip of the bitter drink. The hot brew had begun to succeed in burning away the fog that clouded her mind.

She saw a grin spread across his face and a mischievous light in his eyes. “What is it?” she asked.

“What have we now, three Targaryens?” his voice was rich with mirth as he mimed counting the fingers on his hand. Daenerys considered his question for a moment. Twins? Even if Wolkan is right, it is far too early to tell... Her eyes widened as she took his meaning.

“He told you?”

“Someone did,” he responded cryptically. “Only a few in this keep know the circumstances of your betrothed’s birth. I would see it remain that way. Best not trouble the petty lords with matters of birthrights when death marches southward.”

His words temporarily sucked the warmth from the room as they were both reminded of what had brought them northward. Dany could still partly recall her dream. She looked at him then, but he avoided her gaze, opting to gaze into the fire burning in the hearth. There is something he knows. Something he is not telling me.

Tyrion turned back after a silent and somber moment. Placing a hand on her forearm again, he offered a few kind words. “I’m happy for you,” he said. His smile was genuine and true this time. She smiled back. “Best get some rest,” he gave her an uncharacteristic pat as he turned and waddled toward the door.

Dany placed the empty cup on the tray beside her and sank back into the furs and pillow. Her hand found its way to her womb once more. Is it true? Has his seed quickened inside me? She was not one to doubt a learned man’s expertise, but doubt clung to her still. She had banished all thoughts of children from her mind years before. Even with Jon, she had tempered her fantasies of family with the witch’s words.

Yet now? I might have a little girl, she thought, hope swelling in her injured breast. I might bear Jon sons. My family lives. She sat back and closed her eyes, basking the warmth of the fire that just now seemed to burn all the brighter.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly, this is an important scene but it’s not my favorite chapter. I’m not sure if I am suffering from disinterest or writer’s block, but I am going to step back from this story for a couple days and see if some fresh energy comes my way. Still plenty to write, and I’d like to do it with genuine drive to do my best. On the flip side, I wrote the final chapter of this story over the weekend and it’s probably one of the better things I have written, so there’s that.
Jon sat upon a squat, grey garron at the head of a short column. He wore his padded leather armor wrapped in a thick fur cloak. A frost covered hood drawn over his head kept the cold wind at bay. Ghost, his great white direwolf, strode beside him silently; his red eyes the only hint of color in an otherwise dull and dreary scene. Two score other figures followed him at a distance across the low, white hills of the North. He could hear them talking as they rode by.

“Good lot this did us,” one man complained, his eyes were hidden underneath an ill-fitting cloak, but his thin, fuzzy cheeks stood out as much as his boyish voice. “We rode a hundred miles or more to follow some footprints in the snow.”

“Might as well have followed our own tracks,” quipped another younger lad clad in fine grey and black furs that concealed armor of boiled leather and mail. The fine make of his garb marked him as highborn. He wore no hood upon his head, opting instead to let the icy wind rush through his straw-colored hair. The two northmen went on complaining about the ranging as they continued downward along an icy path into a low valley.

“How long you think it’ll take until we’re back in Winterfell?” the common man asked. “Five days?”

“Judging by our pace, I’d guess four,” the highborn lad responded, a grin forming on his face. “Seems Lord Snow is eager to return to his queen.”

“Don’t blame him,” the first rider spoke again, “there’s worse things in life than having a beautiful woman to warm your bed. You see her? One look is all it takes. I’d sell me own mother across the sea to slide into that for a night, never mind giving up a crown.” Both men chuckled, their laughs forming puffs of white fog in the frigid air. “How you think a bastard like him gets a Targaryen queen to come up to this shit?” he raised a gloved hand and gestured at the endless expanse of white hills and grey clouds.

“Come to help the North, they say,” the second rider shrugged, “might be we’ll be praising her before this is all said and done. Those dragons will kill all these dead men like as not.”

“Dead men,” the hooded man scoffed, “footprints in the snow is all I saw.”

A third rider awkwardly shifted in his saddle and carefully spurred his own mount forward a few paces to join the other two. He wore a collection of furs stitched together like grey motley. Upon his back he carried an unstrung bow carved of some animal’s horn. As he pulled even with the younger riders, he drew back his own ragged fur hood to reveal a shock of red hair and a weathered face. “Aye, footprints in the snow,” he agreed with his new traveling companions.

“Got something to say, wildling?” the first man drew back his own hood to glare at the older scout.
“You southern boys,” the wilding began, “so busy complaining about the cold and snows you
don’t even see.”

“See what?” the second lad’s tone was colder than the air. “We rode ten days out to see some elk
herd’s footprints.”

“Are you blind, boy?” the wilding rider spat, “that was no elk herd we tracked for two days.
Thousands of prints in the snow from men and a dozen different beasts? The dead are already
passed us, marching somewhere south or west.”

“Then we’ll meet them in the field, somewhere south or west,” the highborn lad said confidently,
sitting up in his saddle and grasping at the hilt of his sword.

The wilding shook his head, locks of tangled red hair flying side to side as he expressed his
frustration. “Your southern knights already fought them up near the old Umber lands. I haven’t
seen those eagle knights in a month, hmm?”

“Careful now, savage,” the highborn lad spoke in a low, threatening tone, “we don’t want to add
another wildling to this army of the dead.”

“Bran,” the wilding responded. No, that’s not right.

“Bran,” he said again, the word echoing in the
hills around him. The two riders continued to spit insults at the third, but the words faded away.

“Bran.”

The world flashed white for a moment as Bran felt himself drawn away from his cousin’s distant
patrol, across the frozen wilds of the North and back to Winterfell’s godswood. He opened his two
blue eyes and beheld the great weirwood tree in front of him. A single red leaf was falling slowly
toward his rolling chair, swaying side to side like a ship in a storm. He kept his eyes on it even as a
voice whispered behind him.

“Is he awake?” Sansa asked cautiously.

“Did you see him?” Arya put a hand on his shoulder and shook him a bit as she demanded and
answer. “Did you see Jon?”

“Yes,” the Three-Eyed Raven responded. Bran’s sisters – his sister’s – had come seeking him in
the godswood a moment before. Sansa and Arya often spent time with him, either in his chambers
or here in the wood. Those were simple, subdued conversations though. This was different.

“How far is he? Is he safe?” Sansa demanded.

“Yes. Four days, I think,” he answered simply. He had seen Jon riding across the low hills that
made up the border between the Bolton and Hornwood lands. It had proven difficult enough to find
him, like fumbling in the dark for some misplaced keepsake; but they had demanded he find the
Lord of Winterfell. He had drawn upon his memories of Jon in order to seen. The Three-Eyed
Raven could see much of the North. Everything west of the White Knife was open to him. Yet to
the east, the dead roamed the North. He was out there. They all were.

“Can you get a message to him? A raven?” snow crunched underfoot as Arya circled around to
look him in the eye. She looks worried, he thought. And she should be, another voice whispered.

“It doesn’t work like that,” he sighed. Now she looked disappointed. Sansa swept in from the other
side to stand in front of him.
“What’s the point then?” Her blue eyes shone with a cold anger as she spoke. “You can’t see what we need you to see, or else you refuse to do it. Arya told me you would not help her. If you can’t see our enemies outside the walls or inside them, what are you doing out here?”

Arya looked between her sister and brother, hesitant to intervene. “You’re angry,” he said plainly. The utter lack of emotion in his response had highlighted the anger in hers. Judging by the softening of her stern visage, she realized that too. Sansa stepped forward and placed a gloved hand on his own.

“I’m scared,” she admitted, “we all are. Those men tried to kill Daenerys. Jon is off in the wilds with one hundred men. And… the raven from Ser Jorah Mormont…the dragon,” she finished in a whisper.

He had heard the news of the Night King’s dragon when Jorah’s raven had arrived from the Wolfswood. They had gathered a small group in the solar to discuss the news even as Daenerys recovered from the attempt on her life. The knight’s scouting party had not seen the beast itself, but they had come across the remaining brothers of the Night’s Watch who had manned the Wall when it was attacked. It made sense, even though he could not see himself. The bitter cold that pressed against his mind had slowed his thoughts and visions. His foe was trying to hide something from him. It must be the dragon.

“I’m sorry,” he tried to force some feeling into the apology.

“Doesn’t matter now,” Arya broke her silence. “Those Lannister men are dead and the rest in chains, just need Jon back to sort them out. We have nothing to fear from inside the walls.”

“Maybe you don’t,” Sansa scoffed, “but you should see the way people look at you.” Arya smiled at that. He smiled to, or tried to at least. He had heard about Arya’s deception and her saving the queen. He regretted not aiding her when she had asked, or at least he thought he did.

Then again, he had dreamt of this, had he not? Five arrows piercing a lion’s bleeding hide whilst it lay dying in the snow… Perhaps that is what Daenerys saw? The queen had come inquiring about visions of the future. Only she had seemed saddened, not fearful. He shook his head ever so slightly, dismissing the thought from his mind. He could interpret those greendreams a thousand ways. Wasting time on them would not do him any good now.

“I did what I thought was right,” Arya shrugged “Bran couldn’t help me, so I did it myself.”

“You killed a man and wore his face,” Sansa whispered, her tone somewhere between awe and accusation. “You don’t feel, well, odd about that? You aren’t upset?”

“I killed one of our enemies in order to spy on the rest,” she responded. “Bran spies on people too, only with birds and trees and whatnot. I had to know, so I did what I had to do.” Sansa looked away, shaking her head. The three surviving children of Eddard Stark had each suffered in their own way. In their suffering, each had found a way to grow stronger. Those newfound strengths often clashed with each other. Even so, they accepted each other as they were.

Sansa let out an exasperated sigh as she shook her head. She turned to Bran again. “So four days, you think?” He nodded. “Very well, four days then,” she said as she adjusted her thick fur cloak about her shoulders. “Is there anything we can do for you? Anything we can have sent here?” She sounded almost motherly as she asked.

The Three-Eyed Raven considered her words. What did he need? To see… the voice whispered. To learn. He closed his eyes for a moment, listening to the wind rustle the leaves of the heart tree,
feeling the cold air upon his face and the warmth from the ground beneath his chair. Ah, of course.

“Find Samwell, if you would,” he gave his answer. Sansa and Arya might be his family, but Samwell Tarly seemed to be the only one who understood what he was now. The larger man had spent many an evening pouring over faded scrolls and dusty tomes stolen from the Citadel or else borrowed from the Stark’s library.

Together, the odd pair had been searching for clues. Sam across the faded pages of a hundred histories and the boy who had been Bran across history itself. Neither had met with much success. That was not Sam’s fault, though. His books would not reveal the truth. Only the visions could do that.

“I will find him,” Sansa replied, nodding at Arya and motioning back toward the keep. “Tell me more about these faces, then,” he heard the Lady of Winterfell whisper as they two women walked away.

He watched the gentle wind push ripples across the surface of the black pools while he waited for Sam. Tiny waves rolled toward and crashed upon frozen shores without a sound. A raven quarked in the tree above him. He considered slipping into its skin. It would be easy enough and he quite liked the feeling of flying high above the lands of the North.

“Yes, why not? Let me escape this chair for a moment.” A boyish voice urged him on. He missed his old direwolf and the freedom that came with slipping into Summer’s mind. Warging into a raven was easy. The simpler the creature, the easier it was to control; so long as it had a mind to speak of.

The world flashed white, then blue, then he was drawn out of his broken body and into the large black bird’s. Fear froze his muscles for a moment. Calm, it’s just me. The bird relaxed. He flapped his wings, testing them for flight. He let out a call to the others, a victorious shout that echoed around the grove. Others joined in.

He sensed them even as he heard them. Each beast was connected by, well, something. That urge that caused a herd or flock to flee as one. That slumbering power that bound the trees together in a forest. There was not a name for it, so far as he knew; but he knew how it felt. Better yet, he knew how to use it.

The Raven extended himself along those connections and found the others. Two score more ravens quarked in unison as their eyes flashed white. Then, as one, they flew. In the same instant, he was in all of them and none. Each bird controlled its own wings, but he directed their flight. The icy wind flowed under their wings and lifted them higher.

Winterfell seemed so much smaller from up here. The keep and castle were tiny compared to the vast army camps outside the walls. Those camps were in turn dwarfed by the Wolveswood that loomed some leagues distant. Even from here, he could sense others in the forest. The ravens, the beasts of the wood, even the larger black dragon hunting for prey. He would not join them today.

As one, he circled the tallest towers of the castle, all his eyes peering through the opaque and icy windows into the darkened rooms beyond. Then lower again on a down draft, he swept across the open space above the largest yard outside the godswood.

He toward a column of thick black smoke rising upwards from the blacksmith’s shop. Half a dozen ravens circled the plume, lower and lower until they perched upon the side of an unused cart. The smithy was alive with activity. Hammers rung and steel clattered below. He could hear the hiss of hot steel dipped into water. A muscled young man with short black hair was hard at work on a breastplate far too small for any man-at-arms to wear.
A dozen eyes looked off to the left. A black-clad figure shuffled across the frozen mud toward the archway. Ah. As one, he left the birds and returned to his own body. The Raven felt a flash of fear from them as he ceded their minds to their original inhabitants. The world flashed white again and he opened his eyes to find Samwell Tarly trudging across the softer godswood ground.

“Hello,” Sam called out. His intonation added an extra syllable to the greeting. “Your sisters said you had asked for me?”

“Samwell,” he looked at the man and forced some warmth into his voice, “thank you for coming.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Truly,” his voice quivered. “Now, I know you had asked me to look into records of what we have of the Children of the Forest a bit further…” his voice trailed off as he fumbled for something in some hidden cloak pocket. Sam produced a bit of parchment from a concealed pocket. He squinted his eyes to read his own handwriting. “I did find quite a bit! Maester Lollard wrote that the Children and the First Men fought for thousands of years. The First Men came from Essos across the Arm of Dorne, you see, and began to clear forests away for farm land…”

He knew all this already. He did not have to cast himself into the past to remember the tales Old Nan used to tell Bran about the wars between the Children and the First Men. Obsidian and bone had clashed with stone and bronze for hundreds of years. When their numbers proved too few to stem the tide of men crossing the Narrow Sea, the greenseers twice summoned the waters of the sea to drown the Arm of Dorne and the Neck. Neither attempt had worked. Indeed, nothing they had tried had worked. Save on final, desperate attempt.

The Three-Eyed Raven could still recall that vision; could still see the man bound to the tree as clearly as he could see Sam standing before him now. They had tied him to a great weirwood and driven a shard of dragonglass into his chest. It had not killed him, only changed him. His brown eyes had burned an otherworldly blue…

He knew who he was – what he was – now. Like most revelations, it had come to him in that space between consciousness and sleep. Even so, he feared to reach back again; feared he might draw the Night King down upon them like he had in that cave. They had not been ready then. They were not ready now.

“I know,” he responded, silencing Sam’s ongoing but unheeded lecture on the history of Westeros. “Did you find anything else? About dragonglass? About their magic?”

“Oh, well,” Sam’s enthusiasm died as he considered the question. They had discussed some of his visions: the ambush in the forest, the creation of the Night King. There is more, there must be. “Nothing about what we talked about. Perhaps,” he let the word hang in the air, “well, have you tried to see anything else? The maesters don’t really write about how the White Walkers were defeated last time in any great detail. It’s only legends and myths, but if you could see that…”

He shook his head. That was the obvious solution, of course; but it was hard enough for him to see that now. Perhaps the man who had been the Three-Eyed Raven before him could use his sight with precision; but he could not. Sometimes the visions came at random. Most of the time, he needed a connection: something that drew him to a person or their past. Visions of his family were easy. Something as simple as a memory might serve to guide his mind through time.

Visions of the past were harder. His mentor had helped him see the Children, the Winterfell of his father’s youth, and other scenes of times long gone. Even with the faded blue mark upon his arm, visions of him were harder still. It was a web of sorts; a maze. He could see the walls connecting at each corner but was still forced to wander among them.
“Oh…” Sam looked crestfallen. This was not the first time. Sam’s hopes had often clashed against his own abilities. Perhaps I am the key to defeating the White Walkers, but I cannot see it. “Have you tried to see the dead again? Perhaps using the ravens?” he stuck his neck forward and offered a half-smile that pushed his fleshy cheeks to the edge of his face.

“I saw Jon,” he offered a simple response. His cousin was a day or two from the White Knife, thence another day or two to Winterfell itself. It had taken a firm determination to find him, even with his hand upon the weirwood’s white bark. Anything beyond Jon’s position would prove more difficult still. He could sooner walk across the godswood than see across the North.

Sam’s expression lightened at the mention of his friend. “Jon! Oh, well is he alright? He did find anything?” He shook his head again, recalling the words of the men in Jon’s party. “Maybe you just need to focus a bit?” he suggested. He grasped the handles on the back of the rolling chair and pushed it within arm’s reach of the heart tree.

The Three-Eyed Raven closed his eyes and reached out, placing his pale withered hand upon the bark even as he reached out with his mind. Dead men. See the dead. The Walkers. The Night King. He repeated the thoughts over and over again to no avail. Even as he tried to throw himself forward, he saw nothing. He let out a frustrated breath and renewed his efforts.

A childish yell echoed from the stone arch that led to the godswood, shattering his concentration. He opened his eyes and turned to see Gilly walking into the dappled light of the grove, leaning to her right side as she guided young Sam. The boy could walk a few paces on his own, but still needed his mother’s guidance for longer journeys.

Sam laughed softly as the pair wound their way toward the heart tree. The Three-Eyed Raven smiled as he watched the boy navigate the thin layers of snow that covered the ground of the godswood. His small legs shuffled rapidly as his attentions flew to and froth like ravens flitting between the heart tree’s branches. One moment he was examining a fallen leaf and the next he was staring in wonder at the red canopy above him as the ravens quarked their welcome.

Young Samwell’s interests were peculiar and yet altogether familiar. He recognized them. So did Bran. Samwell’s spirit was the same one might find in every child: that boundless energy and optimism. It gave him hope. Yet he saw something else in those bright blue eyes too; something cold and eerily familiar. It sapped the joy from the scene. What is it? He wondered as he considered the child before him. This was the first time he had felt it.

Young Sam moved closer, his eyes fixed on the red canopy of leaves far beyond his reach. His small foot caught on a gnarled white root as he shuffled forward. He fell forward and landed upon the crippled boy’s useless legs. Gilly let out a small gasp. The Three-Eyed Raven lunged forth to break the child’s fall, grabbing at the boy with one hand.

It all happened at once. His own bare skin brushed against the child’s pink cheek. The world exploded in a brilliant flash of white light. It was almost too bright; like stepping from a dim hall out into a sunny, snow filled morning. He kept still and silent for a moment as he collected his thoughts. Touching the boy must have triggered some vision, he knew. It was sometimes the same with weirwoods. It just made it so much easier. Yet the vision itself still remained a mystery. The white light slowly faded away. Where am I?

He tried to blink but found that he had no eyelids to use. His muscles felt cold and stiff, yet stronger somehow. He felt two powerful legs underneath him once again. The world shone in cool colors of deep blue and grey. Figures shuffled in a loose formation in front of him. The dead, he realized as he watched the grim procession of frost-covered corpses shamble away into the distance.
Where? When? He wondered. What am I seeing? He looked around him. A storm raged; an otherworldly blizzard that should have sapped the warmth from his very blood. Yet he felt no chill. Indeed, the storm seemed to give him strength. That's odd. A cold, blue fire glowed in the distance. Some small holdfast was burning. He stared at it for a moment. Where there should have been an eagerness for warmth he felt only reluctance; almost a fear of the fire. Even in this ethereal form, he felt different. Something was wrong.

He raised one hand an almost gave a shout. Long, pale fingers made of cold blue ice extended from his hand. Veins rose from the hard, jagged flesh like strips of grey iron amidst stone. In his other hand he held a long, pointed spear of translucent ice filed to a razor’s edge at its tip. The weapon felt strange in his hand, both balanced and weightless; a part of his arm yet utterly foreign.

He felt them now, too. Some were close at hand; others far afield. The connections were strong, like the ravens in the heart tree. He could feel hundreds of minds brushing against his. Most were no more complex than the birds. He could sense faint urges and instincts, shadows of memory, and the cold. Always the cold.

There were others now; others like him. With a bit of effort, he reached out to them. It was easier than before. He knew these ones. The connection was almost as strong as the one he had used to find Jon some moments before. Beyond them, he felt more memories and more shadows. He wanted to see further. Something drew him back even as he reached out. The one whose mind I have taken, he knew. It was weaker than he, but it called out to the others.

A blinding pain shot through him. He was close. The Three-Eyed Raven jostled with the other consciousness, grasping to find purchase in the stranger’s mind. Dozens of others pressed against him. No, he began to panic, searching for an escape. His cold, blue eyes met another pair and he cast himself forward into the corpse shambling past him.

It was emptier in here. The wight’s mind was a faded thing with no voice of its own. He could hide here, but only for a moment. He could still feel the others pressing forward, searching for their enemy. He leapt again, finding it easier to move this time. Like flying between the ravens, he thought. He found another corpse after the first, then a massive snow bear, then a large raven missing half its beak. Each new host gave him only a moments respite.

Another stab of pain rent his mind. I need to see. Now. He looked up with half a head and saw the blue flames burning in the distance. Closer. He gathered him strength and threw himself forward. Blue eyes flashed white as the Three-Eyed Raven cast himself in another wight. The tower was closer now, much closer. He could feel the heat from the fire; could see the ruined roof and melting stone.

A shadow passed over his face. A terrible screeched echoed across the frozen hills. He averted his gaze as the dragon swept overhead. Time to go, he thought. Only one last glimpse. He dared to look up again and spotted a banner hanging by a single thin rope from the holdfast’s wall. Black with a white sunburst. He knew that sigil…

The Three-Eyed Raven screamed in agony as he felt himself torn from the body’s mind and cast into the cold void. The pain was unbearable. He chanced on final look. The burning holdfast, the legions of dead men, the dragon disappeared like wisps of morning mist. Away! Now! He withdrew across the icy fields and hills, back to Winterfell and the heart tree. The landscape receded before him.

He felt a meaty hand on his shoulder. The Three-Eyed Raven opened his eyes. “Bran?” Sam was shaking him. The larger man stood before him wearing a concerned look. Gilly held the boy against her breast as he wept. “Bran what happened? Your eyes turned white all the sudden and you
“Gave a shout. What did you see?”

His breathing was heavy and uneven, he realized. He collected his thoughts and looked at Sam. His mind still throbbed with the vision’s pain. “I saw them,” he answered, realizing he was panting with exertion. “I saw them all.”

Sam swallowed heavily and looked over to Gilly. “Would you give us a moment?” he asked softly, fear ringing clear in his voice. She nodded and paced across the grove, thin ice cracking as she walked away. “You saw the dead? The Night King? The dragon? Where are they? Close?” the questions poured forth from Sam’s mouth in a harsh, low whisper.

The Three-Eyed Raven gave a heavy shrug. “Karstark lands, I think.” The banner upon the holdfast’s wall. Yes. That’s where they are. “I thought you said you couldn’t see?”

“Little Sam,” Bran inclined his head to where Gilly had retreated to the other side of the godswood. “I touched him and…” He was not sure what had happened. It had been a vision of the present, or very nearly so. Yet he had not been as Bran once was. He had been within one of the White Walkers and then within the wights. Almost as if I had warged into them.

“Oh,” Sam looked at the boy too. He knows something. He could see it in the larger man’s eyes. “How… odd…” was all he offered as an explanation. “Does this mean you can see them now? Can you try again?”

He shook his head. “Not now. He saw me. He knows. If I try again…” Stay to long where you don’t belong. He remembered the old Raven’s words even as he felt the dull throbbing pain in his head and on his arm.

Sam let out a pent-up breath that misted in the cold air. They stood in silence for a moment. Each man collected his thoughts and mastered his fears. “We can try again on the morrow,” he sighed, “I need to rest.”

With that, Sam grasped the handles on the back of the rolling chair and leaned his considerable weight against it. With a low groan, the wheels began to turn slowly. He could hear the man huff with exertion as he pushed the broken boy across the Stark’s sacred grove. When they had passed through the archway, two guardsmen hurried across the yard to take over Samwell’s duties.

With the soldiers’ aid, they maneuvered up the low stairs into the great hall. Two dozen pairs of eyes turned to regard him with a curious courtesy as he passed to the high table with the wheels of his chair clacking loudly over every uneven stone. The hall’s hushed conversations slowly resumed as he took his spot at the lord’s table. Sam drew up a chair beside him as a serving girl brought them both bowls of some thick stew along with hard brown bread.

The Three-Eyed Raven ignored the food as he looked over the people eating their meals at the lower tables. Wilding women and Cerwyn men and proud Vale knights all sat together, talking softly as steam rose off half a hundred bowls and plates. For their sake, I must see.

Behind him, a fire roared in the hall’s massive hearth. He could feel its heat warm the back of his head. His mind still throbbed with a dull pain. Without thinking, he drew back the woolen sleeve of his doublet to reveal the faded blue mark upon his pale skin. It had burned with the same intensity as the fire behind him. Perhaps pain is the price I must pay.

If it was, then it was a small price to pay. Many of the soldiers sitting before him would suffer far
worse in the wars to come. He would do his duty. He would play his part. On the morrow, he would try again.

Chapter End Notes

Obviously, people want to see Jon's reaction. So do I! That's why I'm working on it right now. There is quite a bit in the coming chapter. It will probably end up being the longest thus far. That said, there is some important stuff in here and this is what the outline demanded.

Thank you to everyone for the comments and kudos. I really enjoy talking with people in the comments and seeing what you all are enjoying in the updates.
Jon returns from his ranging.

Chapter Notes

This one is long. See what ya think!

“How could you let this happen?” he demanded to no one in particular as he strode across the yard. His heart was pounding in his chest as he pushed his legs as far as they could go, willing himself to walk faster. I should be running. He wanted to; but that would not befit the Lord of Winterfell.

Tyrion and Davos strode behind him, the former huffing with exertion as he struggled to keep pace. They had accosted him as soon as he had dismounted. By their ramblings, Jon had guessed the problems had only multiplied in his absence. He needed to know where the other ranging parties were and what they had found. He needed to discuss his own findings as well. Most of all, he needed to see her.

“She’s quite fine,” the Hand of the Queen assured him, “only a light wound and the poison was ineffective.” What?

“Poison?!” Jon wheeled on the dwarf. No one had told him about that. The outriders who had met his party at the ice choked western shores of the White Knife had informed him of the attack. The Lannister men whom his advisors had told him to trust had tried to kill Daenerys with steel whilst the castle slept. Yet he had heard nothing of poison. “She was poisoned?!”

Tyrion stood firm as Jon loomed over him. By the look in his mismatched eyes, he realized Jon had not been told all the details. He cracked his lips to speak, but was interrupted. “She was,” Davos placed his fingerless hand on the edge of Jon’s fur cloak as if to steady them both, “and she’s just fine.” His tone was calm and assuring. The obvious had gone unsaid, of course. He was angry with his advisors and with the guards. Angry that the men whom he had chosen to trust had betrayed it. Angry that they had gone after her. Angry with himself for leaving.

“I tripled her guard,” Tyrion responded, “and we’re having proper armor made.” Tyrion listed the items and actions taken as if describing the contents of the main keep’s larder. “The men responsible are all dead. My brother and your younger sister saw to that. The others are in chains.” Younger… He means Arya? He knew she had spent time across the sea and had seen her training in the yard or with Lady Brienne. Fighting a group of serving girls is one matter. He was not sure how she had managed half a dozen armed and trained cutthroats. I must speak with her. I need answers.

Tyrion offered none of those just now. Why would Cersei send assassins north now? Or were these just men hoping to claim the rewards she offered? And what of Bran? Has he seen what I failed to
find? What of Clegane and Jorah and their men? He had left Winterfell to find answers in the
wilds of the North. It seemed that, in his luck, he found nothing while the questions within his own
halls multiplied tenfold.

“And Sansa? Bran?” he inquired.

“The rest of your family is alive and well,” Tyrion finished with an odd glint in his eye.

“Aye, we’ll see,” Jon nodded and turned on his heel, his black cloak billow behind him as he
resumed his strides to the keep. He would deal with the rest of his responsibilities in a moment.
“Ghost!” he called out across the yard as he moved, “to me!” The great white wolf cut across the
yard and was at his side in a few swift movements.

Daenerys was healing in her chambers, he had been told. The other questions would have to wait.
Everything would have to wait. He made for the smaller entrance at side of the keep. The Stark
guardsman opened the tower door, but not quickly enough. Jon extended an arm and shoved the
thick oak aside. The entryway rang with a great thud as the door collided with the stone wall.

He ignored it, making for the stairs and taking them two at a time; his legs complaining under the
strain. Anger and concern drove him in equal measure. Those men had lied. They had betrayed his
trust and his hospitality. They had gone after Daenerys when he had not been here to protect her.

This is partly my fault. That his queen needed protection had never occurred to him before. He had
allowed those men to stay. He had endangered them all. Jorah commanded her incomplete
queensguard, but he had ridden off at Jon’s own insistence. Her Unsullied sentries, ever clad in
black leather armor, were like their queen’s second shadow. Yet the two soldiers guarding her door
that night had been cut down in ambush. And dragons are no use against hired blades.

The thought of who had hired them almost brought his blood to boil. I’ve been so focused on the
enemy to the north I’ve forgotten the one to the south. He had secured the Neck and White Harbor
against attack, but should they triumph against the dead there would be another war to fight. The
last time Varys had delivered his reports, the Lannister woman had been mustering her forces in the
capital and cementing her rule in the Crownlands. She’ll hear of this. She’ll try something else.

He was on their landing a moment later. Torches lit the hallway, dancing in the disturbed air as he
strode by. He passed Jaime Lannister’s room; its door closed to dissuade visitors from calling. “My
brother”, Tyrion just said. I must speak with him, too. There would be time for that later.

Spears greeted his face as he turned the corner. Four Unsullied sentries stood guard at either end of
the hall with two more in front of the door. Ghost growled menacingly, showing his massive
yellow fangs. He sat back on his haunches at the sight of two Stark men, armored in padded leather
and armed with crossbows, standing across the hall from the doorway. They nodded their heads in
recognition as he swept by them, wolf at his heels, and made for the doorway. He paused outside.
The guard on the door’s right gave the wood a quick rap and heartbeat later it opened.

His breath caught in his throat. Daenerys was sitting up in bed. She wore one of the thinner dresses
she favored during their evenings alone. Bed furs covered her lower half. In her hands she held a
horn of some steaming liquid. A hot rage filled him as he noticed the white linen bandages
wrapped around her left shoulder.

Missandei sat at her bedside. The pair’s happy chatter slowly faded away as Daenerys looked up to
see him standing in the doorway. Only his wolf’s heavy panting and the crackling fire made any
noise. Her faced kept its smile and her eyes lit up as she saw him enter, pacing to her bedside as
Ghost entered after him.
“My lord,” Missandei rose and greeted him a curt yet courteous nod. He returned the gesture, but had eyes only for his queen.

“Daenerys...” he began, his voice thick with concern. She’s alright. He had been told as much already, but some creeping feeling of dread had convinced him he might find her weakened and close to death.

“Jon,” she said softly. She continued to smile at him and placed her hand upon a bare spot on the furs, inviting him to sit. As he sat, Missandei stepped back, muttering about some errand that needed attending. She slowly backed away and exited the chambers, instructing the guards to close the door behind him in some foreign tongue. The pair waited with bated breath until they heard the metallic click of the latch.

“Are you well?” he asked. Without asking, he reached forward to touch the bandages wrapped around her side. The white cloth felt fresh and clean. They’ve changed this multiple times, he knew.

She nodded and, putting her drink aside, raised her small hand to hold his own. The gesture calmed him. Suddenly, he was not concerned with guards and lies and assassins. Her violet eyes and easy gaze washed those worries from his mind. Beautiful eyes. He had missed them almost as much as he had the rest of her.

“I’m fine,” she whispered, “more than fine. It’s just your maester that insists I keep to this bed and rest so often.” She seemed serene; almost too calm. Some time had passed since the hired blades had attacked, but he still expected the experience to affect her more than some bad dream.

“Do you remember what happened?”

She swallowed and shook her head slowly, loose silver hair waving from side to side as she did so. “No,” she sighed out, “not truly, the poison they used troubled my mind.”

Her curious passivity confused him; even made him a tense. “You were attacked, Daenerys,” he began to reason with her, urging her to realize the severity of the statement. I had thought she might be terrified. Or angry. He had witnessed her flashes of anger on several occasions. It was usually directed at Lannisters. That she had not marched the remaining southron men out to meet her dragons was something of a surprise.

“As I have been before. I told you as much when we first met. No doubt others will try where those men failed...” she released his hand as her own dropped to her navel. She suddenly seemed distracted by thoughts of the wars to come. “I am fine, Jon.” Her assurance had a hint of finality to it, as if this would be the last discussion on the matter. It certainly will not be, he thought as he remembered the men chained in the cells far below him. He resolved to not trouble her with matters of justice just now.

They were together and alone. I’ve missed this. Such moments are precious. Days riding through the frozen emptiness of the North had seen him longing to be back at her side. He had wished that he could have ridden a dragon back instead of his own horse. “Well, Maester Wolkan is a wise man and trusted councilor,” he said, trying to stifle his own emerging smile. “I must heed his advice and see no issue keeping you in bed a bit longer.”

Her eyes narrowed as her lip curved upward in a wicked grin. “Is that so?” her tone was playful yet forceful. “You presume to command your queen?” she asked. Her wound had not sapped any of her inner fire.

“It was only a suggestion, Your Grace,” he spoke formally as the jest continued, “advice from a
husband to his royal wife.” The wording of his joke brought memories to the front of his mind. _We are to be married_, he recalled. _She asked me that night._ It had been late; deep into the night during that treacherous winter storm. It still seemed half a dream to him, yet he had accepted her proposal.

*I’m to be married to a queen._ He almost laughed as the realization swept over him. _The Dragon Queen. Would that Robb could see me now._ His half-brother might have laughed so hard the roofs would have lost their snow to the man’s booming mirth. There would be a wedding, perhaps in the godswood. They might have a feast, albeit a small one given the circumstances. Jon smiled as he caught himself wondering what Daenerys would look like in an ivory gown. _Most men consider what their betrothed looks like without the dress._

They would be family. They already were, by blood; but it had never felt that way. Bran’s revelations had shocked him. Upset him, in truth. He had come to see reason by his own thoughts and by Sansa’s words. The nights spent beside Daenerys had burned away some of his doubts. Others still lingered. They had sunk deep into his bones; they were a part of him. He was raised as the Bastard of Winterfell. Neither visions of secret Targaryen weddings nor daggers in the darkness would change that.

*I’ve learned of my mother and father and my ancestry. Are there any other family members I’ve yet to meet?_ He looked at her. She seemed lost in thought as well, with one hand pressed against the spot below her navel and another on the furs. “We should do it soon,” she said as she gazed off into the fire burning in the hearth. “The marriage I mean. The ceremony,” she swallowed, “before it comes to battle.”

*It might not._ He had found only vast swathes of disturbed snow on his ranging. If Jorah and Sandor Clegane had not found anything and Bran still proved unable to see the enemy, then they were stuck preparing Winterfell against the unknown. _I must speak with Davos and Tyrion to sort out these other matters. No need to trouble her with that just now,_ he reasoned with himself.

“Aye,” he said as he moved to take her hand in his, “though we best tell the others we mean to wed.”

“Tyrion knows,” she explained, “and I’m sure your sisters have figured it out. You might consider informing your lords at a supper in the hall. Tyrion thinks our marriage might bring them all peaceably into the fold.”

*I don’t think that will matter unless we defeat the dead._ The lords of the North had only rallied behind House Stark once the battle against the Boltons was already won. They stood by him now out of fear for their own lives and lands, he did not doubt that. If they destroyed the Night King, what would convince Lord Glover or Cerwyn to march south to fight on Daenerys’ behalf. Daenerys had not demanded they bend their knees in homage, only fight beside them. _Our marriage? Even then, what will they say when I reveal my true heritage?_ Perhaps it might be Sansa that ruled the North and bound it to Daenerys’ rule. _If we survive._

“I’ll see to it, then,” he said, leaning forward to place a kiss upon her brow and moving to stand up. He turned to his wolf. “You stay here, hmm boy?” he said playfully as he extended a hand to bid the beast come closer. Eyes shining in the firelight, Ghost padded silently across the floor. He turned back to Daenerys with a smile. “The newest member of your queensguard. He’s even brought his own white cloak.”

She laughed as Ghost moved toward the edge of the bed. It was such a sweet sound. “I happily accept him into my service,” she smiled. He nodded again and made to exit their chambers. The door swung open as he approached it. Ever silent themselves, the Unsullied sentries had no doubt heard him approaching. He passed over the threshold and into the hall. Two more Unsullied had
joined the hallway patrols. It felt good to have them guarding the door. It felt better to know Ghost was on the other side.

Content to see his love well and in good spirits, Jon considered what next needed attending to. Tyrion and Davos stood at the end of the hall from where he had walked a moment before. Sansa had joined them, her auburn hair standing out against the dim grey walls. The Lady of Winterfell had no doubt handled the challenges of ruling presented in her second tenure with the same deft hand and icy courtesy that made her so effective during his longer absence.

She wore an odd look upon her face just now. “What is it?” he called out as he walked toward the group. Late supplies from White Harbor, news from Mormont or Clegane, some new southern threat?

“Best said behind closed doors,” Tyrion replied as he closed the distance and redirected Jon with an outstretched arm. “Perhaps your solar would do? I’ve asked Lord Varys to join us there.” He nodded his assent.

Jon turned and made for the opposite end of the passageway while the others followed. They walked in silence for a moment, until Sansa drew even with him and began to speak in a hushed tone. “She’ll be fine.”

“I saw,” he offered a simple response. Though Jon had harbored hopes the two might have become friends, or at least friendly, Sansa’s icy courtesy had extended to Daenerys as well. She’s wary of others, he knew. After Joffrey, Cersei, and the Boltons. It would take time. “And the surviving men?”

“I threw them into the old cells. I thought to leave their fate to the two of you,” she explained.

“And Arya?” he wondered aloud. How is it my little sister did this?

“Arya… best you hear it from her,” she shrugged into the black sable cloak about her shoulders. “She’s been spending quite a bit of time in Mikken’s old forge,” she said with the hint of the smirk. He wanted to ask what that meant, but by the time he had sort out his thoughts the group had arrived at the door to the solar.

A warm glow emanated from the room’s hearth; one of two in the castle that the servants kept burning night and day. The flickering light cast dancing shadows upon the sewn scenes of Stark history that hung upon the wall. The room was empty but for a plump, pale figure standing in the corner admiring one of the more faded tapestries. Varys turned and gave an odd half smile.

Sansa, Tyrion, and Davos entered behind him. This was a smaller council than usual, though that might have been intentional given the apparently sensitive nature of whatever they were about to discuss. “Well?” he asked the room, “what is it? Word from the other parties?”

The two older men looked at Varys. “Just so, my lord,” he said in his oddly musical tone as he produced a small raven scroll from his sleeve. “A message from Ser Jorah Mormont arrived but a few days before you did. He has found Lord Beric Dondarrion, still alive, one Tormund Giantsbane, and some survivors from Castle Black commanded by a Lord Commander Edd.”

An odd wave of emotion washed over him. Edd? Truth be told he had not even considered the man in months. Ever his friend, Dolorous Edd had been part of his past life. And Tormund… it was good to hear he and Beric had escaped the attack on Eastwatch. No doubt they fled westward to Castle Black, but Varys just said…
“Survivors from Castle Black?” he asked.

“It would seem your friends were not the only ones who survived an attack in the north,” muttered Tyrion darkly. “This Night King fell upon the brothers of the Watch with a dragon. Our queen’s dragon. The one slain some months ago.”

Jon felt his throat tighten as he swallowed. *The dragon.* Some small part of him knew it was possible, but he had watched the beast sink beneath the ice with his own eyes. He had hoped that would be the end of it. Even as he thought of that he remembered looking into those burning blue eyes from across the small stretch of water, remembered the thousands of corpses shaking violently and slowly rising to their feet. *Why should a dragon be any different?*

“I see,” was all he could muster in response. Drogon and Rhaegal had been their one advantage. *And now…* They had been preparing for siege, for the waves of dead men to break upon the stout walls of Winterfell. The castle’s walls could not stand against dragonfire when the Wall itself had not. *This changes everything.*

“Does she know?” His thoughts turned to Daenerys. ‘*My children*’ she always calls them. She had wept over the memory of losing Viserion, just once aboard the ship south, but he could always hear the pain in her voice when she spoke of her dragons. It would pain her even more to learn she had lost the great white dragon twice: once to death and again to the dead. Even so, she needed to know the truth.

“We thought it best to have you tell her. No use troubling her Grace with this matter so soon after the attack,” Davos explained. Jon dipped his head in acceptance of the task, though question the wisdom of concealing such information.

“The other lords must know as well,” he declared, adding, “What else need I know?”

“Quite a bit, I fear,” Tyrion sighed. “Your brother’s visions have apparently resumed in earnest. He saw the dead men on the march at the edge of the Karstark lands.”

*Karstark lands? That cannot be right. The tracks we found were on the western bank of the Last River.* He would need to speak with Sam and Bran too. *Something is not right.*

There were too many things to do: a war to plan and sentences to be meted out; an army of dead men to locate. “We’ll sort through it all on the morrow, here in the solar. See that Sam and Bran are summoned as well.” He turned to Sansa. “Assemble the lords in the hall for supper at sundown, it’s time to see justice done for the southern men.”

Sansa nodded and turned to leave the room. He caught a curious glint in her eye as her gaze passed over him to the corner of the room. *Varys…* he realized. The spymaster had served the Lannisters in the capital while she was held hostage. His service to Daenerys would not burn away years of distrust and disdain.

“Her Grace will join you in the hall to face her would-be killers,” Tyrion told Jon before turning away to discuss some matter with Varys in low, hushed tones. *No doubt I’ll learn of that soon enough.* Right now, he needed to focus on the task at hand.

He had seen justice done before, when he was still the Bastard of Winterfell. Lord Eddard would behead men for murder, desertion, and other serious crimes. On the Wall, he taken Janos Slynt’s life for insubordination. Those matters had all been as clean as the cuts through the offenders’ necks. A man obeyed an order or he did not.
Compared to all that, this situation was something of a winding maze. The easiest course would be to kill them all and be done with it. He did not doubt that any other ruler, Stannis or Cersei or the rest, would have simply mounted their heads on spikes. He felt a cruel, vengeful urge to do the same to the men who had attacked her.

No… That’s now how he meant to rule. He needed to learn what happened from someone who remembered it clearly. He needed to find Arya. The smithy, Sansa had said, though he wondered what she would be doing there. His little sister had always found some adventure within the castle walls. Jon remembered fondly the scenes of their youth: Arya sneaking into the kennels and trying to ride a hunting hound or Arya and a guardsman’s son stuffing one of Sansa’s own dresses full of straw and beating back the “Wilding Raider” with sticks from the godswood.

Perhaps she’s after another sword, he wondered to himself as he made his way through the halls of the keep, down to the ground level and out into the yard. They had set up multiple smithies within and beyond the walls of Winterfell. Most were active from well before dawn to long after sunset, hammers ringing against steel to craft dragonglass weapons, arrowheads, pieces of armor and whatever else their armies needed for war.

Lord Wyman had sent some of his best smiths to Winterfell, but their own skill paled in comparison to Gendry’s. Though younger than Jon by a few years, the Baratheon bastard had trained under the Qohorik smith Tobho Mott in King’s Landing and knew much of the creation of and care for armor. It was partially for that reason Jon had tasked the boy with seeing the dragonglass up the White Knife some weeks ago.

Two bastards. Theirs was a strange bond, he realized, like a brother upon the Wall. The bastards had become friends while sailing to Eastwatch. Gendry had regaled him with tales of King’s Landing, wartime in the Riverlands, and his meeting Lord Eddard whereas Jon had spoken of King Robert’s visit to Winterfell and the brothers of the Night’s Watch.

Only once had he mentioned traveling with Arya Stark, much to Jon’s surprise. His tone had seemed oddly wistful then as he recalled their misadventures. Jon had only learned of his little sister’s survival a few days beforehand. It had felt good to learn of her survival; better still to hear the details of how she managed to escape the capital.

He lost himself in thoughts of a life long past as he strode to the far end of the yard where Mikken’s old shop had been expanded to accommodate the demands of wartime. He could already taste the black smoke billowing from the sides of the smithy and could hear the din of hammers on steel, the steady breath of the billows, and the hiss of hot iron being tempered in water.

A familiar voice called through the black fog as he approached the entrance. “Gods, would you keep still for a moment?” he recognized Gendry’s voice issuing orders to some unseen apprentice. “I need to make sure these pieces are fitted proper.”

A wall of smoke met him full in the face as he turned the corner. He hacked out a cough to clear his throat and squinted his eyes against the forge’s soot. The hot, black air stung his eyes and he fought to keep them open.

Gendry stood with his back turned to Jon. A collection of finely wrought steel armor pieces lay on a table at his right. With a curious precision, he took each piece from the table and fastened it around some faceless figure clad in a narrow helm and black breastplate.

“Bracers next,” Gendry called out as he fumbled around on the low wooden bench that hosted a few other bits of armor. Jon paced forward into the shop as he watched the bastard continue his craft. He quickly fastened the thin black steel wrist guards with their leather fastenings and sat back
to admire his work.

Back still turned to Jon, the figure stood motionless and encased in a slightly ill-fitting suit of black lamellar steel. Fine work, he thought as he found himself admiring the craftsmanship. The completed pieces were finely wrought and angled as if to emulate a woman’s supple curves. Even so, they displayed a unique fierceness that he immediately recognized. Daenerys’ armor…

He was glad Tyrion had the sense to commission the steel. Daenerys would surely find herself upon her dragon or in the field in the wars to come. She had plainly refused armor before, deciding to wear her gowns of silk and wool lined with furs. He enjoyed seeing her in some of those, but not in harm’s way. All that would change. If her dragon’s demise north of the Wall had not convinced her of her own mortality, the news of its fate and the attempt on her life certainly would have.

Gendry looked up at him as he strode into the center of the smithy. “Jon,” he smiled as he spoke. His white teeth stood out against his soot covered face. Jon smiled back.

“Gendry,” he inclined his head to the figure half-encased in steel. The smith’s blue eyes followed his own.

“Never made a woman’s armor,” he shrugged, “never mind a queen’s. Though this might be some of my best once it’s finished.” Jon inspected bits of the steel more closely and saw pieces of dragonglass fused into armor. Interesting… Dragonglass would lighten the armor’s weight and might just ward off wights. He reached out with one gloved hand to touch it.

“Brittle stuff, that, but easy enough to work with once you’re comfortable with it,” Gendry explained.

“I’m not comfortable,” another familiar voice complained from within the armor.

“Arya?” Jon laughed. The suit of armor has a name now. It seemed almost too perfect: his little sister had often stolen away with polished guard’s helms and silvered longswords from the armory, pretending she was Visenya Targaryen come again. Now here she was in a dragon rider’s armor, a Valyrian steel blade on the table at her side. He walked around to face her.

Her dark grey eyes met his and she gave a wicked smile. “He needed someone to help,” she tried to shrug, though the weight of the steel dampened her efforts.

“Needed someone near enough the queen’s own size,” Gendry explained as he set the black steel vambraces aside on the low wooden table.

Jon nodded. “I see. Well I had hoped to speak to my sister alone,” he said. Gendry nodded and began to free Arya from her steel prison. Little sister. Even after learning the truth, she was still that to him. She always would be. And Sansa and Bran and Robb and… Rickon. In truth, his baby half-brother had been little more than a toddler when he left for the Wall. That did not mean he loved him any less. The shame of his failure before the battle still weighed heavy on him.

It was like Sansa said: Eddard had been as a father to him; had protected him. Now he would be something of a father to Eddard’s trueborn children. His duties would go beyond that, too. Ned had always told Robb that a lord’s people were like his children. I am the Lord of Winterfell now. I must protect them all. He had never been a father and, with his oath to Daenerys, perhaps he never would be; but he would not fail in his task. Not again.

Another smith’s clanging hammer blow shattered his moment of inner solitude. He refocused his eyes and saw Gendry continuing at his task, his calloused hands fumbling with the leather straps
that secured the separate pieces of steel together. His soot-covered fingers struggled to find purchase on the fastenings. Jon had never known a blacksmith to struggle so mightily with a piece of his own make.

“Almost finished?” Arya asked, her voice a higher tone than he remembered. Jon chuckled at her impatience. The fire in her eyes reminded him of Daenerys. He wondered if his own mother had shared that temperament.

“This one’s stuck,” he muttered into the steel. Normally a head taller than Arya, the Baratheon bastard stooped low and placed his hands on either side of the armor to gently undo the various fastenings. “There we go, got it. Now the rest.” His surprisingly nimble fingers made their way down her right side then her left, loosening the small leather straps that kept it all together.

Arya’s cheeks glowing as hot and red as the forge’s embers as Gendry worked. Her eyes were uncharacteristically downcast, unassuming and innocent. It was an odd sight. Jon could not recall ever seeing her this flustered. Though that might be impatience or anger as well. But no. Jon knew her well enough to see the flush in her face was not from the forge’s heat. Certainly not the girl I left behind some years ago.

The fire returned to her eyes as she realized he was staring at her. With a huff, she pulled the breastplate away even as Gendry removed the other bits of armor. She turned and shoved the steel into Gendry’s chest. “Might need a bit more work,” she laughed out before turning to Jon and nodding. She grabbed her grey fur cloak, dagger, and Needle before making to leave. The smith looked bemused, but Jon swore he saw a smile creep up his face as brother and sister turned to exit the smithy.

Jon inhaled a deep breath of the crisp, free air of the yard as they walked alongside each other. Such breaths were a rarity within the walls and outside the godswood. The halls smelled of smoke and overcrowded quarters. The stables smelled of horseshit and wet hay. He could still smell the coalsmoke of the smithy on his cloak. He would have to bathe tonight to purge the acrid smell from his garb. Or else bury my face in Daenerys’ perfumed hair.

They walked in silence for a moment. It felt like a dream of another life. My life, he knew, before I took the black. And before… Well, no use dwelling on that now. She had been his family. She still was. Parents and siblings were not supposed to have favorites, never mind bastards, but Arya had always been Jon’s. They speak freely of anything under the northern sun. They could tease and laugh each other without fear of offending courtesy. It was love, but of a different sort.

“So,” he said as they walked onward toward the stone archway that marked the godswood’s entrance, “is that what passes for courtship in Braavos?” he asked, his tone hinting at a sibling’s tease.

“What do you mean?” she asked, cheeks darkening again. Despite her training, she failed to mask the emotions in her voice.

“Nothing,” he grinned, “only Sansa tells me you’ve been spending quite a bit of time in that forge. I take it you’re not working to become a smith?” She punched him. He chuckled and feigned a mortal wound where her small fist had bounced off his padded armor.

Her hardened mask melted away like the snow beneath their feet as the pair strode into the grove of the Old Gods. “Sansa ruins everything,” she muttered, eyes downcast. Sansa fixes everything, Jon thought as he chuckled in response. He still hoped to speak with her of the assassins and Lannister men, but now did not seem the time. This was a tender moment and did not warrant a fool’s interruption.
They continued to walk across the dying, frozen moss of the wood. Arya took a few lithe strides toward the heart tree and sat upon the smoothed white bark of a thick lower branch. He followed her and was selecting his own seat when she spoke again. “How do you know?” The question was as cryptic as the weirwood’s red gaze.

“Know what?” he asked. He thought he knew what she might ask, but it felt odd. The Arya before him was not the girl he had armed with Needle some years ago.

“How do you know when you love someone?” her eyes shone with something he had never seen in her before, though he could no sooner name the look than he could give her a satisfying response.

‘I’m not a bleeding poet’ would have been his first answer, but he owed her more than that. “I suppose…” he spoke before he had the words to continue. How do I know? He had been with Ygritte first, a woman of the free folk with hair kissed by fire. The circumstance of their meeting had been, well, less than happy; but their desire to live and the desire for each other had driven them together. And holding her in my arms… her could still hear her final words whispered amidst the din of battle. Whatever he had felt after that… That emptiness. Perhaps you could not truly know love until after you had lost it. “You just know,” he shrugged into his fur cloak. She seemed disappointed for a moment, then curious.

“Do you love Daenerys?” Love. He could not say when the word had first sprung unbidden into his mind; only that when he awoke on that ship after she had saved them all, he had not wanted her to leave him. And everything since then. Knocking on her door, sharing her bed, laughing softly at our secret jests, learning of my family and agreeing to a marriage. Every time he opened his eyes since that day, he wanted to see her violet eyes and silver hair beside him; wanted to wrap his arms around her slender waist and hold her close. There’s no other word for it.

“Yes,” he responded. She bobbed her head in acceptance though still seemed rather sullen. Even though he thought Daenerys, he had taken her meaning. Of course, he wished the Baratheon bastard well. He had set him to seeing the dragonglass north and hoped he might attend the war councils, to better learn his father’s craft. The world still thinks me a bastard, too. Only this was different. This was his little sister.

He heard her let out a pent-up sigh, her breath forming a brief, white cloud in the cold air. “How do I…” her eyes begged him to understand what she could not put into words. She seemed so vulnerable. He could see the longing in her eyes. It was a feeling he recognized all too well. Perhaps not so little. Jon smiled at her.

“Show him?” he grinned and shrugged at the same time. “Shoving his own armor in his chest is probably a poor way of going about it.” She exhaled harshly and threw a small stick at him. It harmlessly broke against his armor. He looked at the broken projectile for a moment before turning back to Arya. She wore a completely unapologetic look, but still seemed eager for an answer. He obliged. “Everyone has their own way.” Some girls tease you and steal your sword, some throw sticks, others fly north to save your life.

Silence settled in between them as each became lost in thought. He wished he knew what to say to her just now. This will not do. He took a step forward, his leather boot crunching as it pressed into the old snow atop the roots of the old weirwood, and put a gloved hand upon her shoulder. He gave her a quick, reassuring squeeze.

“You’ll figure it out, but I’m happy to keep this our secret, hmmmm? So long as you try to as well.” She nodded. “Now, I had hoped to speak of the Lannister men. I need to know what happened.” The youthful fire in her eyes died at the mention of the assassins and their comrades.
“You were all so happy to believe those men had come to help,” she looked off toward the edge of the grove as she spoke. “I knew better. They’re Lannisters. Cersei’s men. The same people who killed our father. Same men who killed Robb and mother,” All warmth had gone from her voice. Indeed, the very air itself seemed colder.

“And you killed five of them by yourself?”

“Four. One before and three in the room itself. Jaime Lannister had the other two,” she shrugged as if recounting the contents of a mundane meal. He watched as one gloved hand idly fell to her side, thumbing the pommel of her dagger.

“One before…?”

“I knew they were up to something,” she began, “and I knew they would not make their move if they knew that I did. So, I took one man’s face and joined the rest.” Took his face? He was not sure what concerned him more, that his sister would so willingly take a life or that she would so freely admit to it.

“You didn’t think to bring this to me? To ask for help?” his brotherly and lordly instincts drove him in the same direction.

“Like I said, I didn’t want them to know. Besides, you were busy riding off into the woods, figuring out how to be a Targaryen,” she met his shocked stare for a moment. How does she?– I heard Sansa speaking of it,” Arya quickly assured him as she recognized the shock on his face. Less secret than I thought… He kept his composure as he continued questioning her.

“And so you took it upon yourself to spoil this plot?” he asked, still incredulous.

“Someone had to” she shrugged again. He let out a long, exasperated sigh. He was not angry with her. She had no doubt saved lives by taking others.

“What about the remaining men? The ones Sansa had thrown in the cells?”

“Not sure.” He could see in her eyes that she was not. “They didn’t seem to have anything to do with it, but they’re still Lannisters,” she spat out the last word. “What are you going to do with them?”

“I’m not yet sure,” he admitted. She looked away, clearly disappointed. Perhaps she has changed more than I thought. Of course, she seemed more reserved and serious now than she had been as a girl. That was only natural with what they had all been through and winter finally upon them. Still, this was Arya.

He looked at her then. Truly looked at her. Arya sat back on the low branch and pulled her legs up into her chest. Perhaps she could feign a toughened disinterest with others, but he saw the pain and fear in her eyes. It was subtle enough. She hid it well, like a grizzled old commander concealing a wound from his men. She noticed him staring and turned to him.

“I don’t want it to happen again,” she whispered the admission. For a moment, he expected tears. Yet none came. No, of course not. This was Arya. Jon wondered how long it had been since she had last cried. He slid toward her and draped an arm about her small shoulder, pulling her in close like he used to do those many years ago.

“It won’t,” he hugged her close, “I’m here, and Sansa and Bran.” He paused. “Gendry too.” He felt a soft jab in his ribs and smiled. “We’ll protect each other.”
“That’s what I was trying to do,” defiance crept back into her voice. *That’s more like it*, he mused.

“I know, but we need to trust one another, to share our strengths… so, next time you see something, you come to me, hmm?” She looked at him, dipped her head in an acknowledgement, then moved closer to hug him again. When she made to pull away he thrust an arm forward and tousled her hair playfully, remembering how quick she was and knowing he had to be swift. To his surprise, she let him. For a moment, he felt half a boy again, playing with his half-siblings in the godswood.

He glanced up through the dark red canopy. *Still time*, he noted the angle of the afternoon sun’s pale rays. He guesses they might have another hour or so before Sansa assembled the lords in the hall to sup and witness the fate of the southron men; another hour before he would have to see to his duties as the Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North. *I can have a boy again for just an hour.*

“So, how exactly did you get to Braavos?” he asked. He knew the basic details, but she enlightened him further even as the shadows of the trees lengthened. In turn, he regaled her with tales of the lands beyond the Wall. He made no mention of the dead men or Night King, of course, choosing instead to describe the Wildling spearwives, fearsome mammoths, and massive giants that he had seen. By the time he finished his tale of climbing the Wall, the sun had slipped below Winterfell’s own.

He glanced at his sister and then upward at the fading violet sky just visible through the red canopy. He stood up. Arya joined him, kicking her legs out and landing on the ground all in one graceful movement. Together, they went the way they had come some time earlier. Neither spoke a word until they were at the edge of the archway that led to the yard.

Jon leaned sideways and tousled her hair once more, muttering “perhaps he’ll like your hair like that.” The jest earned him another jab, but as they continued toward the hall he could see her hurriedly fixing her brown locks.

The hall quieted as they entered. Conversations ended in hushed whispers and the clatter of wooden chairs scraping against the smooth stone floor. For a moment, it was so quiet that Jon could hear the crackling logs of the lord’s hearth at the other end of the hall.

The Northern lords sat at the long tables and their squires and attendants lined the walls. Jon noted the arms emblazoned on surcoats as he walked past: mailed fist of House Glover, the proud merman of Manderly, the rusted battle axes of the Dustins. *All families that ignored our call to arms.* Justice would be met in front of these men. Jon did not doubt Sansa had insisted certain lords be given places of honor closest to where the Lannister men would be tried. The thought almost made him smile.

He glanced his sister’s auburn hair at the far end of the hall. Her piercing blue eyes met his own for a moment and she nodded. He noticed Ser Davos standing behind her, accompanied by Brienne of Tarth and her squire Podrick Payne.

Jon kept his eyes on the fire as he strode forward to the high table. Tongues of scarlet, gold, and orange flames danced wildly between the blackened stone walls of the hearth. Twin ranks of ensconced torches on either wall aided the fire with weaker light of their own.

He could not help but think of the Red Woman as he stared into the flames. *What might she do with these men?* He wondered. They had not participated in the attempt, but that did not absolve them of their role in harboring the traitors. *Did they know? Are they guilty too?* He regretted summoning the thought almost as soon as he called it forth. *Innocence. Guilt.* Those words had
meant nothing to her and her lord.

He turned the corner of the table and placed a hand on the finely carved chair that had served half a dozen Lord Starks. Eddard once sat this chair, he knew. What might he do? In truth, Jon did not know. Ned’s own sense of honor had slain his lord father like his own sword turned against him.

Inhaling deeply, he looked up at the assembly. Countless pairs of eyes looked back, their gazes curious and apprehensive. Arya moved to the back, melding into the shadows of the back wall. Footsteps echoed from the passageway to his left and he turned to see Daenerys walked toward him. Tyrion and Varys followed her with Missandei, Grey Worm, and a dozen of his Unsullied marching behind. Ser Jorah was reported to still be a day’s ride away. Maester Wolkan completed the procession into the hall, though Jon thought it was odd his keep’s maester was with the queen instead of Sansa.

A subdued smile broke across her face as their eyes met, though it was only for a moment. She wore a dress of black dyed wool lined with silver furs to match the silver dragon brooch upon her right breast and her own silver hair. He felt his own lip curve upward in a smile, but stopped himself before the assembled lordship noticed the gesture. Now is not the time.

“Your Grace,” he greeted her with a low nod that would pass for a bow. Daenerys nodded in turn and took her cushioned seat beside the lord’s chair. Jon took his own seat as well. A great commotion followed as the lords and their respective retinues resumed their own seats. Jon swept his gaze over the assembly once more. They’re used to her, he knew, but they still don’t trust her.

It seemed a ridiculous notion for lords who had so readily abandoned their own oaths to cling to old prejudices so tightly. He had more personal reasons for enjoying Daenerys’ company, of course, but he trusted her. She had saved him beyond the Wall. She had come with him to save his people. Trust would be as crucial as dragonglass in the wars to come. He needed his lords trust and needed them to trust in him. Especially when I tell them the truth…

Now is not the time, he repeated the thought. There were matters of justice to see to. He turned to Ser Davos to issue the command. “Bring them in,” he ordered. Davos nodded and paced away out a side door. They all waited in silence. A moment later the clatter of chains rang from another passageway as the remaining Lannister soldiers were led into the hall. Harsh whispers and low curses filled the air as the prisoners were marched into the space in front of the high table and made to kneel by their escort of Stark guardsmen.

An aching pity filled his heart as he looked over them. Though their time in the cells had not been long, each man looked pale and gaunt with hollow cheeks and scraggly, unkempt beards. They all bowed their heads and stared at the floor, averting their gazes from Jon and Daenerys.

A roiling rage burned away his fleeting sense of pity. His heartbeat quickened. They tried to kill her. It felt like they had swung a sword at his own person. His desires as a lover and duties as a lord clashed within him. He thought of the woman at his side and the linen bandages just now concealed under her dress. He thought of the poison they had sought to use. Of their lies and false promises of aid. He thought of Ser Alliser and Bowen Marsh and Olly, of cold steel knives and daggers in the darkness.

His hand fell to his side as he brushed the polished wolf’s head pommel of his sword. I’ve met out justice before. Now he would have to again. Though he had sworn the North to Daenerys, the crime had taken place on his lands and in his hall. As the Lord of Winterfell, it was his duty to mete out the queen’s justice.

“You stand accused of conspiring to kill the queen,” his tone was firm and cool as he issued the
charge. “Of forsaking your oaths and betraying our trust.” Those were not crimes in themselves, of course, but Jon knew that they must be addressed as well. “What have you to say in your defense?”

The one they knew as Ryn Hill, though he doubted that was his actual name, raised his head and met Jon’s gaze. His hazel eyes shone with fear. “Please, m’lord, Your Grace,” his voice was high and strained. “We rode to join you… Aelan, the others, we didn’t know.

“You swore that you had abandoned Cersei,” Sansa protested. Her interruption caught Jon unawares, but he let her continue. As the Lady of Winterfell, Sansa had seen the Stark’s affairs whilst he was away in the south and on the ranging. She had passed judgement on the crimes of those men held for various offenses; everything from simple theft to rape. And she had dealt with Lord Baelish. He knew how effective she could be. “Why should we believe a word you say? How do we know you won’t try to finish what your comrades began?”

If they meant to kill her, why only bring five? Why not all two dozen? He wanted to ask. Ryn’s own stuttering response went unheard as shouts erupted from the tables. “Send their heads to the Lannister woman!” a White Harbor knight called out from the rightmost table. Others echoed the sentiment. Jon looked to where Daenerys sat passive and impartial, her hands resting in her lap. She was neither his lover nor his betrothed here and now, but a queen intent on listening to her subjects before passing judgement.

That might prove difficult here, he knew. In time of peace, justice demanded that both sides be heard and their stories told; but this was war. Some of these men had worked hard around the keep preparing the North for battle, but others might have aided their fallen friends. Jon did not trust them and he would not risk it.

He raised a hand to quiet the hall. The shouts turned to slowly fading murmurs. He waited until it was near silent before speaking again. “Nothing you can say to convince us of your innocence in this matter,” he raised his voice so that even those beyond the doors might hear him, “but you have not committed any crimes yourselves. I cannot execute men for their comrades’ offenses.”

Angry whispers and groans swept over the room. Their hungry for blood. Lannister blood. Any blood. He had been gone a fortnight, but he realized how restless the encamped forces were becoming. You could only keep an army of men penned up for so long. Lords and levies alike wanted to see these men hang or their bloodied and tarred heads mounted on spikes upon the battlements. Their hunger will go unsated for quite a while. Our true enemy doesn’t bleed.

He turned to Daenerys, willing his thoughts to pass through the air between them. She raised an eyebrow, inviting him to continue. The pair might have agreed to become man and wife, but that did not mean they always understood the other. That message is clear enough though, he figured. This was his keep, his hall, and his decision.

I needs end this quickly before the men take matters into their own hands, but what am I to do? He could not keep them here, that was for certain. Nor could he send them from the North. Ryn and his men had spent too long within Winterfell’s walls. They knew the North’s numbers, their strengths and weakness, the faces of the commanders. He might as well command Maester Wolkan send a raven to Cersei if he chose to send them below the Neck.

Tyrion had realized that as well. “If you let them ride south, my sister will learn all they know,” he hissed in a low whisper from where he stood behind Jon’s seat. He nodded to show he had heard, but otherwise ignored the man. He could still hear hushed conversation behind him where Tyrion spoke with Brienne and Pod.

“Nor can I allow you to stay within our walls,” he continued, “as free men or prisoners.”
“M’lord,” Ryn begged, “if you send us south the queen will kill us for certain!” He pitied the men their fate. Perhaps they had deserted Cersei’s forces to join the fight against the dead, but he would not risk further attacks. *I could send them out on another ranging to prove their loyalty?* He dismissed the thought almost instantly. Bran would prove more useful in matters of intelligence and the other two parties had yet to return.

“Wait,” Tyrion whispered again. He could barely hear the Hand above the growing murmurs of the lords. “Send them south of the morrow, after our council meeting.” *You just suggested the opposite course of action. What is it you have planned?* “I shall explain later.” Jon relented and placed his trust in his old friend.

“On the morrow, you will be given enough supplies to see you safely to the Neck. Once you leave the North, you will be beyond my power to judge.” Groans erupted from the prisoners and lords alike, though he could hear Tyrion murmur his appreciation. With Jon’s pronouncement, the men were led away to the clanking and clattering of their chains.

He ordered drink brought out immediately to cool the rising tempers of his men. Supper followed. Serving girls brought out steaming bowls of stew, venison pies, and fresh-baked brown bread while squires served small ale, stout ale, and watered wine from silvered flagons. The one he knew as Lorra set a warm loaf right between him and the queen before dismissing herself with a shy smile. Jon winced as he grabbed a roll in haste and burned the tips of his fingers. Daenerys had struggled to contain her laughter as she reached forward and tore a piece free, ignoring the heat.

One of the older women from the kitchen brought them two of the venison pies cooked with carrots, bacon, and mushrooms. Jon attacked his own portion with gusto while Daenerys shied away. He watched confused as she leaned to Missandei and requested some other fare instead. A moment later, her handmaiden returned with a small platter of fruit. He shrugged and continued to eat.

The hall was loud and boisterous, perhaps too much so for Jon’s sake. He kept polite conversation as the men’s cups were emptied, filled, and emptied again. Winterfell’s larders could seldom afford a supper such as this, but even small feasts were important for morale. Besides, it was good for the northmen to associate good fare and plenty of drink with their queen’s presence.

They only had it for a moment longer. Daenerys was clearly distracted by something and not at all hungry, judging by the remnants of fruit on her plate. He leaned upon the side of the chair in order to ask her what was amiss, but she cut him off with a soft smile as she placed her hand atop his. “It’s nothing,” she said, “though I’m going to return to our chambers. Perhaps you’ll join me?” He nodded and smiled as they both rose from their places at the head of the hall and made for the passageway off to the side. Some of the lords seemed to notice their departure. Most of the others had their faces firmly set in their cups. The queen’s Unsullied marched ahead of and behind them all the way, only leaving them alone once they had safely closed and latched the door behind them.

Ghost greeted them both with a wag of his massive tail. Jon reached down to give the wolf a scratch behind the ear before he undid his sword belt and set Longclaw against the wall. Daenerys was already changing out of her black dress into something more suitable for a calm evening, undoing her complex braids to let her silver hair hang loosely around her shoulders. *I need to tell her, he thought.*

“Daenerys,” he turned to face her, “I’ve something to tell you.”

He saw her grin as she turned. “That’s good. I’ve something to tell you too.” That caught him off guard. He had never seen her quite like this. Her apparent happiness shone brightest in her eyes as
she moved closer to him. “What is it?’ she asked.

He inhaled deeply. “Something I learned earlier today. Something Tyrion lied about until he thought you were ready to hear it.” The grin slid from her face like snow from a slanted roof.

“What?” she commanded in her regal tone.

“Jorah sent a raven some days past. He found survivors from the Night’s Watch who were there when the Wall fell.” He grasped her hands in his as he looked into her eyes to deliver the truth. “Your dragon, Viserion. He raised him…” He saw her swallow.

Jon felt her grip tighten in his hands as cold fire flashed in her eyes. In her sudden anger, she pressed her lips together and held her breath in. A moment passed in silence as she looked at him and then away into the fire. “I felt it,” she admitted, still averting her gaze. Her tone was surprisingly calm. “I don’t know how, but I felt it. I didn’t want it to be true,” she explained, “but I just knew.”

He did not know what to say in response. He could not fathom her loss, not truly, but he would be here for her should she need him. Daenerys continued to state into the flames. For a moment, the only sounds in the room were the crackling logs and faint shouts from the hall below. Then she turned back to him, her eyes burning brighter than the hearth’s fire.

“I told you that we would destroy him and his army and we shall,” she proclaimed. He had expected shouts or tears for a moment, but reminded himself otherwise. She’s not like that. She’s not like everyone else. Daenerys could be prone to fierce and fiery anger, but she often hid her emotions under that regal mask she so often wore. “This changes nothing. Drogon and Rhaegal will put their fallen brother to rest.”

He dipped his head in understanding as she looked back into the flames. Another moment passed in silence. Then another. He watched her pale, flawless face all the while, wondering of what she was thinking. Then she turned to him, her mask replaced with the happy expression she had worn earlier that evening.

“I suppose I lied to you as well,” she said, looking away again as if her eyes hid some secret. Jon furrowed his brow. What’s this then? He reached out to take her hand in his. She grasped it, but still kept her gaze from meeting his.

“You can tell me,” he assured her. He wanted to know. Daenerys might be his queen; but in the bedroom, she was just his. There no titles or honorifics. Most of the time there were not even clothes… Here they could speak openly of whatever they pleased.

He heard her let out a light, sweet laugh; almost a giggle, really. Dany kept laughing as she turned back to him. Her eyes were wet; rimmed with unshed tears. Tears? Yet she was still smiling. Is this some sort of jest? “That’s what I’m trying to do,” she said, biting her lip to stifle her emotions.

He loved to see her smile. It was a rare enough sight these days. Yet he had never seen her like this. Daenerys seemed so happy. It was odd. A moment before they had been speaking of such grim subjects. “So… it’s a happy lie, I take it?” Jon decided to play along, smiling and chuckling lightly as he asked. She nodded her head quickly as she blinked away some of the tears. He watched her small frame shudder as she let out a ragged sigh and looked up at him.

He looked at her. Love. There was no other word for that gaze. Jon felt his own breath catch in his throat as he drank in the sight. His betrothed’s silver hair hung loosely around her. Her sleeping dress was thin and lowcut, offering a glimpse of the white linens wrapped about her shoulder and
the tops of her pale breasts. Her violet eyes sparkled in the dim firelight.

Keeping her gaze locked with his for a moment, Daenerys moved closer and pressed her body against his. Her warmth felt good in the cool evening air. Jon wrapped his arms around her and held her close. As he drew her in, she bowed her head and pressed herself against him further still; burying her head between his shoulder and neck.

She was crying now, her tears falling freely and soaking through the thin wool of his undershirt. Jon held her close as she wept. She gave a few gasping sobs as she cried and her body shuddered with the effort. *She’s still laughing*, he realized as he held her. He was not quite sure what was going on.

After a moment, she pulled away and looked up at him again. “I’m sorry, Jon. I just never thought…” her words faded away as he raised a hand and wiped away a stray tear on her cheek with his thumb. Dany reached up and pulled his hand away. Slowly, she guided it downward and pressed his palm against the spot just below her navel. He could feel her warmth under the dress’ thin fabric. She looked up at him again with that same, soft smile on her face.

Realization dawned slowly on him. *She can’t have children.* At least, she had told him as much. He had never believed her, yet he had accepted her words. A happy lie… “I’m-

“-pregnant…?” he finished, whispering the word in awe. He felt his jaw slacken and his lips part. His pulse quickened and heart began to pound against his chest. “Are you sure?” Daenerys bit her lip again, a nervous but excited gesture. Her eyes shone with hope. She nodded. Jon smiled.

He had always sworn to himself he would never have a son; never father a bastard. Yet now he found himself swept away in fantasies of the future; of family. He felt his heartbeat quicken with his uneven breath.

“I know I said- I always thought- I don’t know how…” Dany sighed as she fumbled with her words. It was his turn to laugh. Normally so confident and well-spoken, his queen struggled for an explanation.

“I think I might know how,” he grinned, “but I’d be happy to show you again if you’d like.” His love gave a light chuckle as she pulled his hand away from her womb and held with both of her smaller ones. Her grip was tight as if she never wanted to let go. He did not want her to. He felt his head list to one side as he lost himself in her eyes. Her eyes were a raw red and still rimmed with tears, but his queen was a vision of happiness.

Daenerys let go of his hand as she turned and walked toward their bed. As she moved aside, Jon saw the rubies set into Longclaw wolf’s head pommel glint in the firelight. An odd sensation gripped him then. He looked back to Dany, just now removing the last of her clothes by the side of their bed. His eyes dropped to her bare stomach and to her womb. They lingered there for a moment before returning to his sword.

*Safe*, a voice whispered in the back of his mind. *Keep her safe. Keep them both safe. Keep them all safe.* And he would. He would defend them with Longclaw in his hands, Ghost at his side, and his people behind him. They would meet the dead in battle soon enough. Jon would lead them. He would do his duty. Whether as a bastard son, a brother, a man of the Night’s Watch or its commander, he always had.

*I have other duties now*, he thought as he looked at Dany just now climbing under the furs and giving him a mischievous grin. *Duties as a lover, as a husband, as a father.* That word filled him with something he had not felt in years. *Purpose?* No, he had always felt that. *Hope.* That
wellspring of happiness. He was going to marry Daenerys. He was going to be a father.

Chapter End Notes

Well, here we are passed 100,000 words. That's approximately 100,000 more words than I thought I would ever write for a story. Thank you all for the excellent discussion in the comments and for the kudos. I always enjoy hearing what people enjoyed or what they think is missing. I've received some great recommendations or requests. Some I cannot really accommodate because of their specificity, but others like "Have another Jon/Arya scene soon" are easier to include. In fact, comments like this generally stoke my memory and help me write a more complete story.

Two notes on this chapter:

1. Arya is a compelling yet complex character. I tried to balance the teenage girl aspects with the assassin aspects with the typical abrasive Arya toughness we all know and love.

2. I thought about what Daenerys might say and do when telling Jon she was with child. Being a mother (of Dragons, of freedmen, etc.) is pretty central to her identity, so realizing that she can have a child of her own would obviously have a major emotional impact.
Tyrion III

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The bear had wandered into camp sometime late last evening, no doubt drawn to the Dothraki cookfires by the smells of fresh meat that had wafted into the Wolfswood. It had been a truly massive thing to behold, with shaggy brown fur, sharp black claws and long teeth as yellow as the snow around the Dothraki horselines. The screamers had killed the beast with a dozen arrows before dragging the great corpse – which they considered a mighty trophy in this foreign, frozen land – to the keep as a gift to the queen.

Thus, this morning, Daenerys had accepted the hide of the great brown bear as a wonderous gift worthy of ‘only the finest hunters’. Only after they left had she asked that the beast be butchered for meat to feed the people of Winterfell.

And so it had. Stark sentries feasted on thin strips of seared bear flank alongside fried eggs and brown bread leftover from last night’s small feast. Tyrion had requested the bear’s balls for himself, a curiosity that had clung to him ever since he had visited the black brothers upon the Wall. The cook had given him a look of utter horror at the request, but then again, Tyrion had been receiving those for years.

*Bit tough,* he reflected as he leaned forward and pressed all his weight into the dull cutting knife in order to separate the thin strips of darkened meat from the white, fatty flesh. *And a bit chewy,* he almost laughed the morsel out of his mouth as he passed it from side to side, grinding his back teeth against the chunk. He swallowed far too early and immediately fumbled for his horn of small ale to ease the meat’s passage down his gullet.

*Bad way to go…* He pushed the pewter plate away and reached for the bread instead. Good meat was becoming something of a luxury these days, with the Wolfswood hunters having to stray further afield to haul in prey and the nearby shepherds carefully managing their flocks. Another load of food was due in from White Harbor soon, though the northern reaches of the White Knife had already frozen over.

Grains were far more common, though not common enough that each man could become a glutton whilst he waited for the war to start. The Starks had enforced fairly strict rationing in anticipation of a long, hard winter. *It might be almost as hard as this bread,* Tyrion thought to himself as he gnawed on the tough, brown crust of a roll. *I might prefer the balls over this.*

Last evening’s small feast had been preferable to both bread and balls, of course. They had brought out brown ale and venison pies after Jon had sent away the prisoners at Tyrion’s own behest. *I’m still surprised that worked,* he thought as he took another long gulp of ale. Jon listened to his advisors and Daenerys listened to Jon. That was good. He knew he could rely on the Lord of Winterfell to keep his queen and their unborn child away from the fighting.

Jon Snow had yet to learn or even approve of Ryn Hill’s fate, and yet Tyrion knew he would agree. Neither he nor the queen truly understood the art of ruling as he did. *They’ll know a good idea when they hear it though.* The proposal had come to him in pieces: the first during a wine sodden conversation with Jaime and the second whilst hearing Jon speak last night.

His brother had not attended last night’s assembly, but he and Tyrion had talked at length about the paths that had led them here and their plans for the future some evenings earlier. Jaime had spoken
of his campaign in the Riverlands before returning to find the smoldering ruin of the Great Sept of Baelor scarring the face of city he once saved.

By his own account, Jaime had led the Lannister armies against the rebellious Tullys of Riverrun after the Freys had failed to take the castle. The Blackfish himself had flown the proud trout and grey direwolf in defiance of the king’s peace.

“And how did you manage to convince old Brynden to strike his banners and surrenders his family’s castle?” Tyrion had asked, leaning forward on the footstool he had claimed as his own throne that first time he visited Jaime in his chambers.

“The true Lord of Riverrun ordered that they open the gates,” Jaime had shrugged into his silver goblet.

“The true lord?” Tyrion had offered his brother a curious smile. “Of course, old Lord Walder kept the man as a hostage in his dungeons. “And how did you convince Lord Edmure Tully to obey your commands?”

“You’ll recall he married Roslin, the Frey girl-“

“Yes, I do believe I heard something of that matter,” he replied dryly. Jaime ignored the jest.

“She bears his child, bore it by now if truth be told.” Roslin Tully, Cersei, Daenerys, am I next? He took a drink. “And what does his child have to do with this?”

“I threatened to fling it over the walls should he refuse to surrender.”

Tyrion noticed a sudden flash of Lord Tywin in Jaime’s green eyes. “I see.” He drew out the second word for a full breath. Our father’s son indeed. I may yet require a crossbow nearby. “So Edmure was lord of his own keep for half a heartbeat before you gave it back to the Freys.”

“He may yet have a keep of his own again. I sent him, the girl Roslin, and their Tully whelp to live with the Westerlings at the Crag.”


“I sent them there first, before your queen landed her armies on Dragonstone. I knew you would pursue the conquest of our family home and I swore that I would keep Roslin and the babe safe,” he explained.

“Only after you threatened to toss the babe over the walls, by your own account,” he challenged his brother.

Jaime’s eyes had flashed at hot as the fire in his hearth for a moment, before a sullen shame darkened his mood and brought out the hardened lines on his face. “Aye, before that,” he grimaced.

They had sat in silence for a moment before Tyrion sallied forth with a related topic. “And now the Freys are gone?” Jaime had spoken before of his ride through that broken Riverlands on his way to Winterfell. It had been a dire diagnosis.

The Freys, Lords of the Crossing and of Riverrun, had been slaughtered by some nameless, faceless foe. The Lannisters lacked the strength to secure the region in full. Thus, petty lords struggled for the remnants of meagre harvests or else drew fresh blood in centuries old feuds.
Bracken and Blackwood were reportedly at each other’s’ throats once more while Mooton and Cox had declared for the Iron Throne in hopes of winning lands further inland. The other river lords were frozen in fear.

“It appears so,” he sighed “though only the gods know who slaughtered half a house.”

_Half. “Just the men, I’m told?”_

“Just the men,” Jaime echoed.

“That might give Edmure’s flying whelp some claim to old Lord Walder’s seat then, no? And to Riverrun, should the child be a boy.” Jaime had nodded.

*So the Riverlands is in shambles.* Where most men might have seen chaos, Tyrion saw an opportunity to win new swords to his queen’s cause. Cersei would no doubt name some foolish ally as Lord Paramount of the Trident. Whether the remaining Riverlords would rally around her puppet was another matter. *And how many of those houses had kin slaughtered at the Red Wedding?* They were more likely to swallow their swords than pledge them to Cersei. *We just need the Tully man and his child.*

The means of how to retrieve Lord Edmure from the clutches of Lannister bannermen was another matter entirely. Tyrion had arrived at the great hall for trial and supper the same way he had left Jaime’s chambers the night before: utterly clueless. Jon had briefly suggested banishing the men from the North, but that would not do. Should Cersei capture the turncloaks they would be tortured for information. Of course, keeping them in Winterfell itself was out of the question.

The answer had presented itself as all great revelations do. *Entirely unexpected,* he mused. When they met in solar after their respective morning tasks, Tyrion would propose his plan. Ryn Hill and his remaining men will don their old Lannister armor and golden cloaks. Equipped with a crimson banner emblazoned with the proud lion of Lannister and bearing a scroll with the royal seal forged by Varys, the men would ride south for the Crag and free Edmure under the pretense his presence was requested in the capital. It seemed the ultimate irony that the same men who had sworn they had never deceived a northern soul now staked their souls on deception.

*Should this succeed, by the time word reaches my sweet sister, Edmure will be rallying swords to our cause, or else sending ravens from some hidden holdfast.* At least that was his hope. *My plans for the conquest of Westeros have seldom deserved the name.* Part of that had been Jaime’s doing, of course. His brother had proven quite the strategist in the earliest days of the fighting, before Daenerys had flown out to meet him on the field.

That was just another irony. Jaime’s experience fighting a dragon might now be their salvation against the queen’s own risen child and one hundred thousand dead men. It was for that reason he had been asked to attend the council meeting in the solar with the rest of the royal advisors and a few notable lords. That particular meeting was due to start soon enough.

Tyrion stood and abandoned the rest of his meal. There was one more piece to his plan that had to fit into place before he could rightly present the idea to Jon and the queen. He was certain Varys would agree. He was half certain Varys already knew. Still, his friend would certainly find flaws in the plan and have interesting news from the south as well.

News of Cersei’s maneuvers in the south always gave him pause. *Last I heard, the Golden Company had landed in the capital. Surely they are enjoying our absence.* Tyrion did not doubt the importance of the northern war, only his place in it. Should they prevail, all roads led south to Cersei and war.
If there was one thing he knew for certain, it was the Cersei Lannister would defend her crown to
the last breath. *Especially now that she is with child.* That had surprised him. From the way she
shied away from drink and cradled her navel, it had taken a keen eye and clever mind to discover
her condition, but Tyrion remembered her carrying Joffrey and Jaime’s other two children.

*It certainly complicates matters.* Given her own revelations and motherly disposition, Daenerys
would dare not kill a woman with child nor a mother cradling a newborn babe, even one who had
sent assassins northward in place of armies. Should she birth another Lannister, Cersei was safe
from the horrors their father had unleashed upon Daenerys’ own family some years past.

*And Daenerys...* he mused as he walked through the grey, winding halls that led to the lord’s solar.
*This child will do what a thousand council meetings will not.* His queen was stubborn, almost to a
fault, but she often listened to reason where the lives of the weak and powerless were concerned.
Tyrion knew she would not dare put herself in harm’s way now. *I thought a wedding might make
her see reason, but it was only the bedding I needed after all.*

A welcoming orange glow greeted him as he turned the corner to behold the solar’s doorway open
and inviting. He could neither see nor hear anyone else in the room. The council meeting would
surely begin soon enough, but he still had time to finalize his plan.

As he entered, Tyrion saw a plump figure robed in dark grey sitting upon a cushioned chair near
the fire. Tyrion’s friend looked up and regarded him with a half a frown and one eyebrow cocked
in a curious gesture.

“My Lord Hand,” Varys called out in his higher voice. *Perhaps I won’t mention the bears balls just
now.*

“Lord Varys,” he responded, stepping fully into the room and closing the door behind him. The
iron hinges creaked as the heavy oak swung shut.

“Oooooh,” Varys said in a mocking conspiratorial tone, “have we some secret matter to discuss?”
He leaned forward ever so slightly but kept his hands buried in the folds of his robe. *A spider
without arms.*

“We both know there are no secrets with you,” Tyrion rolled his eyes and paced forward around
the table that occupied the middle space.

“Few enough,” he agreed, standing to pull another chair closer to his own position before inviting
Tyrion to join him with a sweeping gesture. “I trust you’re hear regarding your family’s men? Or
are we to discuss the naming of the queen’s babe?”

*Few enough secrets indeed.* He decided not to ask precisely how Varys had come across that
particular morsel of information. “I always did like the sound of my own name, but no doubt the
child would grow out of it in time,” he quipped as he plopped himself onto the seat beside his
friend and fellow councilor. *If he knows that, there’s no use explaining this, then.* “But no, I had
hoped to send Ryn Hill and his men south to the Crag,” he began.

“The Crag... It is a fresh invasion of the Westerlands you’re planning? Or do you mean to win
over House Westerling to our cause with twenty good men?” he asked dryly.

“It’s another occupant of the Crag I’m interested, actually.”

“Ah, young Edmyn Tully,” Varys sighed in recognition.

“Edmure,” Tyrion wiggled backwards on the seat and made himself more comfortable as he
corrected the spymaster, “I would have expected a man – person – of your talents to get at least that right.”

“Edmure is the father, my friend, but Roslin Frey gave birth to a healthy young boy some time ago.” A boy, is it? How interesting, if it’s true.

“And was it one of the midwives who sent that raven? Or another orphan boy?” He questioned.

“Neither,” Varys explained, “I had Grey Worm plunder the Rock’s rookery and maester’s quarters before the Unsullied abandon your family’s home and marched for King’s Landing. Of course, Jaime… you wonderful fool. His brother had emptied the coffers and larders, but a man who had disdained raven scrolls and scribbled letters his entire life would not immediately have realized the importance of his own archives.

Most of those raven scrolls would be useless bits of information: grain shipments or mining reports; old messages from Robb Stark’s western campaign and the like. Yet some would certainly prove useful. They must have, elsewise Varys would not have brought it up in the first place.

“Ah, very clever of you,” he said, pursing his lips and giving his friend an appreciative nod. “And so you learned that the heir to the Twins and Riverrun was born at Casterly Rock?

“Heir, my Lord Hand?” Varys chided playfully. “The infant boy has a claim upon the Frey and Tully lands to be sure, but other do as well. The Crown stripped the Tully’s of their own holdings.”

“One crown did,” Tyrion corrected him, “I am sure our queen will restore Edmure to his father’s seat with all its attendant lands and titles.”

“Our queen and king, no?” asked the spymaster. “I heard there was to be a wedding soon.”

“There is. I dare say they’ll announce it soon enough.”

“Well played, then.” Varys congratulated him. Oh come now. “Your scheming seems to have worked.”

“I’m not quite sure I did much of anything on that front,” he protested. It was true. Varys only smiled. They sat in silence for a moment, Tyrion looking at the dancing flames of the hearth; Varys decidedly averting his gaze. Then he remembered why he had come. “So, the men. The Crag. I shall need a seal and signature forged. Is that within your considerable power?”

“They won’t,” he stated firmly. “Cersei would surely kill them. Anyway, I mean to provide additional incentive. Some of their number will remain here, hostages for their comrades’ loyalty. They might work as they did before the incident.”

“It is,” he shrugged, “but what happens when these men betray us or desert us?” Tyrion had considered that eventuality as well. It would not do to invest so much hope in proven turncloaks, even if they did seem like genuine men.

“They might deliver him here or to the Vale to wait until the time is right,” Tyrion suggested

“The right time may never come,” he warned grimly. “Your sister has promised to make Harry Strickland the Lord of Harrenhal and Lord Paramount of the Trident.” Homeless Harry? Tyrion
knew the name. The landless captain-general of the Golden Company was no great warrior, but he had a certain ruthless efficiency to him. He had the men to win that seat and title. “She’s already set ten thousand swords loose upon the Stormlands.”

“Why? The Stormlands are spent!” he argued, though he knew the words were wrong even as he spoke them. His sister would command the remnants of the Frey and Tarly forces by some means or another. The Stormlands would fall into her grip easily enough.

“Are they? Lord Stannis’ host was defeated upon the Blackwater, not swallowed whole by it. There are still some few thousand spears to be found in the keeps and towns due south of King’s Landing.”

“And Cersei means to have them all?” Varys nodded slowly. Tyrion sat back in his chair and exhaled. This does not bode well. We shall bleed ourselves as white as the northern snows while she regroups.

“One by one, or so it would seem. What lord would do anything but bend the knee when faced with cruel sellswords and two dozen armored and towered war elephants? The Errols of Haystack Hall and the Bucklers of Bronzegate have already pledged their lands and lives to her cause. I’m told…” his voice trailed off as if he were hesitant to share any more details.

“Told what?” Tyrion inquired.

“When Lord Ralph closed his gates to Strickland, the sellswords took to tormenting the Buckler smallfolk in the village below. Elders and maidens alike were lashed to the elephants, a limb for each beast, and torn apart.” A practice most favored by the Volantenes, he knew. The thought made him want to retch. “Once the screams had died away, the men flung the broken bodies over the walls. The loved ones of the soldiers; wives, fathers, friends and the like. It took two days for the Lord of Bronzegate to yield, at which point Strickland honored his foe’s higher status with a five elephant escort to the grave.”

“Gods…” These men must be stopped. He saw the same disgust writ plain on his friend’s face. “And how does Cersei mean to keep these lords’ loyalty? Place an elephant in every holdfast?” He almost admired her penchant for cruelty, but slaughtering smallfolk and lords alike was no way to win a lasting peace.

“I’m told she demands a hostage of each house, an heir or second son or favored daughter. She means to foster them at court.” Tyrion’s eyes widened with shock. Impressive, Cersei. Most impressive. And it was. A child from each house being fostered in the Red Keep afforded his sister many advantages. What lord would rightly bend the knee to Daenerys when his young daughter was in the queen’s clutches? What fool would lay siege to a city when his heir stood behind the walls?

“Your told. You heard. It is said,” Tyrion intoned dryly, “how is it you know all this, spymaster? You fled to Essos with me.”

Varys lips formed a thin grin and his eyes lit up. His true passion. “My little birds never stopped singing, my friend,” he lectured Tyrion in a jolly tone. “My flock has grown ever so big, even in winter. The promise of a bountiful spring is a powerful thing indeed.”

“Information for promises,” Tyrion considered the trade, “your little birds must have minds to match their names if they serve you for wind and words.”

“Winds and words,” Varys repeated the phrase in a light and airy tone, “gold and promises of it.
Land and titles, revenge…” he drew out the word ominously and lifted his shoulders in a light shrug.

“I see. And what promise did you make to-”

The door slammed open, cutting off his question and causing the fire to roar upward as a draught breathed fresh life into the flames. The queen’s Hand and her spymaster looked up in surprise to find Ser Jorah Mormont standing just beyond the threshold, four figures behind him. Tyrion looked to Varys then back at the grizzled knight. He looked worn and weary from travel. No doubt he has just returned from the forest. The second bear to do so, though perhaps this one will remain uneaten.

He held his position for a moment, his sad eyes sweeping across the solar in search of other friendly faces. Then he rummaged in a small satchel at his right side and plucked a coin from the pouch. With a deft flick of his thumb, Jorah tossed the thin bronze disk back to Tyrion, the shadow of a grin crossing his face as he did so. Tyrion caught it with a swiftness that surprised everyone in the room.

“I take it our foe was not interested in bribes then?” Tyrion returned the gesture as he used his arms to propel himself onto his short legs.

“Didn’t find him. Came across something else instead,” the old bear said in his gruff yet soothing voice. He stepped forward to shake Tyrion’s hand. As he moved, the faces of the four men standing in the hall came into view. Two were brothers of the Night’s Watch, one clearly a wilding with a head covered in red hair, the last a bedraggled soul wearing an eyepatch; though Tyrion thought he seemed oddly familiar.

Tyrion’s eye met the wilding’s. “Gods…” he heard the man gasp in a thick northern accent. The creased lines of his bushy brow wrinkled in confusion as he looked Tyrion over. “That’s got to be the ugliest baby I’ve ever seen.” This should be fun. He was used to dwarf jokes. He had heard them all. The best way forward was to ignore the jests. Be the bigger man, he thought as he approached the men.

“Tyrion of House Lannister,” he spoke before Jorah could properly introduce his newfound comrades, “and Hand of the Queen.” He extended one hand forward to shake the man’s own.

“Tormund,” he returned gesture, crushing Tyrion’s fingers in his grip, “called Giantsbane.” He held Tyrion’s hand for a moment longer before letting go. Ah, he thought as he pulled at threads of memory from years ago.

“I’ve heard your name before, when I visited the Wall some years past. You marched with Mance Rayder, no?” He could recall the time spent joking with Yoren and the men, or else speaking of more serious matters with Jeor Mormont and old Maester Aemon. A different army had been marching south then, though now that threat seemed far less dire.

“I did,” he nodded, “and who would have thought a fucking Mormont would save my life after years of trying to take it? Har!” he let out a booming laugh that seemed to shake the timbered ceiling of the solar and set the flames to dancing wildly in the hearth.

“We found them, a few dozen, broken and battered where the river meets the wood. Tormund and his men, the Lord Commander and his, and Lord Beric,” Jorah explained.

“Beric?” Tyrion asked in surprise. Jon had told him that the ‘lightning lord’ had ridden northward with the Hound and Thoros of Myr to join the ranging beyond the Wall. He had read Jorah’s
message that the man had been found with the others. Yet Tyrion had not seen the man in years. *Since he was a younger, more handsome man at Robert’s court. I can barely recall what he looked like.*

Recollections would have been useless anyway. A shade of a man stepped forward at the sound of his name. He was battered and scarred with a thick leather eyepatch covering part of his well-worn face. “Aye,” he said softly. “The Lord guided Ser Jorah’s own party to our sorry camp and saved us.” *Oh, I’m sure he did.* Varys hummed pensively in the corner at Beric’s words.

“That’s good to hear. And you’ve brought some Black Brothers along as well?”

“Lord Commander Tollett,” Jorah motioned to the smaller man clad in black leather and black furs. Tyrion looked him over. He had a long face with long brown hair that looked to be retreating to the top of his head, a pointed nose, and a thin beard still covered in hoarfrost.

“Not sure what there is to command anymore, but I’ll keep the ‘lord’ if it’s all the same to you,” he said without a hint of mirth. “This here’s Stev.” He offered no further introduction for the larger man with dark brown hair behind him.

“I see. Well, be welcome by the fire and warm yourselves. I shall send for hot mulled wine and something decent from the kitchens.” The men bowed their heads in thanks. “Though, I take it by your presence here the queen has asked you to attend our council meeting?”

“Aye,” Jorah nodded, “She did. They should both be on their way here now.”

That was good. They had much and more to discuss. The rangings, the visions of the boy Bran, plans and strategies for both the North and south. Tyrion called a serving girl from the end of the hall and asked for food and drink to be brought to the men at once. Then he resumed his seat by Varys. The cushioned seat was valuable for the solar would soon be crowded and they might be here for some time.

He watched the fire crackle merrily as lords and advisors filtered into the room. Each pair of eyes swept from left to right and right to left, making certain they had not insulted the Lord of Winterfell or the queen with their tardiness. Lord Glover accompanied Lady Karstark into the room. *The girl looks half a corpse herself,* he thought, *though not without good reason.* She had no doubt heard that Bran had seen the dead men bearing down upon her lands and that her people were fleeing south with all haste.

Lady Sansa and Arya arrived a moment later, both girls wearing sheepish smiles on their faces that betrayed some girlish conversation. The grins slid off their faces as soon as they crossed the threshold. *She wolves…* he joked, though only in part. The girl Arya was known to be deadly and wild; the polished blades of her thin sword and Valyrian steel dagger at flashed in the firelight. Sansa had no need for weapons; her eyes could do what steel could not.

Of course, she had steel sword to her as well. Lady Brienne walked a half step behind them both, wearing her usual grimace and Valyrian steel sword. Tyrion heard a grunting gasp from the corner as turned to see the man Tormund looking at the woman with eyes and mouth wide open. *Oh gods…*

A rather annoying clacking sound followed Lord Eddard Stark’s daughters into the room. Tyrion recognized the sound well enough and, sure as winter’s arrival, saw Samwell Tarly escorting Bran Stark into the solar. The larger man set the boy’s rolling chair next to the table while he made to lean against an empty spot between to tapestries.
Tyrion looked at Varys, but the spymaster only had eyes for the boy. Wariness and concern creased his face, giving him an ugly look. *His disdain for magic extends even to the Stark boy.* Of course, Varys was not fool enough to try anything now. They needed the boy and his visions. *Three Eyed Raven, he calls himself. He might make a fine spymaster one day. We won’t even need the birds.*

His own older brother saw fit to join them then. Jaime wore a jerkin of faded black and dark brown leather with no sigil visible. He met only Tyrion’s and Brienne’s gazes before finding one of the remaining seats at the edge of the room.

Finally, the royal retinue arrived. The occupants of the solar stood as Daenerys entered the room, followed by Jon, Ser Davos, Missandei, Grey Worm, and some dozen Unsullied clad in thick black leather. Their commander bid them stand guard outside the door. Maester Wolkan arrived behind the soldiers, the odd links of his chain clattering with every step. All others stood in respect, save Bran. *How rude.*

“Edd?” a rare smile broke across the Lord of Winterfell’s ever brooding visage as he moved to embrace his former brother.

“Aye…” the Lord Commander sighed, “it’s me alright. Thought I’d come back to you one way or the other.” Jon laughed.

“Gods, it’s good to see you. And you, Stev,” he inclined his head politely toward the other black brother. “And Tormund,” he took a few steps to greet the red-haired wildings, who enveloped him in a firm, hidebound hug. The door closed at last as the joyful memories of the past settled into the unfortunate business of the present.

*That’s it then,* Tyrion knew. Having been caught in an evening storm, Clegane had sent word that he was still a day’s ride away. Tyrion was shocked to learn the man had bothered to report at all. This would be their council.

Daenerys moved to sit in a finely carved, high backed wooden chair at the head of the table opposite the hearth. Jon moved to help her sit, but she shot him a stern yet tender look to halt his movements. *Our father-to-be already grows protective, I see.* Tyrion wondered what was going on behind those dark grey eyes. So much had happened to the man in so short a time. To learn of his true parents then discover he was going become one surely changed a man. *May you be a better father than mine own.*

The assembled lords, ladies, and councilors retook their seats after the queen had sat. Only Jon, Jorah, and Grey Worm remained standing. Jon looked to Daenerys for a moment, then to Tyrion, then let out a great breath that sounded suspiciously like a sigh. Finally, he opened his mouth to address the assembly.

“We’ve a number of things to address, not least of which are my brother’s visions of the dead,” the Lord of Winterfell began, “but first…” he looked to Tyrion.

“I had hoped to set forth my proposal before fewer ears,” he said as he rose from his own seat. “Nonetheless, it is a simple proposition. Instead of taking heads and hands, we make use of these men, innocent though they may be. I would clad them in their own armor and send them south on a mission.”

“You proclaim their innocence even as you send them into death’s arms?” Alys Karstark spoke from the corner of the room. No one else joined in her accusation. *Still, those stares, they all want to know what it is I intend to do.*
“Innocence…” he spoke the word slowly as if speaking a foreign tongue, “their innocence is a curious thing, is it not? If my father and sister committed grievous crimes and betrayals, am I to blame?” Silence overtook the room as the Lady of Karhold’s cheeks blossomed in so deep a crimson that Tyrion might have mistaken her face for a Lannister banner. Jaime scowled. Jon took a half step forward, anger plain in his eyes now. Tyrion cut him off. “A question for the maesters, I suppose.”

“What is it you propose?” Daenerys asked from the head of the table, her tone authoritative but calm.

“We shall send these men south to my family’s lands,” he caught his brother’s gaze for half a heartbeat before continuing, “under the guise that they serve my sister.”

“And what? Kill the queen?” Lord Glover laughed out his question.

“Would that I could dress you in crimson and send you south instead, my lord. No. That would be folly. I mean to secure potential allies for our cause. Ryn Hill and his men will ride for the Crag whilst flying the Lion of Lannister. There they will find Edmure Tully and his wife and infant son.”

“Edmure Tully?” Sansa shuffled from her own seat and raised her head at the mention of her own uncle. Arya looked curious as well.

“Rightful Lord of Riverrun,” he explained, “and his son would have a good claim to the Twins now the Frey men have been butchered.” Sansa leaned inward towards the table, ever curious, yet the younger sister turned her gaze away.

“And if they free Edmure and his family by force or deception, what then? Are we to expect the Riverlands to rally to his side?” Daenerys pressed him for answers.

“Your Grace, my lords,” Brienne stepped forward to stand in the firelight. This is unexpected. “I rode through the Riverlands not long ago. Should these men free Lord Tully, I know some houses would flock to his banners.”

“So we raise half a dozen houses in rebellion along the Trident? Are they to fight off the Golden Company while we battle the dead?” Jon demanded answers as he set one gloved hand upon the table.

“Set one half dozen against the other half dozen? Bring them all northward?” Tyrion gave a playful shrug as he strode around to stand before Jon without anything between them. “There are plenty of options. I say we send the man and boy to the Vale. Once we ride south, we can count of Edmure Tully to support our queen’s claim and rally the loyal houses of the Riverlands to our side.”

Jon nodded, but trouble still stirred in his eyes. “Very well. Ryn Hill and some of his men will be sent south according to this plan,” he said grimly.

“What other news of the south is there?” Jaime interrupted his host with an eager question. Of course, you want to know. Tyrion did not doubt his brother still harbored affections for their sister. Should we win this war, I may have to send him south under false pretenses as well. Grey Worm, Lord Glover, and a few others shot him glaring looks but he ignored them all. Tyrion looked to Varys as half the others did.

“Cersei has set the Golden Company against the lords of the Stormlands,” the spymaster explained, sparing the council the gruesome details. “She holds the Greyjoy ships and Iron Fleet in reserve,
alongside her own forces, Frey levies, and the remnants of the Tarly forces that were attacked along the Blackwater; though I would expect her to send them forth shortly to bring the Crownlands firmly under her thumb.”

“Tarly forces under what commander?” Jaime protested, “Randyll and Rickon Tarly were killed after the battle.” You damned fool.

“K-killed?” Sam spoke from his own position behind Bran’s rolling chair. Glances shot across the room like arrows cast into a summer gale. Samwell looked at Jon, Jon at Daenerys, Daenerys at Tyrion with a fury that suggested he might not see the dawn.

“I fear Lord Tarly and his son met their end in battle,” he lied. That seemed to placate some of the worried expressions in the room, yet other remained. Jon’s eyes flitted between his betrothed and her Hand. This is a conversation for another time…

“And what of the dead?” Daenerys almost tripped over her own words in her haste to pursue a different subject.

Jon looked at her for another second before turning to address the council. “Bran says he saw the Night King’s forces marching toward Karhold.” Alys let out an almost silent cry of despair as Lord Glover put a hand on her shoulder to steady and comfort her. “We’ve not heard from Karhold, but Lady Alys has sent ravens warning her castellan and commanding her own folk to flee south, and we’ve sent word to Lord Wyman to send ships north along the coast to supply and aid them.”

“Thank you, my lord,” the Lady of Karhold said, just above a whisper.

Jon nodded at her and sighed deeply. “Bran’s visions only tell us part of what we need to know,” he said as he reached for a scroll stored upon the shelf behind him. Carefully, he laid out the old map of the North upon the table. “My own ranging party saw tracks in the snow on the western bank of the Last River,” he explained. “Now either one of us is wrong, or the dead have split in two or more. We need to know which it is.” He turned to his cousin expectantly.

“They have,” the broken boy said dully. “I’ve seen the Night King leading his forces south and east to Karhold.”

“And across the river?” Tyrion asked the question he could sense on everyone’s minds.

The boy’s blue eyes met his for a moment. He met Bran’s gaze… and almost leapt back in fright as his eyes flashed white. The boy’s whole body shook for an instant, then it lay still.

“Oh, he’s having a vision,” Sam explained as he paced around and knelt at the side of the rolling chair. Tyrion looked around. Concern colored the expressions of everyone else in the room. They all looked among each other and the pale, empty eyes of the boy. A moment passed in silence.

“Is he all right?” Brienne whispered to the room.

“The boy’s a warg…” Tormund responded in wonder. Another moment passed. Then another. A log cracked loudly in the fire and a fierce winter wind began to howl outside. Tyrion looked to Varys again and was surprised to find the eunuch deeply unnerved. He had half a mind to comfort him just then.

Bran gave a great gasp as he emerged from his vision, though Tyrion thought it sounded as though he had just emerged from a pool of freezing water. “What did you see?” Sansa asked calmly.

“Some of the dead have crossed the river,” he said in a bloodless tone, “some twenty thousand,
perhaps. White Walkers ride with them.”

“I thought you said you had trouble seeing?” Arya spoke defiantly from her own position in the corner. She sounded almost angry.

“I don’t know….” Bran sounded uncertain at first. “for a while, yes. But then, well,” he looked at Sam as the girthy man shrugged. “It’s just been easier for me for a few days now. I can see what I need to see.”

“Regardless of his troubles, I’ve never known his visions to be false,” Jon spoke again, “and what he’s just seen confirms what my men found on the edge of the Bolton lands.”

“This could be an opportunity,” Davos said from his perch in front of an elaborate tapestry. He’s right…

“How do you mean, ser?” the queen addressed the smuggler.

Davos stood to explain himself, but Tyrion interrupted. “March our forces out to meet the dead. We can fight a fraction of the Night King’s forces without their commander or his dragon.”

“Dragon?” Lord Glover nearly spat out the word. Perhaps we held that too close to the chest. The lords must be told eventually. A few nods settled the Lord of Deepwood Motte’s startled stance.

“I fear our enemy has raised my dragon as he has so many brave women and men, my lord,” Daenerys address Lord Glover. “I assure you it makes no difference. I shall see your family, people, and lands protected with my other two.” The man nodded in thanks even as the blood drained from his face, though Tyrion thought he did not seem entirely placated.

“Davos is right,” Jon adopted an air of authority as he swept to the center of the room, “if we can strike a blow against the Night King, can destroy a piece of his army, we’ll stand a far better chance when the true fight comes.”

“With two dragons and nearly twenty thousand bodies of our own, I should think so,” Tyrion shot back. Though I have no intention of sending our dragons into the field of battle. “I should think Jaime would take a place under the command banners,” he continued, “we have few enough experienced leaders here, and with Lord Royce gone… Most took his meaning. He noticed a flash of suspicion in Lord Glover’s eyes, but otherwise the council had acquiesced to his suggestion. I doubt the soldiers themselves will accept this so easily.

“And how do we fight these twenty thousand dead men?” Jaime asked. “By your own accounts, this is an army that does not tire, does not weaken. They will not flee the field in horror at the sight of a dragon or horde of Dothraki.”

“We have made weapons of the dragonglass brought north and have torches, pitch, arrows,” Sansa began to argue.

“It’s the walkers you need to kill. His lieutenants,” Beric’s voice echoed off the stone walls of the hearth as the man looked into the flames. “They raised the bodies.”

“Lord Beric is right,” Jon stated, “when I slew a walker beyond the Wall, the wights that followed it fell.”

“So fly your two dragons over these lieutenants and bathe them in dragonfire,” Jaime proffered his hand as if to demonstrate how simple the solution was.
“The walkers killed the first dragon with a single spear,” Tormund said cautiously.

“I fear I must agree with our wilding friend here,” Tyrion spoke again, “this division of the dead certainly presents an opportunity, but we must be cautious. We cannot risk the dragons in a mere skirmish.” There were some murmurs at that.

“Lord Tyrion is right,” Jon called above the din, “we won’t need to deploy all our strength, either. We won’t need to fight all twenty thousand wights – not for long.”

“What is it you propose?” concern colored the queen’s voice as she demanded the details of the plan.

“Every time I’ve fought them,” he nodded at Tormund, Edd, and Jorah in turn, “they’ve held their commanders in reserve, like any living army would do.” But…? “but, they don’t fight like a living army. They attack all at once, they overwhelm their foe with sheer numbers. If we can draw the bulk of the army into a fight with the queen’s Unsullied,” Jon began to make small motions with his hands as if to demonstrate the movements of great armies, “we can send light and heavy horse around the rear to kill the remaining wights and the commanding walkers.”

There were a few mutters of apprehension around the room. Davos was the first to speak. “You mean t’spring a trap?” he sounded reluctant. Jon nodded.

“Kill the commanders and the wights will die again without a fight,” Jaime understood the plan.

Draw them in, as I did to Stannis upon the Blackwater. Tyrion remained skeptical of this plan. He had seen fewer battles than his brother or the other men in the room, to be sure, but he knew that battle plans seldom deserved their names once steel clashed with steel. “Of course,” Tyrion raised his voice to be heard among the half dozen low discussions now filling the solar, “we’re assuming these walkers do not sense our trap. That the dead charge forward as you say they will. That our men can hold the line and not break in fear at the sight of twenty thousand corpses.”

“Unsullied fear nothing,” Grey Worm spoke in his monotone voice from where he stood motionless behind the queen.

Daenerys gave Tyrion an annoyed look. “We must make assumptions in war. Would you have us rot behind Winterfell’s walls and wait for the dead to come here with all their strength?” Preferable to rotting as a blue-eyed corpse, Your Grace. He saw that fiery glint in her eye that betrayed an eagerness for battle and blood; that hint of Targaryen madness that showed itself from time to time. It was useful, yes, but dangerous and deadly if left unchecked. “My Unsullied will hold the line against these dead men while the Dothraki sweep around the rear and kill these walkers.”

“And how do you propose t’find this smaller army of dead men?” Davos asked, “even if they’ve crossed the river there are still leagues over which they can roam.”

“They hunt the living. They’ll find us,” Tormund said grimly. His tone darkened the mood in the room. Tyrion looked around at the downcast eyes as each person privy to the plan considered his or her role in it.

“And we can find them as well,” Sam Tarly spoke again, “Bran can see across the North and use his ravens as well. It might be easier that way,” he gave a half shrug with a half-smile.

“That’s settled then,” Jon said decidedly, “we’ll discuss specifics later this evening.” He turned to Grey Worm and instructed him to prepare his forces. The other lords and advisors made to rise and
dismiss themselves from the solar, but Daenerys’ voice rang clear above them.

“There is one other matter to discuss,” she said. Tyrion watched her flash a quick look at Jon before continuing. All eyes returned to the queen. “Marriage,” she spoke the word as if it were a command to one of her dragons. Some took the queen’s meaning far more quickly than others.

Tyrion might have burst out laughing as his eyes flitted from lord to lady to councilor. Beside him, Varys matched the tips of his fingers together idly, a bored expression all too plain on his face. Jorah seemed beside himself, though the old knight hid his emotions well enough from those who did not know him well. Beric nodded his approval as he turned from the fire while the man Tormund only gazed at the Lady Brienne with an intensity rivaling the queen’s own visage a moment earlier.

Jon looked half shocked himself, as if the announcement of the planned betrothal had finally made it all true. Jon’s own black brothers wore expressions of surprise, yet all seemed gleeful in their own way. The Stark sisters were less surprised. Sansa’s face remained unchanged whilst her younger sister grinned in the dark corner like some square toothed shadow cat. The brother was… well no doubt he’s already seen what we’ll serve at the wedding feast.

Only Lord Glover scowled at the announcement. “Marriage?”

“Yes, my lord, between me and your Lord of Winterfell.” The queen’s tone was light and womanly, but serious. Tyrion remembered the same approach when they had first spoken in atop Meereen’s Great Pyramid. The Lord of Deepwood Motte made to speak again, but she cut him off. “I am not wedding you, my lord, and you will recall that I never demanded you or your fellows bend their knees. I brought my armies and my dragons north to defend what’s yours. Family, land, people, all of it.”

“Your Grace, I never meant to-”

“Perhaps when this fight is won, you might help me claim what is mine. Through this marriage I join your people, as they may join mine in time,” she finished with a woman’s grace, a queen’s authority, and a dragon’s fire. Tyrion caught Sansa’s smirk for a moment as Lord Robett stepped back beside Lady Karstark, cowed but not convinced. If our allies are as weak willed as my lord just now, Cersei might just stand a chance.

“We will inform the remaining lords later this evening,” Jon finished as he struggled to hide the shadow of a grin. Yet Tyrion noticed it did not reach his eyes as he looked from Daenerys to Samwell Tarly and back again. Mayhaps this evening’s bedroom banter will be less pleasant than before, he thought as the queen paced towards the door and the once orderly solar dissolved into a dozen conversations.

Tyrion was of half a mind to intervene, to explain the queen’s actions upon the Blackwater. He knew she was changed from the woman she had first been when he had found her in the East or when they had landed upon Dragonstone. He checked his own impulse. If they are to be joined and rule as one, they must learn what that means. Harsh words might be exchanged this evening, but harsh words might yet prevent harsh deeds yet to come.

Chapter End Notes
A couple notes here.

The South - I'm sort of doing damage control here. The show slaughtered a ton of characters that made the political scheming so interesting and I'm trying to build it back a bit. I'm not a medievalist, but I think it's pretty ridiculous that the ruling families of two regions die and the other houses just fold. There is plenty of potential here, so rest assured the southern story line will be more compelling. There is plenty going on, but I did not feel an information dump in like two conversations was good writing. More will be revealed as our northern friends learn what's going on in their absence.

On that note, I've made drastic changes to Harry Strickland, leader of the Golden Company. In the books he's like a cowardly foil for Jon Connington. With no fAegon in the show, I've decided to alter his character quite a bit to reflect the sellsword culture of Essos alongside some exile elements (Jon Connington, Vargo Hoat, Daario, etc.)

One of the things I enjoy doing is the one off POV chapters (e.g. Bronze Yohn Royce). I've got one or two planned for future chapters, but feel free to offer suggestions!

As always, thank you all for the awesome feedback and support. I certainly did not expect any of this when I scribbled that Daenerys piece a few months ago. It means a lot.
Daenerys V

Chapter Notes

Chapter 20! If you're greatly enjoying this, or mildly enjoying this, or not-at-all enjoying this, please leave a comment below! Always like to hear what people think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The announcements had gone about as well as Daenerys had expected. Once again, they had gathered in Winterfell’s great hall after sundown to let Jon inform his lords that he and Daenerys meant to wed, and soon. The northern lords and their valiant Vale companions had been loath to hear of their lord’s latest oath. Petty fear and selfish concerns drove them to murmur and grumble and complain, she knew. They thought this marriage would be tantamount to surrendering their lands, people, and pride to the south once more.

In truth, she had yet to discuss the exact terms of the union with Jon. How and where would they share their vows, who would preside over the ceremony, and the marriage itself had yet to be determined in full. He had sworn the North to her as Lord of Winterfell, but should he follow through on his desire to reveal his parentage to his people, his title and lands would rightly pass to Sansa.

Of course, if he does that, it might strengthen our claim to the throne. Daenerys was pleased to see he had come to terms with the revelation and yet she hoped he might more fully embrace his identity and place at her side. He had named her his queen. I mean to name him my king. Two Targaryens would sit upon their ancestors’ throne and rule together, once the wars were won.

And they still don’t trust a Targaryen, she considered the Northern lords again. Daenerys might have thought that the cold preserved prejudice, but she knew better. Men were this fickle in every corner of the world. Lords Glover, Karstark, Cerwyn, and all the rest worried for their families, people, and lands. Many of these lords had fought her father and brother. Perhaps some had lost fathers and brothers of their own during the War of the Usurper. People will do anything to protect their families, she thought as her hand shifted once more to her womb.

Three Targaryens... My family. It all seemed a dream still, even though she knew it was real. She remembered the signs from carrying Drogo’s son. When I was little more than a child myself. The thought of the unborn son that had been stolen from her made Daenerys draw her hand away and clench her fist in cold anger. That will not happen again.

Doubt lingered inside her, growing alongside her child. What if I lose it as I did Rhaego? Or Viserion? What if I die and leave the babe alone? What if I am not a good mother? Daenerys may have called herself Mother of Dragons and named her three hatchlings her children, but they were still dragons. Mother was what her freedmen and Unsullied had called her when she had ruled as queen in Meereen. A queen is a mother to her people, she knew.

Mother was just another title. She had never known true motherhood, as a girl or a woman. She had never held a child of her own blood in her arms; never felt a tiny hand grasp her own fingers in a moment of blissful vulnerability; never let a beautiful baby girl suckle at her mother’s breast. She wished for a girl, a little girl with silver hair like hers and grey eyes like her father’s. Or black hair, raven black like Jon’s with amethyst eyes... as I saw that night those months ago.
Daenerys had to keep herself from laughing. Here she was hoping for the color of her babe’s eyes and hair whilst most would be content with a healthy child. She hoped for that too, of course. *It just still seems a dream… or perhaps a cruel jape. How many times have I dreamt of family and love? Of children and a place to call home?* She was as close to having them all as she was close to losing them. *Death marches south with another one of my children…*

That had been the second announcement. In a moment of clarity, Missandei had suggested altering the presentation of the news so as to place the emphasis on the forthcoming march. It had worked, for any hint of dissention stirred up by the marriage had been swept away by news of a battle to come.

A new wave of hushed murmurs had swept over the assembled lords and knights as Jon revealed their plans to challenge their foe in the field. Why this Night King had divided his forces no one could rightly say, though divide seemed a generous word given that this smaller force still matched their own in numbers. Some had seemed fearful of the promise of a fight against their enemy. Others had been more eager, hunger for blood shining in their eyes as if there would be some glory to win in the war to come.

That angered her. *They have not seen. They don’t know.* That thing had slain Viserion, had raised him as a slave to its will. *These men don’t understand.* They would soon enough. Even if Jon’s plan to lure the White Walkers into a trap succeeded in ending the battle quickly, the horde of blue-eyed dead men was still terrifying to behold.

*This must be what Jon felt when he first arrived at Dragonstone, trying to convince me of an ancient enemy to the north. If I had only trusted him then… No. It would not do to dwell on the past. If I look back I am lost,* she had always told herself. She was here now and so was Jon. There was to be a battle soon. *And I shall have my first taste of vengeance against these creatures.*

Jon had ended the assembly with the news that the Lannister men had been sent from Winterfell and from the North. Their true mission, to find and rescue Edmure Tully and his child, was to remain a secret. Jon commanded some of the lords to prepare their best fighters to march three days hence before dismissing the assembly.

Daenerys had done the same with her commanders, gathering them in the lord’s solar to discuss plans, numbers, and logistics. Grey Worm had informed her that over six thousand spears were prepared to march into the field while her bloodriders had counted some thirty-five hundred riders ready for battle. Both groups of warriors would make up the bulk of the fighting force, with some of the northmen held in reserve. Dany silently wondered how her warriors would perform against the enemy she had seen beyond the Wall.

That had all been earlier this evening. Now, the dim flickering light of the torches betrayed the late hour at which she found herself pacing through the darkened halls of Winterfell’s main keep. She was alone save for Missandei and the Unsullied guards that shadowed her every movement.

“Will you ride with the Unsullied into battle, Your Grace?” her handmaid and dear friend asked, her voice as hushed and low as the fires that lit the hall before them.

“Of course,” Dany responded without turning to face her. After many years of practice, the two women had almost perfected the art of matching steady pace with steady conversation. “The Dothraki will expect their *Khaleesi* to ride with them into battle… and I must show these northern lords why I have come north. I must show them the kind of queen I am.”

“Ah, yes, Your Grace.” Dany could see a smirk flash across Missandei’s lips for a moment. They both knew Daenerys had come north for one lord in particular. *I swore to him we would fight the*
dead together and I shall honor that promise. The obvious answer, that she would not permit Jon to ride into battle alone, was left unsaid. Perhaps that was why her friend was smirking.

I am not the only woman with a loved one marching into harm’s way, she knew. “I will keep him safe,” she assured Missandei, though it was a promise she could not truly honor. Dany considered demanding that Grey Worm command his soldiers from the rear. I might as soon order my bloodriders to join the battle on foot. She would try to keep each of her sworn swords safe, but this was war.

She looked into her friend’s golden eyes then and saw her words had done little to assuage her fears. “These dead men…” her voice was even softer than before, “and this Night King. I heard the wildling man speaking of them as we left the solar earlier…. They-”

“I saw them too,” Dany cut her off before Missandei’s words guided their conversation into a darker place. “They are different, to be sure, but I saw many of the dead destroyed beyond the Wall. They are only bodies, not warriors,” she smiled at her companion. A false smile for false words. Anyone who is not afraid of our foe is either a boastful liar or a fool.

“Of course, Your Grace,” Missandei responded with a practiced courtesy. The pair rounded the corner that opened onto the hallway that housed Daenerys’ chambers. “Would you like me to help you prepare for bed?” she asked the queen. Dany considered the question for a moment.

“I think not, thank you,” she said. Jon might already be inside and well into a night’s rest, though he often stayed up waiting for her when she was attending to other business. Though she valued time with her friend, she savored the moments alone with her betrothed. The stone walls of their chamber kept out more than the snow and cold winds. When they lay together, all troublesome thoughts scattered like leaves in an autumn breeze.

As they reached the door, Missandei smiled, bowed low, and dismissed herself for the evening. Dany noticed her quickened pace as she walked down the hall and wondered whether Grey Worm had remained in the keep for the night.

One of the Unsullied guards opened the door and stood aside as she entered the room. A wave of warmth washed over her as she crossed the threshold and shut the door behind her. A fire crackled in the hearth and fresh candles flickered in the corners of the room. Their bed stood orderly, well made, and empty. Ghost slumbered in the corner, his white hide almost a silver-gold in the dim firelight.

Daenerys heard a great sigh from the left side of the room and turned to see Jon staring out the window, his gaze fixed on the towers of Winterfell and the black night sky beyond. He did not turn to greet her. She knew why. There was a great tension in the air. She could feel it; like a twine rope tied around their hearts and pulled taught, its fibers beginning to fray with the strain. Jon let out another sighing breath. She saw his breath fog up the glass windowpane. Daenerys remained silent too, watching her lover brood beside the window and looking at the flames dance to and fro in the hearth.

“What happened to the Tarlys?” she heard him ask after another moment’s silence. She had been expecting this ever since Jaime Lannister had seen fit to utter the ugly truth of the matter earlier that morning. Dany had avoided the subject in the midst of a council meeting. She could not avoid it now.

Jon knew she had attacked the Lannister armies upon the Blackwater. He knew her forces and her dragon had killed thousands of men, many of whom were simple folk, innocent save for the spears forced into their hands and the lion and huntsman banners flying above their heads. Sometimes
strength is terrible, I told him. Daenerys still knew that to be true. If we are to rule together, he must see it too. They could not send every enemy off on one of Tyrion’s schemes nor bind them in chains for the war’s duration. These wars will be terrible.

“I gave them a choice: bend the knee or die,” her tone was harsher than she intended it to be. She raised an eyebrow apprehensively, daring him to question her judgement. He is to be my husband, she reminded herself as Jon turned to face her. She softened her visage as their eyes met.

“And so you executed a father and son,” he said, his voice colored with confusion and frustration. Samwell’s father and brother, he means.

“I did,” she replied. She felt that familiar anger begin to rise inside her. He was her lover, her betrothed, but that did not mean she liked her decisions being questioned. “I made a choice, as did Lord Tarly when he betrayed his liege and the very people he swore to protect.” Randyll Tarly had helped Cersei’s forces plunder winter stores from a dozen castles and towns. How many mothers will see their children go hungry this year and next? How many families will struggle to survive the winter?

“Aye,” Jon agreed grimly, “but there’s a difference between killing a man in battle and killing him after he’s yielded.” He failed to meet her eyes as he soft often did during a difficult discussion. Daenerys wondered why he cared so much for some southern lord, even if it was his friend’s estranged family. They had argued before and no doubt would again, but this seemed out of place. After all, Jon had made terrible decisions too.

“Is there? I didn’t see Lord Bolton among the lords assembled in the hall this evening,” her tone was oddly defiant, almost unbefitting of a queen.

“That was different,” he sighed out, the fire gone from his tone as he met her gaze again, keeping his eyes focused on hers.

“Was it? He and his father were traitors too. I gave them the justice that traitors deserve,” she responded decisively.

“Traitor…” the word fell from his lips on a silent breath.

Oh... Daenerys swallowed. This time, it was her eyes that failed to meet his as they dropped to his chest and lower torso. Jon still wore a woolen undershirt and leather jerkin, but she knew what lay underneath. A slight sense of shame extinguished that inner fire as she remembered the feeling of running her hands across the deep red ruin over his heart.

Daenerys recalled what Jon had told her that night on the moonlight tower and during subsequent conversations on late nights. His own sworn brothers had named him traitor and carried out the sentence they thought he deserved. It was a terrible fate and end, made all the worse by his return and ability to recall what happened.

“Jon,” her voice was soft now, her tone that same she used when they were both tired and abed. “that’s not what I meant.” She stepped forward and took one of his hands in hers, closing the gulf between them. He nodded, realizing she knew what was on his mind. “You know I-”

“I know,” he said, “I know.” He took her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “Sam’s father may have been in the wrong and I know you did what you thought was right, it’s just…’ he could not put his emotions into words. Would I truly understand it even if he did?

They stood in silence for a moment, lost in thought. Daenerys recalled the battle’s aftermath clearly
enough: acrid taste of ash in her mouth and the hundreds of wide-eyed boys brought before her as prisoners. Most had simply sworn to never take up arms again House Targaryen again, but Lord Tarly… I would do it again if I had to, she knew at once. But what would he do?

“If we ever face such a situation again, I will have a king to question my decisions, hmm?” Daenerys tried to give Jon a reassuring smile as she moved back a half-pace while keeping his hands in hers. The corners of his mouth twitched upward in an attempt at a light-hearted gesture, but his eyes betrayed his true thoughts as they widened.

“King…” he whispered the word as if the two lovers were engaged in some court conspiracy.

“What did you expect when you agreed to marry me?” she almost laughed out the question. Jon finally smiled, the frustration of the previous topic forgotten for the time being.

“It wasn’t a queen I said yes to…” he admitted.

“It was,” she corrected him. “You named me your queen. Now I name you my king,” she finished equal parts playful and serious. Perhaps in ages past some queen might have named her husband prince consort or something similar. Daenerys did not intend to rule that way. We will do it together.

It was odd. Ever since she had burned Drogo upon the pyre and emerged unburnt with her dragons, she had dreamt of Westeros. Of home. She had traveled with her eyes fixed in front of her but her mind on the western horizon, always thinking of her father’s throne. In Qarth, she had tried to buy ships. In Astapor, she had won an army. In Meereen, she had learned what it meant to be queen and in Vaes Dothrak she had reclaimed that title. All for Westeros.

And now I am here. The Iron Throne had been within her reach for months. One breath from Drogon’s black maw might have ended resistance to her reign. She might have sat her father’s throne within weeks of landing on Dragonstone. Instead, she had received the King in the North in her hall and in her heart. It’s not just the throne I want now, Daenerys knew. It’s a home, a family. It’s him.

“You want me to rule beside you?” he asked uncertainly. That seemed a peculiar question. By his own recounting, Jon had served as the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch and then as the King in the North. Perhaps the thought of the Iron Throne and the realm at large gives him pause. Accepting her proposal had not just been an acknowledgement of their feelings for one another, but Jon’s acceptance of his true identity.

“Yes,” she said firmly, “I gave you my word that we would fight the dead together. I want us to rule together.” That was right. He was her blood with a claim of his own, if he chose to pursue it. Besides, they were to be married and she carried their child. Our daughter or son will learn to rule from both mother and father.

“Together,” Jon repeated the word as he mulled over the idea of ruling the realm. “Aye.”

“That’s settled, then,” she said softly as she leaned forward and up, placing a soft kiss on his lips.

“Promise me this, though,” he said with a renewed hint of authority and confidence in his voice. She raised an eyebrow. “You will speak with Sam and tell him what happened,” he finished.

Daenerys did not care to discuss the battle beside the Blackwater any longer, but she understood his longing to make things right. “With you by my side,” she smiled. “We will do it together.” He nodded in agreement.
They parted then, both attending to their respective disrobing. Daenerys walked away from the hearth and toward the low table and mirror in front of which Missandei helped her prepare for each morning. She removed her silver dragon pin from her shoulder and slipped out of her favored black dress into something suitable for sleeping. Then she pulled back the cushioned, armless chair and sat. Slowly, she undid the braids that held back her long silver hair.

Her eyes caught a red streak in the silver fog of the mirror. Dany narrowed her vision as she tried to make out what she saw in the reflection. A scar... The maester had said that there would be some scarring from the assassin’s blade. We’re more alike than we’d care to admit, Jon Snow, she smiled to herself as her fingers reached up and traced the thin red line that ran over her left breast.

The scar was one of many changes Daenerys’ body had experienced since arriving in Westeros. Her thighs were firmer and stronger from riding Drogon around Dragonstone and into battle. Her breasts and womb were already beginning to see the effects of her pregnancy. And, of course, her tolerance for northern ale and northern weather were vastly improved.

A great crack caused her to turn her head. Jon knelt by the fire as naked as the day he was reborn. Her love held an iron poker in one hand and a pine log in the other. As she watched him breath new life into the hearth with a practiced patience, she noticed something she had not seen before. Burns... How have I gone months without noticing that? Or is it fresh? No, she would have taken note of that.

“Your hurt,” she said as she rose from her chair and walked over to where Jon knelt by the fire. He looked up and gave her a confused look at first, but as his eyes met her stare, recognition bloomed across his face.

“Oh, no,” he laughed softly, “it’s nothing. A burn from years ago. My first year on the Wall.”

“Was that when you were still learning to light a fire?” she asked with a smirk.

“I’ve always lit my own fires, Your Grace,” he said with a playful smirk of his own. “It was when I learned fire would kill the dead,” he responded, his own smile fading somewhat even as the glow of the flames cast his face in alternating patterns of orange, gold, and scarlet.


“Aye, we found two slain rangers beyond the Wall and brought them back to Castle Black,” he began to explain. Of course, she thought as she recalled a similar story from their time on Dragonstone. “One rose, blue-eyed and black-handed. It tried to kill the Lord Commander and I killed it, with Ghost’s help,” he explained as he nodded to the sleeping direwolf in the corner. Jon rose to his feet and faced her. Despite her best efforts, Daenerys’ eyes left Jon’s own as he rose, scanning his sculpted figure and manhood before returning to his face.

“The Lord Commander,” she grasped at the morsel of information that she recognized. It was a favored tactic amongst those who sought to seem informed; a necessary one amongst those who sought to rule. “That was Ser Jorah’s sire, no?”

“It was,” Jon replied as he set the iron aside and took Daenerys by the hand, leading her to their bed. “I’ve known few men as fierce as the old bear, and fewer women still,” he smiled at her, though she could tell he did not care to discuss the matter any further just now. Jon raised the thick furs as if opening a door in courtesy. Daenerys pulled at the edges of her silken nightclothes and gave a mock curtsy as she slipped underneath the furs. He joined her a second later.

His naked warmth felt so good against her. It felt right. She felt him shift his position and settle
against her while wrapping a muscled arm around her waist and drawing her in. He buried his face in her loose hair and his breaths slowed steadily. Hers did too. The shadows cast by the fire in the hearth seemed to lengthen as her eyes grew heavy. Her warmth melded with his, and, just before sleep took her, Daenerys could not tell where her body ended and Jon’s began.

Her dream that night was troubled. In it, she stood upon a high balcony of the Red Keep, her family’s stronghold, high on Aegon’s Hill in the heart of the capital. Only it was different than she remembered from her flight into King’s Landing. The towers were made of red and black stone, fused seamlessly as they wound their way upward to brush the clouds. The streets were paved with smooth stone, dark as the blackest night, instead of cobbles and grey slate. Some were not streets at all, but canals of hot fire that periodically sent tongues of flame soaring half as high as the towers themselves. Dany looked across the city to the Hill of Rhaenys, where she knew the Dragonpit to be, but saw only pools of molten fire there as well.

A great black shadow passed overhead and Daenerys looked upward to find Drogon circling another of the keep’s great towers. But no, Drogon is black… This dragon’s scales were of a crimson deeper than any she had ever seen and its horns and spinal plates were the gold of a summer sunset. It perched itself atop one spire and loosed a mighty roar across the city that caused a score of fiery spouts to shoot upwards from the earth.

Daenerys pressed her hand to her swollen womb as she stepped forward, some madness urging her to challenge the beast, but her footsteps echoed against the black slate and the crimson dragon turned its gaze to her. Its eyes burned with malice. Dany stood her ground as the dragon roared again, a savage and frightening sound. Yet the beast breathed no flame of its own, nor did it fly toward her.

Another roar sent shockwaves through the city and Daenerys stumbled as her tower shook. Below, the sound had sent great ripples through the canals of fire. Another roar sounded from the tower and the world shook. Dany was knocked off her feet, cradling her unborn child as she fell back. The crimson beast loosed one final cry before the world broke asunder and flames consumed the tower, Daenerys, and her child.

Dany’s eyes opened wide to behold the bright, white rays of pale winter sunshine that heralded a new northern day. It was a dream, she told herself. Just a dream. The white light calmed her as it washed out the fading memory of her troubled night’s rest. Today shall be a good day, she knew at once. If the sun dared to show its face this early, then they might have it for its entire journey across the southern sky. Good weather was much needed with only two days left until the march.

As Daenerys moved to escape the warm confines of the furs, Jon stirred. Such a light sleeper, she thought, I’ll never be able to escape to so much as the privy without him knowing. The thought made her laugh out loud. That only served to wake Jon fully.

“Pleasant sleep, I take it?” he mumbled as he shifted to face her.

“Yes,” she lied with a practiced smile. There was no need to trouble him with dreams just now. Even so, the great beast in her dream woke another thought in her mind, one she had considered for weeks but never acted on. Jon Snow shared her bed and her blood, but he would never share her mount. I have another dragon who needs a rider.

Drogon had taken well to Jon, so why would Rhaegal prove any different? He’s calmer than Drogon is, she thought as she considered the idea. And he would keep Jon safe and far above the battle. Yes, she decided almost at once. There was little harm in trying. “I have something for you,” she said smiling.
“Oh?” he seemed genuinely curious. “A wedding gift, is it?” You might consider it something of an inheritance, she thought.

“Of a sort. Get dressed,” she commanded, still smiling. Jon rose from the bed and swiftly made his way to where he had placed his clothes the night before. He splashed some water from a silver washbasin onto his face before beginning to dress. Daenerys watched his scars disappear as he donned his undergarments, leather jerkin, woolen breeches, and padded armor. He pulled his hair back in a tight bun and secured his direwolf gorget about his neck. Jon wrapped his dark leather swordbelt around his waist and placed a sheathed dragonglass dagger at his right hip and Longclaw at his left. Finally, he fastened his great fur cloak about his shoulders.

Dany felt a twinge of jealousy at how quickly he was able to ready himself for the day. Missandei would come calling in the next moment or two. No doubt she was already waiting outside the door listening for signs of life within.

Jon opened his mouth to speak, but a quick succession of knocks against the door cut him off and proved Dany’s suspicions correct. “Your Grace, might I enter?” her handmaid’s voice sounded muffled from outside their chambers.

“Yes,” Dany called out. The door swung open and Missandei greeted the pair with a swift, shallow bow.

“Good morning Your Grace, my lord,” she said with a practiced courtesy before pacing to the dressing table to help prepare her queen for the day ahead. Jon responded with a deep nod of his own before moving to stand just inside the threshold. Dany sat upon the low cushioned chair as Missandei brushed and braided her long silver hair. She saw his lingering reflection in the corner of the mirror.

“I will meet you in the yard, Jon,” she called out to him, “I won’t be much longer.” He nodded and left the room. “A tight braid this morning, my friend. I mean to ride today.” It was a matter of both preference and practicality. Dothraki riders kept their hair in braids as show of strength, but the braid itself aided in that battle prowess. No warrior worth the name would ride into combat with hair flying about his face. Neither would she.

“Did Your Grace ride at all last night?” she saw Missandei’s smirk through the silver fog of the old mirror before her. Her friend was perhaps the only person who she could talk to of such matters, even if she had to endure the girlish teases. There were few enough women her own age in the castle itself and none seemed to trust her save Arya Stark. Daenerys had hoped that she and Lady Sansa might have developed something of a bond given what she knew of the woman’s experiences and her own past, but none had yet formed.

“No,” the word carried over multiple syllables as she laughed. “Besides, he’s told me he prefers my hair loose and undone.”

“There is no hair so beautiful as yours, Your Grace,” she said with a genuine smile as she finished her brushing and began to weave the silver strands into the style of the horse lords. “Though your lord’s beard is rather comely,” she offered.

Dany laughed again. “It is,” she agreed, “though I suppose you would not know much hair or beards on a lover.” Even in the mirror, Dany could see her friend’s blush even as she continued her work.

A moment later she was done with the hair and helped Daenerys dress in fine breeches and suitable dress for riding. Fully dressed and ready for a day of preparations, Daenerys exited her chambers
while Missandei dismissed herself and made to walk deeper into the keep. Her Unsullied sentries formed up around her as she walked down the hall and then the winding stairs that led down to the yard outside the main keep.

Sunshine temporarily blinded her and a rush of cold air stung her cheeks as a Stark sentry opened the thick oak door. Her Unsullied took up positions around her as she stepped onto the frozen, straw covered ground outside. Dany scanned the yard for Jon, but that proved exceptionally difficult today.

There was an odd, newfound energy to the keep and castle that replaced the usual laggardly pace. Northern soldiers and southron knights walked every which way, their armor polished and shining in the morning light. Each man bore a dragonglass weapon of some kind: long daggers and dirks; dragonglass tipped spears and lances and axes; even those odd mauls with jagged bits of black lodged in the fire-wood. A good number of soldiers carried torches as well, though many more bore shields painted with the beasts and sigils of two dozen houses. Daenerys had spent enough time in the hall and rummaging through the old books of the solar to recognize most of the heraldry.

The Westerosi soldiers parted as Daenerys made her way into the yard. Where is he? She was starting to get annoyed as she looked around for Jon. As she looked towards the entrance of the godswood across the way, Dany heard familiar voices raised in anger to her right. The castle forge? She made her way through the crowd toward

A stern voice heralded her arrival in the wide doorway of the smithy. “I will not have you marching off into battle,” it said. Jon’s voice. Dany blinked rapidly, trying to clear her eyes of the stinging smoke. Jon stood beside a squat iron anvil, his back turned to her. She could make out the bastard smith Gendry standing next to him with his muscled, soot-covered arms crossed over his broad chest and one leg upon a low wooden stool.

Daenerys had felt an on twinge of anger when she had learned the truth of Gendry’s parentage, yet she had quickly mastered her emotions. If she judged the boy for his father’s actions, then she was no better than the northern lords who judged her so harshly. I must show them the kind of queen I mean to be.

She stepped forward into the smithy and felt a wave of warmth from the forges’ fires. It might have felt smothering to these northerners, but Daenerys thought it a pleasant sensation, almost like a bath.

“I can fight,” a girl’s voice responded. Arya, she knew at once by the fierceness of the rebuttal. She had not seen her, hemmed in as her vision was by Jon and Gendry. The smaller girl stool in her usual dark brown jerkin and grey fur cloak.

“I know that, but I told you no,” Jon responded firmly, “you’re to stay here and guard our home. You’ll need to keep Sansa safe, hmm?” Jon offered his explanation as some sort of uneven compromise. He sounds almost fatherly.

“Arya has Brienne to protect her,” Arya spat in frustration. Hoping to find an ally to support her cause, Arya looked to Gendry. The smith only shrugged, though Daenerys thought she saw a flash of worry in his eyes. Arya grunted and launched a swift kick at one the legs of his stool. As she looked up, her eyes settled Daenerys. Her keen eyes had noticed what the others had not. “What do you think?”

“Your Grace!” Gendry stood up in surprise, almost smacking his head on a low timber beam. Daenerys nodded her head in acknowledgement. Jon turned too, his own grey eyes pleading for aid.
Together, a voice whispered in the back of her mind. *We’ll do it together.*

“I think you should listen to your lord brother, Arya,” she said calmly. Jon nodded in agreement. Without another word, she stormed off.

“That went about as well as I expected,” Jon sighed, turning to face her.

“You came here looking to tell your sister she could not ride into battle?” she asked skeptically. Jon looked to Gendry expectantly.

“He came here for this, Your Grace,” Gendry said as he turned and pulled a figure from the shadows. *No, not a figure.* It was armor, well made and finely wrought. Each piece was carefully placed up some wooden model. The polished steel breastplate shone a dull red as it reflected the forge’s glowing embers. Where some lords might have had the edges of their armor gilded, Dany’s was inlaid with some gem of the deepest black.

*Not a gem,* she corrected herself again. *Dragonglass.* Gendry had worked in the usually jagged material into the steel itself. There were other bits of steel armor as well. Daenerys smiled at the craftsman as she strode forward and inspected the vambraces, greaves, and small pauldrons in turn. Each piece was styled after the breastplate. “Still at work on the helm, Your Grace,” Gendry explained, “tried to fashion dragon wings on the sides, but they broke in the forging.”

Daenerys struggled to swallow her laughter as she put a steel pauldron back into place and turned to Gendry. Tyrion had said something of armor, but she had expected a bit of leather or something of the like. “Thank you, my friend. This is a gift fit for a queen.”

Gendry reached up and scratched at the base of his neck. “Well, yea,” he said sheepishly, “I suppose that was the idea.” Jon chuckled softly. “If you don’t mind, Your Grace, might be good to try it on. At least the breastplate, so I can make the proper adjustments before the march.”

Dany nodded her assent and the smith quickly went to work fitting the two pieces of steel around her small torso. *What adjusts might you make for an expecting mother?* She wondered to herself as Gendry tightened leather fastenings with two practiced hands. He finished quickly. As he backed away and let the full weight settle, Daenerys inhaled as deep as she dared in the smoky forge and rolled her shoulders back.

*This isn’t so bad.* The steel was lighter than she thought it would be, even though it would no doubt be a good deal more taxing on her legs and arms when the extra bits were added. It still felt a bit foreign, but seeing a layer of steel covering her womb also gave her a degree of comfort. She felt Jon’s eyes on her and turned to catch him staring amusedly. *We’re all set to try something new today,* she smiled inwardly while maintaining her royal demeanor.

Daenerys meant to make her own preparations for battle. The Night King might have stolen one of her children, but she still had two full grown dragons to send against her enemies. She had ridden Drogon ever since he landed amongst the assassins in Daznak’s Pit. *Rhaegal though...* Her green dragon still flew riderless.

Only someone with the blood of Old Valyria could tame and ride a dragon. Daenerys had thought herself the last Targaryen for years and had resigned herself to fact that two of her own dragons would never bear riders. Bran’s quiet words in the godswood had changed that in an instant. She had first conjured the idea when Jon had come to accept his true parentage and called at her door that night during the fierce winter storm. Now she would put it to the test.

At a word, Gendry removed the dragonrider’s armor. With another, she thanked him for his work
and dismissed herself and Jon from the forge. They made for the stables and less deadly mounts
than the ones waiting beyond the walls of Winterfell.

The stables were alive with activity as well. Stable boys and grooms check saddles and readied
Winterfell’s mount for war. Two attendants helped her prepare the grey palfrey she had ridden
from White Harbor whilst other hands assisted their lord in readying his white and grey gelding
Frost with saddle and brindle.

A few moments later, they were ready to ride. Jon joined Dany as she set off at a steady trot, her
guards quickening their own steps to keep pace. He still seemed troubled by the conversation with
his sister as the pair made its way through Winterfell’s inner gate and thence past the outer walls.
The destination of their morning ride would provide him with a much-needed distraction.

The Winter Town was abuzz with the same feverish energy that had gripped the castle. Men and
women alike bundled and stacked provisions atop wagons and sledges while the towns makeshift
smithies readied dragonglass arrowheads for the troops marching off to battle.

“Two dozen arrows might make all the difference,” Jon nodded at the crates of shining black
dragonglass tips as they passed one smithy to hurried murmurs of ‘m’lord’ and ‘your grace’.

“Do the dead have any?” she asked. It might be a foolish question, but she had only seen their
enemy fight for a moment when she had flown beyond the Wall. If they could throw spears of pure
ice into the sky, they might have other weapons too.

“Not that I’ve seen,” he assured her. Two dozen arrows for every one of my riders, and perhaps
two thousand riders with good, horn bows. Maybe more? A quarter as many northmen with the
longer yew bows. Daenerys struggled with the numbers as they walked onward. Even if each man
found his mark with each arrow, it still would not be enough to defeat their foe.

A troop of Unsullied marched past in their usual lockstep formation, the tips of their long spears
glinting with jagged dragonglass. The slaves she had freed from the Good Masters of Astapor were
the finest infantry in the world… though Dany caught herself wondering how they would fair
against an otherworldly foe.

The town receded behind them as they rode onward. To her left, Daenerys saw more Unsullied
drilling outside their massive camp. It was an impressive sight made all the more so by what Grey
Worm and Missandei had told her of their tactics. In battle, the Unsullied formed a wall of spears
and shields eight ranks deep. Each soldier fought in position for a few minutes, exerting all his
strength in combat with the enemy. A horn blast would signal his retreat, and he would fade into
the ranks to be replaced by the next in line. It was through this method that her Unsullied had been
known to outmatch and outlast all other armies.

Jon had eyes only for the Dothraki. Her bloodriders were fearsome, proud and, to the smallfolk and
lords of the North, utterly terrifying. The riders had been to Essosi folk what the White Walkers
were to the northerners: monsters that would sweep out of some unknown land and carry you off to
your doom. The few thousand Dothraki she had taken with her to Westeros had fared poorly in the
North’s winter storms, but the promise of battle had hardened their resolve and raised their spirits.
Thirty-five hundred riders were fit to join the march. With their battle plan in place, she hoped that
was all they would need.

Her armies would bear the brunt of this battle. Daenerys knew they were ready. It was said that the
lockstep legions of Old Ghis, on which the Unsullied were modeled, had once been the finest
footmen. Dany had no doubt her Dothraki were the finest riders as well. Yet both the Ghiscari and
the Dothraki had bowed before the might of the dragons. Ghis had been conquered and destroyed,
its walls torn down and fields sown with salt, sulfur, and skulls. To her knowledge, the Dothraki had never faced the dragonlords of the Freehold in open combat, only sweeping down out of the east after the Doom had claimed her ancestral homeland. *But the Freehold had hundreds of dragons. I have two.* She hoped they would be enough.

As she led the ride onward past her armies’ camps and into the low hills that surrounded Winterfell, she began to wonder where Drogon and Rhaegal had made their own dwelling. Dany had tried to move them away from the wood and the herds of livestock the northmen depended on for food, but a dragon often did as it pleased.

She, Jon, and their escort rode onward for a few minutes. There was something refreshing about the bitter winter air after days on end spent in the keep. Jon seemed rejuvenated by their ride as well. Yet she had not ridden forth for air. *Somewhere near…* she knew. She could feel them both. That familiar presence pressed against her mind as they rounded one hill, its northern face covered in snow but the southern side free of any sign of winter.

Her horse froze in place as it caught the downwind scent of her dragons. Jon’s did too. “Woah,” he steadied his white and grey gelding with a calm word and pat on the side, “it’s okay boy.” He looked at her as realization dawn on his face.

“Best we continue on foot, my lord,” she flashed him a grin as she swung out of the saddle and landed on the ground. Jon followed her. Like the hillside, the earth here was soft and muddy from her dragons’ heat. “Drogon!” she called out. A low rumbling and subtle shaking of the earth betrayed her dragon’s whereabouts. Daenerys crested a small ridge and beheld her great black and smaller green nestled between two hillocks. Not a speck of snow lay about their makeshift lair, though much of the ground was blacked with ash and covered with the half-melted remains of once-mighty beasts of the Wolfswood.

“Drogon,” Daenerys called out again, willing her dragon to come to her. He lazily looked up, regarding his mother with an eye of pure molten fire for a moment before shaking himself from side to side and raising his powerful, serpentine neck high above her then to her level in one fluid motion. As she reached out to stroke his great maw, she heard Jon draw a nervous breath behind her.

“Come,” she invited her betrothed forward, “I believe you two already know each other.”

“Aye,” Jon said. His voice was deep and calm, but she could see him shaking somewhat from the encounter. He removed the gloves from his hands and reached out to touch Drogon as Daenerys had done a moment before. Her dragon let out a low, strangely pleasant rumbling sound. *I take it he is pleased,* she mused, *but Drogon is not the dragon I would have him ride.*

Whatever ancient magic it was that governed the bond between rider and dragon had been lost in the Doom, but Daenerys knew enough to be confident. It was said that a dragon would never accept more than one rider. Balerion the Dread, Aegon’s mount, had known several Targaryen riders in his lifetime, but never more than one at once. Aegon’s sisters had never dared mount their brother’s great black, nor he Vhaegar or Meraxes. *Now Jon shall ride the green I named for my brother.*

*Bē,*” she urged him in the Valyrian tongue. ‘Up’ would have been the proper translation and taken literally it might have meant anything from stand to fly. Yet Daenerys knew each command was imbued with emotion and intent as well. *I mean only to have you move aside, my sweet.* Her dragon did as she commanded, straining his two powerful legs and shifting to make room for Daenerys and Jon to pass.
Rhaegal came into sight as Drogon shifted away. Her green dragon was smaller than her black, but swifter through the sky and more willing to accept her commands. *[More willing to accept a rider too]*, she hoped. Jon was only half a dragon himself, but that might still be enough.

She turned to Jon and saw his grey eyes sweeping over Rhaegal from horns to tail. He looked at the dragon, then to her, then back again. “Call to him,” she said, encouraging Jon to step forward as she had done a moment ago.

“Daenerys… I don’t… You can’t mean to…” he said, his hesitation betraying his fear. By the look on his face, it was now altogether clear that this had been what she intended from the start of their morning ride. *You tried to hide from your blood, Jon Snow. You will not hide from this. You cannot.* His predicament filled her with an odd sense of satisfaction. Perhaps it was because she might finally have a fellow with whom to enjoy the skies. Perhaps it was only because she recognized the years of her own dragon taming frustrations in this single moment.

“Do it,” she urged.

“Rhaegal,” he said firmly but quietly. The dragon did not stir.

“He is a dragon, Jon, not a napping child,” she laughed.

“Rhaegal!” he shouted her dragon’s name this time in a tone that revealed the king he had been and would become again. The green dragon opened his bright, golden eyes and turned his head to regard Jon curiously.

“Go to him,” Daenerys encouraged Jon with a bright smile and a soft touch on his arm. With a measured pace, he approached Rhaegal as he once had Drogon. Smoke rose from the dragon’s nostrils as he raised his neck and extended himself forward to meet Jon’s advance. Her lover paused for a moment before reaching out and stroking the green scales of Rhaegal’s maw.

A low, satisfied rumbling echoed between the hills again. *I take it that’s a good sign,* she thought. Another moment passed with Jon stroking Rhaegal’s snout. Dany thought she heard him whispering something to the dragon, but she could not rightly make out what he was saying. Perhaps Jon sensed her eyes on him then, for he turned and looked at her with a wide-eyed expression that begged for aid.

“Climb on!” she called out to him even as she walked over to where Drogon had moved. *Best show him how it’s done.* Daenerys scaled her dragon’s side in a few practiced movements, positioning herself between the twin rows of great spinal spikes while taking care to cradle her navel. She looked over hoping to see Jon mounted confidently, ready to fly through the northern sky alongside her.

To her disappointment, the Lord of Winterfell still stood with one boot in the mud. His bare hand grasped one of Rhaegal’s smaller spikes on the side of his neck, but elsewise he was frozen. Slowly, carefully, Jon made his way up and onto the side of Rhaegal’s wing and thence to a spot between the ivory spikes that protruded from the smaller dragon’s spine.

As she watched Jon settle in on the dragon’s back and adjust his position, Daenerys felt her heart swell with joy for a heartbeat. Then Rhaegal shift, twisting his neck and shaking his body rapidly back and forth in an attempt to free himself of his new rider. She heard Jon cry out in surprise as he fell. *Gods, no…* Daenerys clambered down Drogon’s side twice as quickly as she had climbed. The soft mud and dead grass softened her impact as she landed and rushed to where her other dragon had cast Jon off.
Her lover lay in the mud. The softened earth that had eased her own landing had saved Jon from a shattered bone. She silently thanked the northern gods that he had not come to harm. Groaning in mild agony, Jon rose to his feet and brushed the odd bits of dirt and earth from the front of his padded leather armor.

“Are you hurt?” Dany asked.

“No,” he grunted in response, “not physically, anyway.” He flashed a pained smile as he walked away from the dragon and toward her. Daenerys let out a breath that she had not realized she was holding in.

“I’m sorry, I just thought that-”

“I might ride a dragon because we share blood?” he finished for her, his voice and eyes both full of doubt. I hoped, she wanted to say. Perhaps he is right. She was the blood of Old Valyria, and it had taken her years to finally tame and ride Drogon. And my first time was amidst blood and battle. Maybe dragon and rider only needed some time. That thought gave her some hope.

“Yes,” she responded, “dragons are more effective in battle if they have riders.” And dragons keep their riders out of harm’s way.

“Well, I may stick to riding Frost for the time being,” he said, inclining his head to where he gelding stood waiting beyond the low ridge. She could see disappointment in his gaze. For a moment, he was truly a Targaryen. Without saying anything else, he started to make his way back toward the horses. Daenerys joined him, glancing back once more to where Drogon and Rhaegal had settled back into slumber.

Two days yet remained before they planned to march east and meet the dead in battle. We will try again, Daenerys promised herself as she looked back on final time before spurring her horse onward to Winterfell.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry team. I know Jon riding a dragon has become something of an expectation in the Season 7 continuation sub-genre, but Jon just hopping on Rhaegal like he's scooting into an Uber he just ordered seems weird to me. It took Martin five books to reach that point with Daenerys (though that's a little different since he was growing). I didn't just write this scene for kicks and, like the Cylons, I do have a plan.

Hope everyone had a solid Thanksgiving/ weekend in general!

Iron Bowl makes me sad.
Arya III

Chapter Summary

Arya strikes.

Chapter Notes

I honestly looked at this story thus far and considered blowing it up and starting from scratch. That's the professional side talking. I know I could craft a tighter and more compelling story if I tried. Then again, this is fan fiction and such is the nature of serial publication. That said (and this being my first real piece of writing), I think I have improved in a number of ways over twenty one chapters. Hopefully you all do too!

Always enjoy comments left below and talking with people!

Happy December!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Arya felt a cool wind stir about her. It came from the deep beneath the earth and carried the musty scents of sulfur and damp stone. Outside, the winter wind was wild. It whirled about the walls, spinning loose ice crystals into great ethereal columns that danced around the yard in the day’s failing light. It howled like a wolf as it lashed against the castle’s towers, seeking entrance like some starving beast. She loved to listen to it as she lay abed in those blissful moments before sleep. The northern wind reminded her that she was home.

Down in the crypts of Winterfell, the wind was gentler. It made the hundred lit candles around her family’s tombs flicker, but never fail. It pulled at her hair and cloak with ghostly fingers. Maybe they’re trying to say something, she thought to herself as she looked around at the grey stone faces of her family. Whatever wisdom they might want to pass on was trapped behind cold stone lips and lidless eyes.

I always thought there were ghosts down here. The low moans of the wind sounded like ghosts. The flickering firelight cast ghostlike shadows on the walls. Ghosts... Arya looked further down the vaulted hall to where her grandfather had been lain to rest, remembering how Jon had once covered himself in flour and jumped from behind the tomb to frighten his half-siblings. The thought made her smile.

Much of her family was here with her. Two dozen other Starks lined either flank of the long, vaulted hallway. This first level was the only one that was regularly lit with candles and torches, though Arya often ventured deeper into the bowels of the earth below Winterfell where darkness covered the faces of a hundred dead and forgotten Kings of Winter.

The wind moaned again and Arya closed her eyes, letting the air caress her face. The crypts were cool, not cold. The hot springs that ran beneath her family’s lands and bubbled to the surface in the
godswood helped keep the subterranean halls at a comfortable temperature.

The crypts were a special place, full of memory and dreams of lives long past. Arya liked to come down here early in the mornings, before much of the castle woke. It was a sanctum of her family and intended for her family alone. Stark guardsmen cleared the upper steps of snow and kept the torches lit, but otherwise it was understood that only the members of House Stark were permitted entry. She found the solitude to be pleasant.

Her father stood before her as stern faced in death as he had been in life. Still doesn’t look like him, she thought as she examined the carving for the hundredth time. Not truly. She missed him dearly, just as she missed mother and Robb and Rickon and Bran. The real Bran, not the “Raven”. The real Bran would have helped me with the Lannisters. He would have helped his family. She still felt angry at his refusals to be of assistance, but that was all settled for the time being. And now he says he can see again.

Sometimes, Arya wished she had the sight as he did. She could travel the world in an instant, flying across the seas to distant, fabled lands of golden Yi Ti or walk across the ruins of Old Valyria where dragons had ruled for thousands of years. She could see into the past as Bran claimed he could. Fantasies sprang unbidden into her head as she paced back and forth along the long and dimly lit hall. I could sail with Nymeria down the Rhoyne and across the Narrow Sea. I could watch them build the House of Black and White. She swallowed. I could see father again…

Arya longed for her family to be whole and happy once more; though, deep in the secret places of her heart she knew it could never be so. She loved Jon, Sansa, and Bran; but each had changed in numerous ways since they had been separated as children. She could no more revive the Winterfell of her childhood than she could bring Eddard Stark back to life.

Her eyes found her aunt Lyanna’s statue in her enclave a little further down the way. Father’s sister. Jon’s mother. His true parentage did not make him any less her brother or make her family any smaller. In fact, it may yet make it larger. She hoped that she might find a new sister in Daenerys. They would be sisters through marriage soon enough, when she and Jon were wed. They would all make a new family.

She had meant what she said to Jon some days past. I don’t want it to happen again. She would not let these new wars break apart her new family. Arya Stark had been a powerless little girl the day Joffrey had taken her father’s head. She was not powerless anymore. I’m not that little girl. I can protect them.

The torches flickered wildly as another gust of wind rushed forth from the darkness, whispering a nameless threat. This gust was colder than the one before and Arya felt herself shiver in concert with the candle flames as the chill wind cut through the layers she wore. She absentmindedly thumbed the hilt of her Valyrian steel dagger. The blade had killed one man who had tried to harm her family and it still might kill the dead men who marched on her home; but it would do no good against a menacing wind.

Time to go, she knew. Closing her eyes, she drew in one last breath, inhaling the scents of the crypts. She smelled the rust and wet stone, the candles, the faint hints of sulfur from the springs, and the scent of silent death one could only come to know from the cellars of the House of Black and White.

Turning on her heels, Arya walked away from her father’s tomb and made for the steps. The pale white light of a northern morning greeted her as she cleared the top step and walked into the wide castle yard. Even at this early hour, Winterfell was alive with activity. Enticing scents of cooked meats and fresh-baked bread wafted from the kitchens, driving out the lingering taste of the crypts
and making her stomach growl in hunger.

Squires, pages, and sentries scurried about like rats, their claws made of weapons and armor and the other bits of equipment that were bundled in their arms. Grooms readied warhorses for battle while the smaller stable boys prepared the sure-footed garrons for another northern march. They would leave in two days’ time. Everything had to be ready.

_I must be ready too._ Jon had said that the queen’s armies would comprise the bulk of their forces in the field, but he planned to take at least a thousand northmen to hold in reserve. Arya knew her place was in the field. She had never been in a true battle – one where everyone wore armor – but she was confident that she could hold her own. _Besides, we need every Valyrian steel blade we have to fight against these walkers._

At least, that’s what Jon always said in those meetings. The solar was where she had learned much of their enemy, though she had heard much else in the whispered words in the great hall and from the boastful talk from some of the younger soldiers. Some seemed almost eager for battle. That seemed odd. Arya knew the tales of the Long Night from Old Nan’s bedtime stories: demons made of ice; spiders as big as hounds; armies of dead men and a winter that lasted longer than she had been alive. _Doesn’t seem so bad yet,_ she thought as she looked up at the sky.

There were other stories now, from the men who had gone beyond the Wall. Jon had spoken of an army of one hundred thousand and a Night King. _And his dragon…_ Maybe all that should have scared her, but it did not. Arya knew what real fear could do; she would not let it best her. _Besides, we have two dragons and thousands of the queen’s soldiers._ They said Robb had bested the Lannisters with a third of their strength in the field. Arya was certain Jon would do the same with their new foe.

Part of her wanted to climb one of Winterfell’s towers and watch the dragons fly over the Wolfswood as they so often did in the morning. Part of her wanted to break her fast in the hall. She considered making her way to the kitchens to pilfer a loaf of bread or to the hall to be served a meal as a proper lady might have done, but another wave of smells filled her nostrils with new scents and her mind with new ideas. Arya closed her eyes again and inhaled the smoky air that flowed across the yard from the smithy. It smelled of coal, iron, and fire. It smelled like her soot-covered clothing that needed to be handed to a washerwoman twice a week. It smelled like him.

Her throat became dry as she looked toward the smithy and thought of who she would find inside. _It’s just the smoke,_ she told herself. Yet she knew it was a lie. Looking at him and thinking of him brought on an odd sensation, like fire in her veins. Try as she did to master those emotions and impulses, they often got the better of her. For a woman with her training, it was frustrating to say the least.

Arya decided against the kitchens for the time being. She craved a different sort of satisfaction. The men walking across the yard yielded to give her space and she cut through the milling masses toward the smithy. Her deeds and reputation often had that effect. It would have been a lie to say that she did not enjoy it, but she did not feel entirely comfortable either.

A haze of grey smoke hung outside the low timber entryway and she held her breath until she was inside… then promptly let out a hacking cough. She heard him laugh immediately and watched as he peered out from around the bend. “You alright?” _Not the ‘good morning’ I had planned,_ she mentally kicked herself. _Now he’ll think I cannot stand the forge._

“I’m fine,” she insisted perhaps a bit to forcefully.

“Forge is no place for m’lady,” Gendry said, playfully ignoring all the time she spent amidst the
heat and smoke as he moved to a low table to sort his tools. Arya saw a grin flash across his face. She pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes at his teasing. This was their strange game: ‘m’ladys’ and jests and teases that would have danced on the edge of outright insults for those with thinner skin. The fact that her smith’s vein’s ran with king’s blood made it all even stranger.

“I said I’m fine,” she said again, kicking a pebble at him. It missed its mark. She knew herself and knew she usually was not this aggressive with anyone; but her frustration and embarrassment and other feelings often expressed themselves that way. Gendry did not seem to mind. In fact, it made him laugh even more.

“As m’lady says,” he set his tools down and turned to her. She felt herself swallow and tried to keep her eyes focused on his deep blue ones, but her discipline failed her here and now.

His hair was short-cropped and his beard traced a thin line across his well-defined jaw. She liked that. She liked all of him, really. She could see his muscled chest and corded arms underneath the dirty woolen tunic he wore whilst working. Sometimes, when the bellows blew fresh air into the glowing coals and the fires burned too hot for the cold winter air to have any cooling effect, her smith would remove that tunic and work without it, revealing his true Baratheon inheritance for all to see. None seemed to notice save her.

Gendry’s strength and skill had allowed him to forge the queen’s own armor fairly quickly. He swore that he would make a proper suite when this northern war was done; one emblazoned with the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen and inlaid with rubies like Prince Rhaegar’s had been. Arya found it funny that he sought to recreate a breastplate that his own father had ruined with his legendary war hammer.

He had made one of those too, for his original weapon had been lost beyond the Wall when he had gone north with Jon and Sandor Clegane. By his own account, it was smaller than the first. This one was of a simple design, a thick wooden shaft with a black steel head. Gendry had inlaid piece of dragonglass into it as well.

Ignoring his previous comment, Arya walked over to where it lay leaning against wall and grasped the bottom of the handle. It’s too heavy, she knew at once, though that did not stop her from trying to lift the weapon into the air. With a great huff of exertion, she raised the head as high as her own knee before letting the weapon fall with a dull thud onto the dirt floor.

“Careful with that!” he scolded her. Gendry stepped to where his war hammer now lay and retrieved the weapon from the dirt as though he were picking up Needle.

“Why? Not like you’re going to be using it anytime soon,” she giggled where she had only meant to laugh. Ugh. She felt so… girlish. Like Sansa. She hated that. Despite her best efforts, Arya’s laughter and tone seemed higher when she spent time near him. Indeed, many things changed when she was around the smithy and the smith… and she spent a lot of time here. None seemed to notice save her.

Arya still was not quite sure she knew what that word meant anymore. She loved her father and her family. She loved Sansa, though they often disagreed. She loved Jon most of all. And he said he loved Daenerys when I asked him.

Jon was a man, though. Arya needed to speak to a woman. She had tried to talk with Sansa, but her sister had shown little interest in romantic matters. I cannot blame her for that. For all her prowess in battle, Lady Brienne would not do for such a conversation. A sense of defeat crept into her head as she whittled down the list of friends and acquaintances. Lady Lyanna was too young for matters of love. The two dozen common women that Arya helped train in the yard some mornings would
be of little use either; she did not want her romantic interests being the talk of the kitchens or Winter Town.

“I might be,” he said defiantly as he set the war hammer back in its place against the wall. “Or not. Who knows? Them dragons might roast all the dead before I get another swing in,” he smiled at her as he shrugged and turned to being his work.

_Dragons… of course._ Daenerys would know what to do. Arya had sat by her and spoken of their travels in Essos. The queen knew what is was to struggle and fight and win. She knew how it felt to lose loved ones and find others to love. Arya resolved to speak with the queen of this matter.

Gendry gave a sharp, quick whistle and a wave of warmth hit her full in the face as some unseen apprentice began to work the bellows. The coals began to glow red, the same shade as the weirwood’s leaves. As more air blew into the furnace, crimson turned to fiery orange and orange to a bright gold. She felt a bit too hot where she was just then and stepped back a few paces while Gendry seized a piece of raw iron and burrowed it under some coals and into the fire.

“What’re you making?” she asked, cocking her head to one side as if to get a better view.

“Supper,” he said, stifling any hint of humor. The huffing of the bellows filled the silence for a moment before she heard him laugh. “Just another sword, though I mean to make the edge with dragonglass instead of sharpening the steel. Might be useful if I lose that hammer.”

“Could you put some dragonglass on this?” she drew Needle’s length from her hip and offered the thin blade to him hilt first. He considered the blade.

“I could… but I won’t,” Gendry shook his head.

“Why not?” she asked.

His blue eyes met hers. She saw a flash of something. _What? Concern? Fear?_ She was not sure. Even after mastering the Game of Faces, Arya found it hard to figure out what was going on behind those eyes. _Why is this so hard?_

“I went beyond the Wall. I saw one of them. Nearly died. I know you’re good, but I’d rather not see you fighting dead men,” he explained simply, “besides, you’ve got that dagger there.” He nodded at her hip. That was true enough. The blade that Littlefinger had ‘gifted’ to Bran was the finest dagger she had ever seen. It was so light that sometimes she forgot it hung beside her. Part of her wanted to name the steel after some mighty warrior queen or famous knight; another part of her remembered the Hound’s hatred for named blades.

“If I don’t get to go fight these dead men, you don’t either.” It was a playful challenge; a jabbing jest like in all their other conversations. Only she meant it this time. She did not want him marching off in the field. She did not want to see him hurt. _Or dead._ She did not want Jon to go either. Into the snows of the North or against Cersei in the south. _I meant what I said… I don’t want it to happen again._

“Oh?” he guffawed, “is that m’lady’s command?” She aimed an intentionally slow kick at his side, but he backed away in time to avoid the blow, catching her by the heel as she tried to draw away. She felt a flush creep up her neck as he held her there for a moment before releasing her. Part of her wished he had not broken contact.

“I can ask Jon to make it his command,” she said. Gendry’s eyes widened and he drew back in full. _I didn’t think he’d take that so seriously._
“Ask me what?” she heard Jon’s voice call out from behind her. No… she sighed to herself. Arya loved her older brother, she truly did. But why now? She had been alone with Gendry, joking around and making him laugh.

“We were talking about the war,” Gendry said dismissively.

Jon sighed and nodded. “That’s why I’ve come just now,” he said, continuing, “I’d like to have her Grace try the armor you’ve crafted.” He inclined his head to where the steel breastplate and its accoutrements were set upon a wooden model.

“Can do that easy enough,” Gendry nodded in affirmation. “You want to try it on first?” Jon chuckled softly and moved around where Arya sat. He had seen the new hammer too.

“You made another one?” Jon asked his friend as he reached for the handle and, with some effort, hefted the black steel weapon into the smoky air. Gendry made no move to stop him.

“Bit lighter than the first. That way I can carry it with me if I need to run,” he laughed. Arya’s eyes flitted between the two men as they spoke, but the lingered longer on the smith. For a second, she thought she had caught Jon’s gaze and might have sworn she saw the shadow of a smile cross his face, but in that same instant he turned back to Gendry and spoke again.

“That’s good. I want you with us when we march,” Jon said. Arya drew in a sharp breath. Her heartbeat quickened. She did not want him to go, but if he had to go then she would go too.

“All right, then,” Gendry smiled as he reached for his hammer. Yet as Jon passed it to him, Gendry’s eyes met hers once again, just for a moment. Then he drew back and stood as tall as he could under the low timber crossbeams, posing like some stooped conqueror king with one leather boot upon a wooden stool.

“I’m going, too,” Arya said. Protect each other, you told me, she thought as her grey eyes met his. Jon’s mirth disappeared like the northern sun behind a cloudbank. She heard him draw in breath as if readying himself for some fight. “I have this,” she drew the dagger, “and Needle,” she drew her sword.

“No,” he looked off into the yard then back at her, “I will not have you marching off into battle,” he finished sternly but not unkindly. He still thinks I’m a child. Even after all I did! “I can fight!” Probably better than you can, she wanted to add.

“I know that, but I told you no,” Jon responded. “You’re to stay here and guard our home. You’ll need to keep Sansa safe, hmm?” he offered her a half-hearted smile. It had little effect now. That fluttering sensation she had felt earlier that morning had congealed into cold, hard anger in the pit of her stomach. This was not fair. This was not right. Yet what was she to do?

“Sansa has Brienne to protect her,” she said back. And I beat her too. She looked to Gendry. Please… His eyes widened for an instant as they met hers. It almost seemed as if he were afraid as well… Then he looked back at Jon and shrugged. Her frustration boiled to the surface and she lashed out, kicking at the stool. Though she hit her mark, the strike failed to dislodge the leg or unbalance her smith.

Then Arya looked up and saw Daenerys standing behind the two men. Yes! She’ll help me. She felt like the smithy’s bellows had blown fresh air into her lungs, kindling a hopeful fire once more. “What do you think?” she called out to the queen.

“Your Grace!” Gendry saw her too and stood up taller as a show of respect, though he almost
smacked his head against a low beam while doing so. Arya vindictively cheered for the log’s attempt at justice. Daenerys only nodded in acknowledgement as eyes and postures turned to regard the queen. The older woman’s eyes met the younger’s. *She wouldn’t let Jon go into battle alone. She’ll understand.*

“I think you should listen to your lord brother, Arya,” Daenerys said like a mother deferring to a father’s authority. *They think they’re protecting me,* she realized instantly. *All of them.* Her rage grew at hot as the forge and threatened to spill over. *And they’ve all made up their minds.* Arguing would not do her any good. Suddenly, she did not want to be in the forge any longer, even if Gendry was there. Without another word or glance, she stormed off.

The colder air outside the forge tempered her furor as it filled her lungs. The wind picked up around her, shrieking as it whipped about the battlements. Minutes passed as she paced away across the yard, yet the wind did not abate. It stung her cheeks and pushed at her back, driving her onward. To her left, men were drilling in small formations with their dragonglass weaponry. To her right, the entrance to the godswood stood tall and silent against the wind’s assault.

A gust from the grove took her full in the face, forcing her to close her eyes as bits of snow, ice, and dirt peppered her face and clothing. The wind carried voices too: a child’s gleeful shouts, Samwell’s hushed and hurried words; and her younger brother’s bloodless voice. *Bran’s in there,* she knew at once. She still liked to spend time with him. Even if he was something different now, he was still family. Yet right now she just wanted to be alone.

She turned on her heels and headed to one of the keep’s outer towers. It was a broken structure, not fit for living quarters or storing anything valuable. After that great storm some weeks past, the only thing it contained was old snow. Still, it had part of a roof and showed the best views of the camps and resting dragons beyond. Better yet, it offered a simple solitude that even the statue-filled crypts could not match.

Arya quickened her pace toward her destination. The tower was empty when she arrived. With a cat’s agility, she scaled the winding, half-rotted stairs to the top. A window the size of a middling child looked out onto the camps, fields, and forest. She brushed some snow and accumulated filth aside with the toe of her boot and sat beside the window, hugging her legs to her chest as she looked outward onto the North.

How long she spent up there she could not rightly say. The days in the North were short and growing shorter still. The sun seemed altogether too eager to flee the North and abandon her family’s lands and people to the cold darkness. Still, it had to have been a few hours at least. She had watched the Dothraki screamers ride about in great circles and the Unsullied march back and forth, solid squares of black upon a brown and white field.

Ravens went out at regular intervals at in almost every direction, save north. Riders went out too, some to the south and west along the kingsroad. One group did not go far at all, though they disappeared behind a low ridge and passed from sight. She wondered what they were doing. Sometime later, a larger group of riders emerged from beyond the horizon. The low line of black snaked its way across the dull white landscape. Arya tried to count their number as they drew closer. *Some two dozen, at least,* she figured. As they circled round Winterfell and rode for the gate, she heard a horn sound in welcome. She made for the stairs to issue her own welcome as well.

The riders were already dismounting from their shaggy garrons as Arya emerged once more into the central yard. Her eyes scanned the crowd by the stables, but her ears detected her target first.
“You fucking kidding?” a hoarse and tired voice demanded of some unfortunate soul. She saw a stable boy trip backwards and land in a pile of muck. He scurried backward into a low snowbank as Sandor Clegane emerged from the stables and paced away. He paused as he caught her eye, though no smile appeared on his face as it did hers. She walked toward him. “You look pleased,” he grunted.

“You don’t,” she shrugged in response, still smirking.

“A damn fortnight in this shit country and now I’m told I’ve got time for supper before we ride again?” he said. Three parties had ridden out from Winterfell some time ago. Jorah found people. Jon found tracks. What did he find?

“Sorry,” she shrugged, “find anything?” she asked.

“Not a damn thing,” he grunted. Then he reached behind him and drew a mighty great sword that had been lashed across his back. Arya recognized the darkened, rippled steel of her own dagger on the sword’s length. “Heartsbane,” he gave a harsh laugh, “Houndsbane, more like. Carried this damn sword with me across a hundred leagues. And for what?”

Samwell Tarly had given the Hound his family’s ancestral sword for the ranging. It was a kind gesture, but a practical one as well. Few men in Winterfell were strong enough to wield it. And if they had come across White Walkers? Well… “You’ll get to swing it at something soon,” Arya said back to the man. For a moment, she thought about asking him to join her side, to speak with Jon on her behalf and demand that she be allowed to ride into battle, but the thought seemed foolish. That’s not his way, she knew. That’s not him.

“Aye, that I might,” he sighed and drew a deep breath. They stood in silence for a moment while the rest of Clegane’s party brushed off the frost and dirt from their weary travel and made for the hall where hot food and cold ale were being set out for them. Arya inhaled and thought she smelled chicken.

“Come along and have something to eat,” she said. Her friend only nodded in acceptance and sheathed the great sword once more before following her, his great, pounding footsteps at odds with her own graceful strides. The men in the yard gave the pair an even wider berth than they gave Arya when she was alone.

Scents assaulted her as a sentry pushed open the door to the hall and the pair passed inside. Cooked meats, salted fish, and old bread fried in fat wafted across her path and she found a seat near enough the high table. The Hound took a spot across from her. Oiled torches and tallow candles lined the walls while fresh pine logs from the Wolfswood burned in the hearth. The great fire cast its light upon her friend’s face yet covered his burned side in shadow.

Serving girls brought them food, but lingered just long enough to set the trays and cups down before scurrying away like frightened mice. Or kittens before a dog, she mused. Her senses from the yard had proven correct, for one young girl brought the Hound an entire herb basted chicken. He grunted in appreciation before tearing off a leg and greedily biting into the meat.

That Winterfell’s larders could afford such extravagance seemed odd for a moment, until Arya remembered that this was her first true winter. Herds and livestock had to be culled in lean years, elsewise all the animals might starve for lack of feed. Any proper shepherd would rather see half his heard survive than all of it starve. No doubt the beef, pork, and chicken the soldiers and smallfolk had been enjoying would only last a few more days until it was back to the old salted cod and grains.
The bird’s bones were cleaned in a matter of minutes, and Clegane’s chin dripped with glistening, greasy juices as he shoved bits of bread into his mouth. Arya thought she saw the hint of a smile on his face before he matched mouth with tankard and downed the rest of his ale. She had contented herself with half a bird, though even that seemed a bit too much.

Noise filled the hall as the rest of the castle filtered through in waves. Lords and their retainers took seats around the lower tables while others simply retrieved a bowl of food or hunk of bread before scattering in search of seats. Arya saw Lord Tyrion seated at the high table along with the spymaster Varys, but felt no inclination to join either of the two. Instead, she stayed in her spot and laughed as ale-emboldened men joined the pair and entertained them with lively conversation of sexual, combative, and entirely fabricated conquests.

The walk to her chambers later that evening began as a dull affair. She had left the hall after some time spent among the soldiers and made her way to the part of the keep that housed the lord’s family. She passed Sansa’s closed door first, but a quick knock let her know her sister was elsewhere. A bit further on she passed Bran’s door, which was also shut tight. Someone’s in there though, she knew by the glimmering firelight that shone from the small gap between the door and stone floor.

Arya pressed her ear to the oak and heard two voices. Bran, obviously. And Jon… I wonder what they’re talking about. When they were not busy preparing for war, she and Jon had spent a few evenings sitting by the fire or in the solar, laughing and telling stories. But Bran wouldn’t do that. That was not who her younger brother was now.

She strained and struggled to hear their words, but could make out bits and pieces of the conversation. Bran’s emotionless tone hummed muffled words for a minute or two before being cut off by an abrupt silence. Heavy footfalls echoed against the floor on the other side and Arya saw the flickering orange light blocked by two long shadows. She fled.

Finding safety behind a corner, she peered around as Jon opened the door and looked around for a moment. She saw him shrug before closing the door again and presumably resuming his conversation. She turned to continue her own trek as she heard the faint click of the latch. I wonder what they were talking about, she thought as she walked up the winding, narrow stairs of the connecting tower. Jon must have heard – no, she almost laughed at her own foolishness. Her younger brother had sensed her, maybe even seen her.

The landing just below hers was where Jon and Daenerys slept guarded by some ten Unsullied. She could never see their faces beneath their black helmets, but each soldier recognized her well enough to let her pass whenever she wanted. Arya saw soft, welcoming light spilling from the open entryway. She walked forward into the hall and the two guards closest to her made no move to stop her.

Arya had not once called on the queen or her older brother here in their own room. She never cared much for courtesy, but it did not seem proper and made her rather uncomfortable all the same. There were other things making her uncomfortable, too. She hoped Daenerys might speak with her about them.

The Unsullied standing on either side of the door crossed their spears across the entryway as she approached. The door was open and she could the queen herself seated upon a straight-backed chair, with her left hand wrapping her fingers against an armrest carved in the shape of a direwolf and her right running through the white fur of Ghost. He looked to be enjoying the royal attention.

Daenerys looked up at the dull noise of wood against wood and her eyes met Arya’s. She smiled softly and ordered her guards to do something in a language that Arya could not understand.
“Enter,” she called out. Arya stepped just beyond the threshold as the guards closed the door behind her. Silence settled in between them and Arya was not sure whether she was supposed to speak first.

“I never did truly thank you properly,” Daenerys said calmly as she rose from her seat and left Ghost alone. The great wolf tilted his head in confusion as the abrupt interruption.

“For what?” She saw the queen’s eyes drop to her hips for a moment and realized she still worse the dagger and Needle at her sides. Right.

“You saved my life. You and Ser Jaime,” she explained. “That would earn any common man a lordship or saddlebag of gold.”

“That’s probably what Cersei offered those men to kill you,” Arya retorted. Daenerys laughed.

“I suppose you’re right. Still, you have my thanks,” she gave a genuine, true smile as she walked to where Arya stood. She was only a bit taller than Arya herself. “If there is something you would ask of me, I’d do everything in my power to grant it.”

Arya shrugged and motioned at the walls. “I have everything I want right here.” Almost everything. She saw Daenerys’ hand drop to her stomach as she nodded in understanding. Then, she turned and walked toward her chair again. As she sat, she motioned to the side of the bed. “Join me, will you? I fear your brother prefers his chambers sparsely furnished, so the bed will have to do.” Arya walked across the room and bent to give Ghost a scratch behind his right ear before sinking into the furs of the queen’s bed.

“There is one thing, actually…” she said.

“Oh?” Daenerys raised an eyebrow inquisitively. Even Ghost looked up in interest, his red eyes gleaming in the firelight.

“I want to fight. I’m as good as any of the others. Better, even,” her words poured forth like wine from a cracked cask. “I don’t see why I bothered training all the women for war if we’re just going to sit at home.”

“Your brother said no,” Daenerys responded, though not unkindly.

“I don’t care,” Arya felt the beginnings of anger stirring in her gut. “You’re the queen. Why don’t you tell him to-”

“I know,” she said calmly as she raised a hand. “I do, Arya. I know. I know how it feels to be questioned. To be overlooked. I know that angry feeling you get when you’re denied.” Arya huffed in frustration but let the queen continue to speak. “I know you want to protect those whom you hold dear.”

“But Jon won’t let me go,” she argued.

“I was not speaking of Jon,” Daenerys said. Arya’s face grew hot and she crossed her arms over her chest. She swallowed before speaking again.

“Jon told you…?”

“He didn’t have to. You’ve been spending quite a bit of time with him.”

“Oh…” Was it really that obvious?
“You might be able to change your nose, cheeks, and hair, but your eyes will always tell the truth,” Daenerys smiled softly as she spoke. Arya remembered her old teacher Syrio saying something similar many years ago. Her cheeks still felt hot, though she was not quite sure whether it was from what she felt for Gendry or her inability to conceal those feelings as well as she thought she could. “Has he said anything to you?” Daenerys asked. Arya shook her bowed head as she averted her gaze. “Have you said anything to him?”

“No,” she said, biting her lip. She had spent so much time in that forge beside him while he worked. She had showed him the godwood and the walls of her family’s castle. Yet she had never mustered the courage to show him how she felt. Why? The word oft repeated itself in her mind as she considered it all. Why was it that acting on her feelings was so easy when putting them into words was so hard?

Arya felt Daenerys’ hand on her forearm and looked up to see the queen seated on the edge of her own seat. “It’s odd, isn’t it?” she asked.

“What is?” Arya responded, looking up at her and leaning in as well. They were huddled together now, faces just a few feet apart, speaking in hushed tones like two siblings plotting some jest against a third.

“When you feel that something for someone, but you’re not quite sure if he feels the same.” Daenerys’ lip curved upward mischievously.

“You’re beautiful though…” she whispered, “and you’re a queen.”

“That didn’t seem to matter to your brother for months on end,” she laughed. “I don’t think things like that would matter for our smith, either.” Arya nodded. He’ll just call me m’lady again.

“No,” Arya agreed, “but how did you and Jon… you know?”

“Well,” she raised her gaze to the timber beams of the ceiling as she considered the question, “I suppose we each took a risk, in our own way.” With a reassuring squeeze, Daenerys sat back in her seat, though she placed her elbows upon the twin carved direwolves so as to still lean forward some. “I know you’ll find a way to do the same.”

They both looked up at the door opened and Jon entered the room. Judging by the look on his face, he had not been expecting Arya to be within. “Arya?” he tilted his head like Ghost had done earlier as he surveyed the room.

“Your sister and I were speaking.” Daenerys said.

“I see,” he said as he paced over to the window. He seems distracted. I wonder what Bran told him. Surely, her younger brother had seen something new. Maybe I’ll find out in the morning.

“Good night, then,” Arya rose from the bed and gave Daenerys a thankful smile as she made to leave the room. The pair bade her farewell as she left their chambers and made for her own. She swiftly walked up to the next landing and found some servant had already lit a fire in her hearth and a candle by her bedside.

Arya disrobed and prepared for bed by kicking off her boots, removing her cloak, and otherwise undressing as she tossed a jerkin here and a sword belt there. Only Needle and her dagger were afforded places on honor beside her bed. Well, them and this, she thought as she placed the blades atop that special brown leather satchel she had brought with her from Braavos. Its contents were rarer than Valyrian steel. Finally, Arya slid under the furs and snuffed out the candle, listening to
the wind howling outside the walls as she closed her eyes.

The next morning was somber, grey, and bitter cold. Arya forsook the crypts and kitchens in the hope that she might find Gendry in the smithy once more, but her smith had taken to completing some other work and left his forge as cold as the outside air. What if he already left? No. She was being foolish. Their armies would march on the morrow. He would be somewhere around the keep.

Yet she did not see him for the rest of the day. The keep, castle, and town were alive with the final preparations for the march. Provisions were readied and weapons sharpened. Everywhere she went there were older soldiers speaking in hushed voices or younger lads boasting of their prowess with sword and spear. Arya thought they sounded like idiots.

She walked around Winterfell for the better part of the day. She spent time alone in the godswood. She ate a light midday meal with Bran and Sansa in the great hall. She even wandered about the battlements with the hope that she might see him in the camps and town outside the walls. Her patience and spirit flagged as the white sky turned shades of deeper and deeper grey. When the grey turned to starless black, she returned to her quarters.

Sleep did not come to her at all that night. Not really. Sometimes her eyelids grew heavy or her muscles felt stiff, but she never could quite let it all slip away into nothingness for a few hours. She had too much on her mind.

_Do I love him?_ She was not sure. Love seemed a grand word, reserved for the likes of Daenerys and Jon. She liked him. _I know that, at least. And I care for him._

That scared her, too. For years, whenever she had drawn too close to someone, they had been stripped away from her. She listed them in her mind. Father, Mother and Robb, Bran and Rickon, Syrio and Yoren, and even Gendry once before. Some of them, like the Hound, had returned. Some had not. Still, things felt _different_ with Gendry.

The morning came too soon. No sun rose above the eastern horizon, but grey light crept above the castle walls halfway through the morning. Arya dressed in her usual garb and made her way to the yard. The men were already assembling. Gendry held the reins of a large chestnut horse not more than twenty yards from where she stood. Arya walked over to him.

“So you’re going,” she said, her tone harsher than she meant it to be. Gendry’s blue eyes narrowed.

“Aye,” he said, “I’ve fought them before. I’m not about to sit by while others fight my battles.” He avoided her gaze as he spoke. Gendry seemed almost hunched over, like some great weight pressed down on those broad, muscled shoulders.

“I want you to stay,” she said. _With me._

“I won’t sit out this fight. That’s not what my father would have done. That’s not what I’m going to do,” he argued. _Your father was an idiot and so are you._ She wanted to hit him; to punch him; to grab him and drag him back inside. Why was he being so stupid?

Horns from a dozen houses sounded around the yard and outside the walls. Mounted serjeants spurred their horses and men picked up their satchels and arms. The head of the column that had formed at the gate began to move forward slowly. Their march was beginning. Their war was beginning.

Gendry turned away toward his own mount and rustled the pack across its pack to make sure his
great hammer was secure. *He's leaving.* Arya felt her jaw tighten in nervousness and frustration and as many other emotions as there were banners flapping above the army. The horns sounded again. More men were passing out the gate. They only had another moment.

She heard him let out a pent-up sigh and saw his breath create a cold white mist in the morning air. He turned back to her and parted his lips to speak… but he never got the chance. Arya grabbed him by the collar of his leather jerkin and pulled him close. Then she kissed him.

It was quick, clumsy, and awkward; more a pressing of their lips than some passionate moment from a bard’s song. Arya held him even as she drew back. His eyes were wide with shock, though he did not look unhappy. In fact, as she let him go a blush crept up his face.

She had nothing else to say and did not know what else to do. She did not want to watch him leave, so she did not. Arya turned and walked away as the horns blasted and some southron knight called for the laggards to hurry, lest they miss their chance for glory. She made it all the way to the hall’s entrance before turning and glimpsing Gendry riding out of the inner gate.

*There’s not much time,* she thought as she slipped inside and ran to her chambers. Her regular clothes would not do for what she intended. They were too finely made and easily recognizable. She took a set of plane leather breeches, a woolen undershirt, and an undyed leather jerkin. Arya fastened a spare black woolen cape about her shoulders.

Needle and her dagger still lay on the bedside table. *I’ll need the dagger,* she knew at once. *And Needle…* It did not matter. No one would recognize a single steel blade on a ten-thousand-man march. She fastened them to either hip. Finally, Arya reached for her Braavosi satchel. She already knew the one she wanted; one no other northmen would recognize. Confident in her plan, she reached in and pulled out the face.

Chapter End Notes

Arya is always a difficult character to consider and write. She shuts down her emotions pretty early on in the books as a coping mechanism and has only started to recover from that in the show. On top of that, she's a teenage girl. I have never been nor will I, God willing, be a teenage girl. Nor do I have daughters of that age. Yet anyone who has lived through those horribly awkward years can remember his or her first crush and coming into conflict with strange, new emotions. Arya might have abandoned some of her feelings alone the roadside, but she's encountering a host of new ones here.

I looked at some Sansa/Cersei and Sansa/Margaery scenes as a reference for the Daenerys/Arya conversation. Obviously there are marked differences, but the basic dynamic between older and wiser queen and young woman are there.

Looking forward, I have two shorter chapters planned before our characters meet their foe (ON AN OPEN FIELD!) for the first time. One is a new POV. Thankfully, my workload dies over the holiday and we're given two weeks of remote work/semi-vacation. Hoping to pen some good stuff then, but Work from home (and work on Home) is a pathway to many abilities some consider to be unproductive. It is possible to learn this power.
A Merry Almost-Christmas and Happy New Year to everyone who continues to read "Home". Writing my first story has been an interesting journey and I truly appreciate the support, comments, kudos, and well thought out criticisms that make the story better for all.

The child was crying. It was a shrill and uncomfortable sound, made all the worse by its echoing off the far walls of the godswood. The wails drowned out the *quarks* of the ravens on the white branches above. Gilly tried to comfort her son with soft pats and softer words, but it made little difference. Little Sam continued to cry. *He’s just a child*, a voice within him reasoned. *Let him be...* No. They needed to continue.

“I’m sorry,” Sam apologized as he stood halfway between the rolling chair and the young mother, “he doesn’t like it much. I wish it were different.”

“We need to try again,” the Three-Eyed Raven said, his eyes meeting the weirwood’s lidless gaze instead of Samwell’s. He had grasped the child’s arm a moment before, using his connection to see the dead across the vast expanse of the North. There were two armies now, two foes. One host of wights and White Walkers moved against the Karstark lands in the east whilst a second had crossed the Last River and moved into the heart of the northern country. *I did not see him though,* he thought. *I did not feel him.*

That was strange. Every time the Three-Eyed Raven had cast his mind beyond these grey walls, he had encountered an icy barrier as firm and impassable as the Wall itself. Indeed, ever since the Wall had fallen every vision of the dead brought with it confusion and pain. *Such pain...* The longer he watched, the worse it became. Ever since the cave, his foe knew he was out there. The seer could feel the icy daggers being driven into his mind; could feel the mark upon his arm burn with the cold. Yet there had been no pain just now nor presence in his thoughts. *He’s hiding... concealing himself from me. Why?*

“Isn’t there another way?” Sam asked, desperate for resolution to their problems that did not involve a crying child. “I thought you said you could see better now? Do we need Sam n-n-now?” His teeth chattered as he spoke. The cold had set in late last night, freezing the ground and the air itself. The sky was a seamless wall of dark grey. The clouds seemed to hang lower than before, as if the coldness had constricted the world itself. Every breath misted and froze in the air, even here in the godswood. They were coming closer.

*Yes,* a familiar voice whispering, *you can do it. Just try. He’s just a child.* “No,” he responded to Sam, “we need him.” He needed to see more, to see further. The boy made it easier.

Sam sighed. “Perhaps on the morrow then? It’s cold and the sky grows darker still,” he said, looking up through the red canopy to the sky beyond. *He’s right,* the boyish voice within whispered. *There’s no more we can do just now.* This time, he agreed. Sam summoned two reluctant guardsmen to assist in moving the great rolling chair from the godswood to the keep. The young Stark men struggled mightily in their task, for though the ground was frozen firm and even,
they were not accustomed to the task. The stronger, older men who usually assisted him had marched forth with Jon and Daenerys.

And Jon… His thoughts turned to his cousin as his family’s men moved him across the yard. Jon had come to him some nights earlier. They had spoken in his chambers whilst a warm fire burned in the hearth and Arya had listened at the door. At least it felt like Arya. He had not been sure of that, but he remembered the conversation clearly enough.

Jon often came to seek council or to share what he knew of the dead from his times beyond the Wall. This time he had come with more questions than the greenseer had answers. He wanted to know of the dead and their location, of the Night King and his dragon, of the walkers and their numbers. The Three-Eyed Raven had seen much of that and more and told his cousin what he knew. Yet for his other questions there were no answers readily apparent, for to see was one thing, but to understand was another altogether.

“Why?” Jon had asked that night as he sat staring into the low flames of Bran’s hearth, “why did you tell me?”

“Prince Rhaegar was your father,” he said. He had seen Rhaegar wed his aunt at Samwell’s own urging. He had seen his father battle outside the tower and find Lyanna inside, covered in her own life’s blood. His visions could unravel the secrets of the past. They could help him find the truth. Why, he asked though. ‘Why’ was beyond even his power to explain. He could say how, when, where, but not why.

“I know,” Jon delivered his firm response. A log broke in the fire beside them, sending a cloud of golden embers into the air. They faded to deep crimson before burning away. The Three-Eyed Raven watched the dim light cast dancing shadows on Jon’s brooding visage. He seemed troubled.

“And Lady Lyanna was my mother, I know,” he continued, “but why does it matter?”

“You needed to know the truth,” he said, “you are Aegon Targaryen.”

“Don’t call me that,” Jon snapped.

“It bothers you?” he asked. Bran seemed to agree with Jon, but it was rather odd all the same. I was Bran before, and now I am the Three-Eyed Raven. Why should Jon reject his true name or his true nature? That younger instinct pushed at him from deep in his chest. Bran pushed forward and the Three-Eyed Raven felt his mind warm with that constant excitement of boyhood. Just tell him something. Anything. Make him happy.

No. He was not a child anymore. That was not his purpose.

“I didn’t come here to discuss names with you, Bran,” he said. “My mother might have named me Aegon, but I’m no conqueror. I tried to ride that green dragon today at Daenerys’ urging, and the beast bucked me off like some unbroken colt.” He had felt that. The dragons were powerful creatures, and though they remained far outside the castle walls he could feel their presences at the edge of his own consciousness; warm and wanting where the other’s was only cold.

“No, you’re not a conqueror,” he agreed.

“Then what am I?” Jon was becoming impatient. A Targaryen. That was the obvious answer, but even now he knew he owed his cousin an explanation. What is he? Why does it matter? Perhaps Jon knew what is was to change almost as much as the seer did himself. A bastard on the Wall in one moment, a wildling the next, King in the North, Lord of Winterfell, Aegon Targaryen, consort to the queen… He had lived as many lives as the Three-Eyed Raven could remember. Well, two
lives at least.

Something had brought him back when his black brothers had fallen upon him with cold steel. Something wanted him alive; needed him alive. Fate... is that the word for it? Fate had brought him back and fate had sent him to Dragonstone. He had watched that first meeting from afar and many of the others. Daenerys and Aegon Targaryen had fallen in love and come north to fight.

Yet it was more than fate. Some power watched over him even as others worked against him. The Three-Eyed Raven could feel them all, strong yet distant like those dragons’ minds or the presence of the enemy. They were the wind through the godswood, the black waves on the sea, the fires that burned against the cold, the cold itself. Still, whatever power watched over Jon did not care for thrones or titles. Jon Snow was Rhaegar’s son, but his inheritance was greater than a claim. He ventured forth with an answer.

“You are your father’s heir. The realm is yours. Its people are yours. All of living Westeros looks to you.” Perhaps...

“Do they?” Jon asked, a certain bitterness creeping into his tone. “I don’t see any southern banners flying in the camps. The only southerners that rode here to join us tried to kill the queen.”

“Ser Jaime rode north,” he said. Jon only nodded at that. He could feel the Lannister man’s importance, though he did not know what role he would play. Daenerys, Jon, Jaime, his sister Arya, even the boy Sam; fate swirled around some figures like wind about Winterfell’s towers. “Should the North fall, the dead will march south with greater numbers and without much warning. If you do not find a way to stop them, who can?”

“Isn’t that what your supposed to be doing?” he asked, too harshly though, for he realized his misstep and sat back in his seat. Silence filled the grown gap between the two cousins. The fire crackled merrily in the hearth. Every pop sounded like some foreign tongued laughter that betrayed the seriousness of the topics at hand. Jon sighed again, then inhaled just as slowly. “I never asked for any of this.”

He remembered his visions from some weeks ago; remembered Jon curled and crying upon the roots of the heart tree, begging the old gods of the North to make him a trueborn heir like Robb. In your own way, you did, he wanted to say, but that would not do just now. Instead, the Three-Eyed Raven met his cousin’s gaze. “No,” he said, nodding at his own withered legs, “but this is what we have been given.”

Jon let out another long sigh and grim laugh thereafter. “Aye, I suppose it is.” The Three-Eyed Raven held up a gaunt, white hand. The cold had shrunk and shriveled his thin, pale skin. He could see the greyish veins beneath. It looked as if his life’s blood threatened to leech from his body like the red sap of the weirwood tree. My teacher needed a tree to sustain himself... will I? It was hard to say. The tendrils of his mind sank deeper into the earth with every passing day, yet with every passing day his strength withered just a bit more. Death marched on Winterfell, but for some it was already inside the walls.

Only for some, though, he thought as he placed his withered hand back on the carved armrest and looked to his cousin once more. There is life, too. “I’m told Daenerys is with child,” he said, forcing his lips and cheeks upwards in a smile. It felt nice. With so much to see, learn, and understand, he often forgot the simpler things.

“She is,” Jon said.

“I’m happy for you,” the Three-Eyed Raven responded. Say something more, ask him about
names. About the wedding. About anything else! The boy within shouted suggestions from the recesses of his mind. For once, the seer heeded the advice. “Have you thought of a name?”

“A name?”

“For the child,” he continued.

Jon laughed, but it was not a happy sound. “Bran,” he began, “if we fail – if I fail – that child will never be born. Daenerys and Arya and Sansa and every southern mother with a suckling babe will die.” He rose from his seat and squared his shoulders to his companion. “And to hear you say it, all their fates rely on me.”

“You and Daenerys.” I think. “She did promise that you would fight together.” Jon gave him an odd look, somewhere between accusation and awe. He leaned forward to speak.

“Bran have you been-”

He raised one withered hand to silence the Lord of Winterfell. There was someone outside; a familiar presence. He looked to Jon then at the doorway. His cousin understood and moved to open the door, but by the time he had crossed the threshold to peer out into the hall the eavesdropper was gone.

“What was that?” he asked as he shut the door and resumed his seat by the fire.

“No one,” the Thee-Eyed Raven responded. Mercifully, the interruption and open door had swept the previous conversation from the room. The two men had talked for a while longer about the locations of the dead to help him refine his plans for battle, but Jon left soon thereafter.

He watched a shade of his own memory pass through the hall as his family’s men wheeled him to his own chambers. A fire was already lit, but it did little to drive out the bitter cold seeping through the heated stone walls on the lower floors. The sentries placed him by the fire and begged his pardon as they dismissed themselves in a hurry.

Unable to move about his chambers on his own, the Three-Eyed Raven contented himself by the hearth. The flames shivered as if they themselves were affected by the cold. Golden tongues of flame waved about and turned to orange embers. The embers burned to quickly and joined the cold, grey nothingness that had settled upon the North.

He kept his eyes fixed on the hearth, watching the fire dance about. It felt warmer than usual; almost to warm for simple kindling and logs. And there… There’s something there in the flames. A different fire; a tall column of scarlet flame spinning across… the sea? Even here, hundreds of leagues from the sea, he could feel its heat. It was warm and comforting. It felt good, almost too good. The Three-Eyed Raven pulled at the collar of his jerkin. He felt hot now. The flames burned too brightly. It was too much.

Then the door to his chambers opened and draught of icy air disturbed the flames. The vision was gone. Samwell entered with a bowl of steaming soup and three horns of some drink clutched unsteadily in his left hand. He smiled as he entered. “A bit of chicken stirred in with the broth,” he set the bowl down on the table beside the rolling chair, “and some hot mulled wine from the kitchens,” he almost sang the words aloud, “they’ve made quite a bit.”

The Three-Eyed Raven nodded his thanks and took the horn. He never felt all that hungry these days, but good drink was always appreciated. He looked at Sam. “Is Little Sam better?”

“Oh,” the larger man averted his eyes for a moment, “yes, well, a bit. Gilly is seeing to him now.”
He took a sip of the steaming beverage and Sam did the same. The third cup sat idle on the low table, wisps of vapor rising from the surface.

“Is that for-”

“Me,” a voice said. His sister Sansa stepped into the room from the hall beyond. She was clad in thicker furs than usual, though still black. The darkness brought out the color of her hair all the more. Sam made to stand and offer her his seat, but she found room on the edge of the bed instead. Podrick Payne stood beyond the threshold, his sword hand resting on the pommel of his blade and a smaller horn clutched in his left hand. He made no move to enter. “You can come in too, Podrick,” she called after the squire.

“I’d rather not, my lady. Easier to see enemies approaching from outside the room,” he insisted. All the guardsmen had been more cautious after those Lannister men had attempted to carry out their plot. Lady Brienne’s squire, who had been tasked with helping to protect the Lady of Winterfell whilst she and her Valyrian steel sword were away, had taken to his task with a sense of solemn duty. Even so, the seer realized he seemed to keep his gaze on his liege lady as often as he did on her surroundings.

“I think my brother will spot any attackers before they enter the keep,” she said with a hint of humor. A flush crept up the boy’s neck as he nodded in recognition of her wisdom and made to enter the room, shutting the door behind him as he did so. Though inside, he made no move to sit, preferring to stand beside the door in case of intrusion.

“Is Arya joining us?” the Three-Eyed Raven asked, though in truth it had been the boy within thinking of his other sister. It was good to have company on these long, lonely nights. Despite her frustrations over his refusal to use his sight to her own ends, he particularly enjoyed spending time with Arya. Fierce and deadly, she could also be loving, sweet, and playful. Her companionship helped remind him that Winterfell was Bran’s home.

“I’m not sure where Arya is,” Sansa admitted. He reached out with his mind, though not very far. Just to Arya’s room, to the godsdowd, to the kitchens and the smithy and the dozen other places she might be. He felt others there, but not his sister. “She can take care of herself, I suppose,” Sansa shrugged and sipped from her horn.

“Missing good wine, though,” Sam said into his own horn as he drank deeply. The Three-Eyed Raven inhaled the scents rising from the horns. He smelled nutmeg, cinnamon, and cloves in the hot wine. The smells mixed with the light, smoky air from the burning pine logs in the hearth. For a moment, with warmth and good company around him, he was comfortable. Yet even the roaring fire and hot wine could not drive the lingering chill from his blood.

“And what of the rest of the castle?” he asked his sister. Most of the fighting men had marched with Jon. There were still some few thousand northern men encamped about the walls and in the town, to say nothing of the women and children that huddled together under the shadows of Winterfell’s towers. That was all he knew. Confined as he was to his chair, chambers, and spot beside the heart tree, he seldom saw or heard much of the goings on in Winterfell.

Sansa stared at the floor as she considered how best to answer his question. “This cold has brought more sickness. A few hundred Dothraki remain in their tents too sick to move. They’re not accustomed to winter, or so Wolkan says. Pestilence picks at the edges of the northern armies as well, and we’ve not the healers to attend so many.”

“I could help,” Sam offered, “I studied a bit of medicine in Oldtown.”
Sansa flashed him a kind smile, though he knew it at once for a lie. “That’s good of you, Sam, but you’ve been good helping Bran.”

“There are others, too,” the Three-Eyed Raven said, ignoring Sam’s offer and Sansa’s response, “more have come where others left.” He had felt more minds brushing against his. They felt different; familiar yet foreign.

“There are crofters and herders fleeing east from across the White Knife,” Sansa explained, “some bring livestock and food, but in the end its just more mouths to feed. Our stores are suffering even with the queen’s armies in the field. This cold…” she shivered at the mention, “I’m told its killed too many of the sheep, pigs, and cattle. We can’t even pull fish from the streams since they’ve frozen solid.”

“We don’t have the food?” Pod asked. Sansa shot him a look.

“Our stores are sufficient, for now,” Sansa said, “though the hunters bring back fewer and fewer beasts from the wood. Just this morning they…” she struggled to describe what had happened. “They found something.” The Three-Eyed Raven knew. He had heard the gossip while breaking his fast in the hall.

Three Glover woodsmen had been tracking some herd through the forest. They had brought down a massive elk with their bows and the beast had bled out quickly from its wounds. Yet when the hunters made to secure the carcass and carry it home, the elk rose again, blue-eyed and wild. They slew the risen beast down quickly enough with a shard of dragonglass. One hunter had lost an eye to an antler and another had suffered some shattered ribs from a powerful kick. Thankfully, no one had died.

_Those are not the true wounds, though, he knew. Death moved ever closer to the living. Perhaps even now some of their enemy’s lieutenants stalked silently through the dense inner forest of the Wolfswood, raising bears, elk, and wolves as new soldiers in the army of the dead. It was a troubling thought. But no… I would have seen them. Through Little Sam, I would have known. I think._

“I’ve ordered watched be set further out, and every party that travels to the forest for fuel will be heavily guarded and armed,” she continued. “As for food… well, the queen’s army left well-provisioned and shipments from Lord Manderly have slowed considerably, but we should have enough for now.”

“The elk the huntsmen slew,” the Three-Eyed Raven had been listening only in part to his sister’s report. “Did they bring it back with them?”

“No?” Sansa looked at him as he had invited their foe within the gates to enjoy a cup of mulled wine. “They killed it again and fled, Bran.”

“Did they see its eyes?” Sam asked, shifting his great weight in his seat as he leaned inward to discuss the topic.

“Its eyes?” she asked, “who cares about its eyes?”

_We do. Touching the child the first time had forced the Three-Eyed Raven into the minds of the White Walkers themselves. He had only remained in that cold, hostile place for a moment, yet a moment was all he needed to feel the connections tethering the dead to their masters. It had been an altogether familiar sensation, that which he had felt with the ravens, with Summer, and with Hodor._
“Well…” Sam began hesitantly, “Bran once saw the Night King being created. He saw the Children’s magic at work.”

“The Children of the Forest?” Podrick whispered in awe. The Three-Eyed Raven looked at the lad. He had drifted away from the door and closer to the fire, eager to warm himself. Sam nodded.

“We think they might use the same sort of magic,” he explained, “and sometimes the eyes-”

“You think you know how to defeat the dead?” she asked.

“No,” the Three-Eyed Raven answered. _Not yet._

“Then why does this matter?” Sansa pressed him for details. _Why. The question I cannot yet answer._ His teacher had shown him how the Children had created the Night King. He himself had stumbled upon the man just before he had been captured. In touching the boy Sam, he had felt the connections between wight and White Walker.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. Sansa huffed and pulled her cloak tighter around her shoulders before sipping from her horn of wine again. Jon had been similarly frustrated when he had come seeking council. The greenseer felt the peculiar emotion rising within himself as well. _What good is the sight when I cannot understand?_”

“We’re looking for a way to defeat them,” Sam said.

“We know how to defeat them. Why do you think we’ve spent weeks crafting weapons from the dragonglass Jon and the queen brought north?” She sighed. “Jon is gone off into the field with Daenerys and most of the lords. Even Lord Tyrion rode off with them. I need your help. Winterfell needs you here, Bran. We need you to use your powers to help your people, now more than ever. Use your ravens to scout the woods. Find Jon and Daenerys with your trees… or however you do it. Give our people some hope.”

He looked at her. _Blue eyes. Bran’s mother’s eyes. Bran’s eyes. My eyes._ They were supposed to be family. He was supposed to help her, to help care for their people. To sacrifice for them if need be. He bowed his head in acceptance and saw her smile softly. “I will,” he said.

Podrick had fetched another round of mulled wine for the group, then another. When that had run out, he had pilfered a bit of ale from the larder. Sam brought fresh, dry logs from a store room and told amusing stories from his time on the Wall or as an acolyte of the Citadel in Oldtown as he stoked and fed the flames.

Face flushed from drink, Pod had joined Sansa in sitting on the bed and regaled the other three with tales of the battle against Stannis Baratheon on the Blackwater some years ago. The Three-Eyed Raven remained in his rolling chair staring at the flames. He tried to laugh when someone told a joke and nodded to show he was listening, but never spoke unless asked a question.

Yet he did continue to drink. The wine had seeped into his thoughts. He felt strange, light and airy. His thoughts drifted at one moment then became utterly focused on some detail the next. It was a peculiar sensation. Time itself seemed to slip by like he was in a vision.

Soon enough, the flames in the hearth had given way to struggling embers, allowing the cold outside to set in once more. Sansa dismissed herself first, with Podrick stumbling to his feet to escort the Lady of Winterfell to her chambers. After the two had left, Samwell helped him out of the chair and under the furs of his bed.

“Bring Little Sam to the godswood tomorrow morning,” he instructed his friend, “we need to try
again.” The man grimaced and nodded before leaving the room and shutting the door behind him.

Darkness took him soon after Sam departed, but no dreams came to him, not at first. He woke a handful of times, or at least thought he did. He could not truly remember. Each time he opened his eyes he was not sure if it was a vision, a dream, or a memory.

Once, he woke to find the moon shining brightly through his window. *Samwell left it open,* he thought as he rose and walked over to close it. He could feel the fire in the hearth warm him as he moved to the window. The warmth was comforting. *That’s odd...* There was not a cloud to be seen. Instead, a full moon lit the towers and walls with pale, white light. A thousand stars twinkled in the dark night sky.

The flames shriveled as the white light grew brighter outside. *Too bright,* he thought as he squinted his eyes. It burned, but he did not avert his gaze. The moonlight shone so brightly that he could scarcely see the black outlines of the towers and town beyond. The stars in the black sky began to flash between icy blue and white. Pain wracked his brain and forced his eyes shut. He stumbled back from the window and fell back upon his bed. Darkness took him again.

The crackling of kindling woke him in the morning. Some servant had snuck in and set a new fire in the hearth whilst he slept. Soon, Maester Wolkan came along with two sentries to help him dress. The old, kind-hearted maester suggested he go to the hall and break his fast. He instructed otherwise.

“The godswood,” he told the man pushing his chair, “and find Sam Tarly if you would,” he said to the other. The idle Stark man merely grunted in acknowledgement before seeing to his assigned task. The chair’s wheels *clacked* on the old stones as it rolled down the hall and to the doorway that led to the yard. Another guard, a boy in ill-fitted armor, struggled to push the barrier open. The Three-Eyed Raven thought the boy’s age and small frame hampered his efforts, but as the door slowly swung open he realized it was the fierce wind forcing the door shut.

The morning air stung his face as he passed from the keep to the yard. A dark grey sky hid the sun once again. The wind howled and whipped up thin columns of old snow and dirt. Ice crystals peppered his face as the guard pushed him toward the great stone archway and he closed his eyes to the assault.

Finally, mercifully, they entered the godswood. The winds were calmer here, though they still rustled the red leaves of the weirwood and disturbed the black pools near the center. The young guard wheeled him within an arm’s length of the heart tree’s weeping face before begging his leave and departing for the warmth of the keep. He did not mind.

The Three-Eyed Raven was only alone for a moment. Childish laughter echoed from the archway as Sam led his namesake into the grove. The boy walked with a child’s imbalance made all the worse by the thick grey and black furs bundled about him. He wore a small cloak and fur hat as well. Only his hands were exposed to the cold. *They need to be.*

“Samwell,” he turned his head to welcome the man.

“Good morning,” Sam called out as he approached, “a bit colder than yesterday, no? It reminds me of my time north of the Wall.” The child wobbled from side to side like some baby seal. He pounced emphatically on a fresh-fallen red lead in one instant and shuffled back to Sam’s side in another. When his eyes set on Bran, the boyish smile on his face died.

“I suppose it does,” he said. “I had hoped to scout the Wolfswood as Sansa asked, but before that,” his gaze turned from the man to the frightened boy, “I must learn.”
The child whimpered and struggled to waddle away from the rolling chair and heart tree. Sam held the boy firm and led in onward. The Three-Eyed Raven felt an odd twinge of pity for young Sam, but steeled himself to continue in his task. He placed one hand upon the bark of the weirwood, turning his thoughts to warging, to the dead, and to the Night King. With his other hand, he reached out and brushed the boy’s small fingers.

At once, he felt himself drawn down into the roots of the tree and out into the world. He kept his many eyes closed as time swirled around him with howling winter winds on one side and soft spring breezes on another. The dead, he repeated the thoughts over and over again. The Children. Find them.

He did.

When he opened his eyes, he was standing on one hilltop among many. Low hills covered the landscape and extended to the far eastern and western horizons. By the way the sun seemed to just brush their tips, he knew he was far to the north of Winterfell.

Across from him stood a smaller hillock with a large white tree in the center. Twelve corpses had been lain around the great weirwood at evenly spaced intervals. Their arms and legs had been spread wide as if to connect each body to the next. It seemed some cruel mockery of the lives they once enjoyed. They had not been dead long. The trails of blood glistening like morning dew on the grass betrayed the freshness of each kill. Most had been men, near enough to Jon’s age. He saw a few women as well. Only one of the corpses was a child’s; a broken body that could have belonged to Bran.

The Three-Eyed Raven watched the scene unfold from his perch. Even from hundreds of yards and thousands of years away, he could feel the cold emanating from the lone white figure nearest the tree. It was naked, its icy flesh jagged like the edges of the icy wall that would not be built for another thousand years. Other figures stood at a distance, their golden eyes and black daggers focused on the one beside the weirwood tree. A great grey direwolf stood beside one of the Children and a second had a mighty eagle sitting upon its shoulders, its talons carefully clutching bits of root and moss instead of digging themselves into delicate flesh.

No one moved. The Three-Eyed Raven raised two eyes to the sky. Great white clouds the size of castle towers floated overhead and the bright summer sun shone across the vast green landscape as it slowly rose once more. To the north, he could see rows of proud soldier pines rising from the forest floor like a wall of spear tips. Beyond that, mountains faded into the blueish-purple haze of the distant northern horizon.

The Three-Eyed Raven stepped forward and felt his leather boots sink into a plush layer of thick, green grass. All he walked, he passed the wildflowers that grew in bunches. Bursts of yellow, violet, and pure white dotted his path. Closer to the weirwood, red flowers mixed in among the others. The flowers that had managed to bloom under the canopy were all the same blood red as the tree’s leaves.

As he approached the ring of bodies, the sunlight faded away behind a great grey cloud rimmed in shining silver. He looked again to where the Children stood and might have sworn that one pair of golden eyes tracked his movements, but he could not be sure. Just before he made to step over the child’s bloody arm, it twitched.

The eagle shrieked and flapped its mighty wings as it lifted itself from its perch and flew away from the gathering. The direwolf’s eyes flashed white and it snarled and crouched low while the Children brought their weapons to bear. The Raven looked up and saw the pale figure’s blue eyes turn white. The other bodies began to writhe in the bloody grass as well. Their hands grasped at the
grass and their heels pounded the dirt in some horrid dance. One by one, once dead pairs of eyes flashed white... then faded into that familiar burning blue. Then, as one, the corpses stood.

That's it, then. It's true. The magic his foe used to control the dead was the same he himself had learned to control. He made to leave, to depart the vision and return to the god's wood in Winterfell... but a flash of movement kept him rooted in place.

The one he knew from his visions turned and looked at the bodies with cold blue eyes. Yet he made no move to touch the wights. Instead, he waited as the Children made their cautious advance toward the weirwood and their deadly creations. The one who had borne the eagle just a moment ago prodded one of the larger corpses with the wooden end of his short obsidian spear.

The seer saw the Children smile. Two of them began to speak, their words like the flowing of pure, cold water in a bubbling brook. Another joined in with words like a soft breeze rustling autumn leaves. He could feel their happiness from here. Their plan had worked.

The pale, icy figure stared down at his right hand for a moment, examining it while rolling his fingers and twisting his wrist in a curiously lazy gesture. Then he snapped it shut and formed a fist. The corpses turned and shambled toward the Children, gaining speed and strength as their master learned to use their bodies.

The two largest wights arrived first. One wrapped its pale, bloody hands around one of the small, green figure's necks whilst the second knocked away the spear that had prodded it a moment earlier. The Children's golden eyes shone with fear as they stumbled back and made to defend themselves, but they were overwhelmed. Ten more blue-eyed corpses pressed in from all sides. Dead hands pulled small green limbs from their bodies while the Children stabbed at the wights with their obsidian blades. The mighty eagle that had taken flight swooped down and sank its talons in the neck of one of the corpses, yet it had no effect. The dead man seized the bird and drove it into the ground with terrible force. The Three-Eyed Raven heard a sickening crunch as the light bones broke. He felt the eagle die.

He watched the skirmish unfold with an odd sense of curiosity. The two Children that had been furthest from the initial assault fled backwards and away from their attackers. Powerful as these first wights were, they were still clumsy tools for slaughter. The Children drew the press of bodies away from the tree and the one who controlled them. The dead soldiers mindless charged ahead.

Their strategy had worked, it seemed, for the massive direwolf charged past the bodies and ran straight for the one who controlled them. Slaver ran from its maw as it ran. Long yellow fangs parted in preparation for a deadly bite. A few yards from the tree, the wolf launched itself at its foe.

He heard it loose a pitiful whimper as the pale figure reached out and caught the beast at the neck. He watched as icy fingers closed every tighter around the wolf's throat. He held it in the air for a moment, its feet performing a panicked dance on the grass as its life lefts it body. Then he threw the corpse aside and advanced toward the Children.

Flowers wilted where he walked and the droplets of blood froze on the dying blades of grass. His pace was measured and confident, inevitable as death itself. He moved against his creators.

The wights had slaughtered two, but the remainder were fleeing toward the forest in the distance. The corpses could not keep pace. The Raven watched as they disappeared underneath the green canopy. The other did not seem to care. He turned back toward the tree and surveyed the carnage with a look of utter disinterest.
The direwolf began to stir, its powerful legs kicking the grass as they had just a moment ago. Its eyes opened. They were white for but a heart’s beat before that eerie, icy blue set in. It stood and joined the pack of wights as it made its way back to the weirwood.

The Three-Eyed Raven could feel them, could sense the ghostly presences of the wights pressing against his mind even here in the past. He stepped forward to touch one with an ethereal hand, but stopped as his foe drew up next to the tree. He placed a pale hand upon the white bark, which groaned and cracked where he touched it. Blood red sap poured from the wounds only to freeze instantly.

The Night King’s eyes flashed white again, then he turned and looked directly at the Three-Eyed Raven. He felt cold, jagged shards of ice being driven into his skull as the vision faded to black. He screamed.

Then he was back in his chair beneath the heart tree. The child was crying again. Gilly had appeared and cradled her son in her arms whilst giving Sam an accusatory look.

“Did you see it?” he asked in a hushed tone. He nodded solemnly, his mind racing far beyond words to the implications and opportunities his vision had presented. Some small part of him knew what must be done. He sat in silence for a moment, letting the pangs of pain settle in his mind.

After another moment, Gilly took her son inside. Sam sat upon a low branch and pulled his cloak tightly about his shoulders. Around them, snow began to fall.

Chapter End Notes

Got this out a little later than I wanted to, but had to take some time to re-examine my outline with a critical eye. Many thanks to my buddy/semi-beta reviewer Brandon, who has offered his wisdom in matters of lore and whatnot.

As for this chapter, I imagine The Three-Eyed Raven as multiple people in one body and try to portray his thought process as an internal conversation/struggle. I draw some inspiration from the idea of the Avatar (the Last Airbender [we do not speak of the film]) and a few other prominent fictional works. This particular chapter probably has some Star Wars mystical elements in it too, but that really could not be avoided at this point in time.

Should actually have the next chapter or two out in short order before taking some time off with the fam. Plus, we gotta save the good stuff for January when the holidays are over and we all get depressed and cold.
It was cold. Bitter cold. She had thought it a poor winter on the road to Winterfell and within the Stark keep, but this was something else entirely. Snow flurries had harried them every day since they had ridden forth nearly one week ago. The sun was hidden behind an impassable wall of grey. The icy winds that howled down from the hills to the north stung her cheeks and eyes. It cut right through her wools and furs, making her shiver. The grey palfrey she had taken as her own mount at White Harbor shivered too, its uneven, labored breath instantly turning to white mist in the air. Winter has come, she thought grimly.

Daenerys turned and looked behind her at the long lines of Dothraki, Unsullied, and northmen that wound through the low hills of this country, groups of brown, black, and grey against the white ground. The soldiers of the dozen or so northern houses that had joined them on their march to war were comfortable enough in the miserable weather, but her own forces fared far worse. Keeping warm in the camps was one thing, but facing the northern winter in the field was another.

For the first time in years, she felt truly cold as well. The cold had been a rare luxury on the hot, dusty plains of Essos. The coolness of the shade in Meereen’s terrace gardens had been rather enjoyable. Dragonstone had been damp and uncomfortable at times, yes, but it had been nothing like this. The harsh winds drove her inward into memories of a different unpleasant ride.

Late in the summer and earlier in my life, just on the edge of the Dothraki Sea… Daenerys could remember her own fear and uncertainty as she rode east beside Drogo. Every night had brought Drogo’s then-violent attentions and every day some new city, new word, or new fear. Khaleesi, they called me then. Some still do, she knew as she looked at some of the closer riders, their brown fur cloaks turned against the wind.

Daenerys did not need to remember that sense of dread and fear of the unknown she had felt when wedding Drogo, for she felt it here and now. Our enemy could be just beyond that ridge. My dragon could be close… But no. That was folly. Drogon and Rhaegal flew above the column and outriders had ridden forth in every direction. They would see. She had seen the army of the dead, but never truly fought them as Jon had. He knows. I trust him.

Yet she had trusted him before and her betrothed had almost gotten himself killed north of the Wall. Twice I have tried to save one I love. Twice I have paid a dear and desperate price. Rhaego, her unborn son, was nothing more than a bitter memory now; made slightly less so by the knowledge that she was once more with child. Her dragon’s death had carved a scar into her memory as raw and painful as the one the assassin’s dagger had left. Viserion’s terrible cries as he fell from the sky still echoed in the recesses of her mind. The deaths of my children have paid for
the lives of others. That will not happen again.

Her hand fell to her womb as it so often did since the maester had told her the truth of her condition. Daenerys recalled with ease the symptoms of carrying a child, though many and more had yet to show themselves. And when they do… Well, I shall be wed by then. She could only hope that this northern war was over by the time the child arrived.

*It still seems half a dream… like that vision aboard the ship sailing north.* She dwelt on that often; more with each passing day. Bran Stark’s visions had sent them on this march to strike a blow against the Night King’s forces. *I have magic of my own,* she assured herself, *perhaps my visions shall prove as true as his.*

She turned in the saddle and looked to where Jon rode just ahead of her, discussing something in hushed tones with Jorah and Lord Beric. Just the sight of him warmed her some. *He’s different.* She had realized that long before she realized what she felt for him was true.

*Cold?* No. She struggled for the right word. Where most men were brash, Jon was calm. *But not cautious.* *I have seen the blood of the dragon in him, even if he does not see it in himself.* There was a rare boldness in him. *On Dragonstone, fighting the wights in the north, calling at my quarters that night, other nights since…* It was that boldness that drew her to him.

It was that boldness they needed now. *Calm and caution are for ruling kingdoms, not winning them.* Cersei, for all her vileness, was bold. She had burned her enemies, betrayed their agreement, and sent assassins to accomplish what her armies could not. Daenerys hated her for it, but could not help but feel a begrudging sense of respect for the rival queen.

*Jon must be bold. I must be bold.* They had two wars to win and countless battles to fight before they could make the world safe for each other and for their child. *And for the home and family I would have us build. For the future we will build.*

Thoughts and fantasies of the future she might win for herself, her child, and Jon kept her warm - or at least distracted from the biting cold - as the march continued day after day. There were other means of distraction too. Tyrion provided for good company and conversation. She had insisted that her Hand ride alongside her forces so that he might see the enemy for himself. Whether that would prove to be wisdom or folly had yet to be seen. *You need to see it to know,* she told herself in rare moments of doubt.

Missandei had joined her too, despite the queen’s protests that her friend remain safe and warm within the walls of Winterfell. The Naathi women had only smiled, bowed, and made her own preparations to join the march. *It is not only for me, though,* Daenerys knew. Missandei had already been separated from Grey Worm once before when Tyrion had sent the Unsullied to conquer Casterly Rock. She was not one to subject herself to that again.

She loves him. *I would not let Jon ride into battle alone,* so why should I separate the two of them?

Now she found herself musing on the future of her advisors. Missandei and Grey Worm would stay by her side, of course. *Perhaps they might even marry as I plan to do.* Jorah would serve in her queensguard alongside other suitable knights of good standing and ability. *Or would it be a kingsguard with Jon?* She was not sure.

Tyrion would help Jon and her restore peace to these war ravaged kingdoms, though he might on occasion return to his seat in the Westerlands. *And his brother… well.* Daenerys had thanked Ser Jaime for his aid and made certain the wound he took in her defense was well tended. *But I shall not have him guarding me or my child and I cannot give him the Rock.* His eventual fate was another problem that House Lannister had presented her.
A low, booming war horn shook her from her thoughts and she looked up to see the column beginning to break apart. Above them, the sky was fading to ever darker shades of grey. Near the horizon, it seemed to meld with the hills. The men began to set up camp along the roadside or in the smaller, flat fields in between some of the snow-covered hillocks. Daenerys hoped they would set up her own pavilion somewhere shielded from the bitter winds.

After days of practice, the northern levies were able to set up their own encampments quickly enough. Her own soldiers did so as well. The Dothraki were used to moving camps with each passing day and the Unsullied had been trained in the less glorious aspects of warfare from a young age. Even so, the cold hampered their efforts as well.

Another hour had passed before the iron stakes were driven into the frozen ground and the command pavilion raised and readied. Like all the rest of the world, it was grey and unassuming, though she noted with a soft swell of pride the fearsome three-headed dragon of her house swaying on a black field high above the pavilion’s point. Other northern sigils and those of the few Vale knights that had joined the march snapped back and forth in the wind, but it was the dragons that flew above the rest.

Daenerys dismounted her palfrey and handed the reins off to one of her guards before making to enter the pavilion. It was warmer inside, but not warm enough to remove the fur cloak she wore. Just now, the men were setting up a long table with rows of low backed seats on either side. Jon had called another assembly of the lords and commanders this evening, just as he had on previous nights.

She and Missandei warmed themselves by a brazier as the retinues trickled in. Tyrion and Jorah entered first and greeted their queen with bows and pleasant conversation. Grey Worm came soon after, with a few of his own stern-faced lieutenants who had learned the common tongue of Westeros well enough. With her Unsullied came some of her more trusted bloodriders. Her Dothraki had once scorned making plans for war beneath a tent’s roof rather than beneath the stars, but the viciousness of the northern winter had made them reconsider their proud traditions.

And speaking of proud traditions... Lord Glover, as grey and dull as the rest of the North, pushed aside the tent flap as he entered at the head of a group of northern lords. He and Daenerys locked eyes for a moment before the man gave a short bow and found a seat at the table. Even now, marching to war, they don’t trust me. I must show them, too.

Not long thereafter, Jon swept into tent with Ser Jaime, Davos, Beric, Sandor Clegane, and a few black brothers in tow. Those who went beyond the Wall, she knew. His grey eyes found hers. They seemed troubled. She went to him.

Together, they assumed their seats whilst Jorah laid a large map across the width of the table. It was difficult to make out the details of the faded images upon the old sheepskin, but the carved wooden figures of dragons and wolves made it clear enough where they were. At the edge of the table, just beyond the maps wrinkled borders, she saw pale wooden figures carved in the shapes of men. Weirwood, she realized as she examined them in greater detail.

Jon looked at her for a moment, nodded, then turned to Davos as he stood to address the assembled commanders. His advisor produced a raven scroll from a hidden pocket and handed it to him. Daenerys already knew its contents, for she had read it when it arrived this morning.

“My lords,” he said, assuming the air of command and brandishing the scroll, “Bran has seen the enemy here,” he reached for two of the weirwood figurines and placed them near the edge of the map, near a faded line of blue she knew to be a river, “and here,” he set a single pale figure down much closer to the wooden dragon and wolf. “The bulk of the Night King’s forces remain across
The Last River, but I cannot say why or for how long. The smaller force moves west toward Winterfell... and us."

The wind howled outside, drowning out the sound of worried whispers. “And what of the dragon?” Lord Glover leaned forward and asked in his gruff voice. Daenerys felt cold fingers coil around her heart at the mention of Viserion. *He will be put to rest,* she wanted to say. She wanted to show they lords what she could do. *And he will be avenged.* Instead, she pressed her lips together and let Jon continue.

“Of the dragon, there has been no sight or sign. Bran simply writes the Night King remains with the larger force,” he responded.

“Then we must hasten our march!”, one of the Vale noblemen sitting at the far end of the table rose, as if standing might give his words more weight. “If this king thinks us weak, let us show him our strength. He has grown vain and foolish indeed if he thinks we’ll not oppose his armies in the field. And we have two dragons!” *They love me not, but they’ll gladly send my dragons to fight in their stead.* There were murmurs of agreement around the pavilion from lords young and old.

*Vain. Foolish.* Those were words for southron knights full of confidence and emotion. *They have not seen. That thing that slew Viserion, though...* Those eyes had been devoid of warmth and as impassable as the grey sky above. They did not feel. Perhaps they did not even ‘want’ as any living thing might do.

Jon shook his head and sighed. “The plan is set, my lords. In two days’ time we’ll reach the banks of the White Knife and assemble our armies on the other side. Tormund has ridden ahead with some of the Free Folk. They will draw the dead into our trap.”

“Are you sure, my lord?” young Lord Cerwyn rose and motioned at the map with a sweeping arm. “What if these dead men march past us in the night and cross the frozen river? What if they make it to Castle Cerwyn or Winterfell whilst we march through the snows?”

“That’s not how they fight,” a grim voice cut off Jon’s reply and the growing din of murmurs. Daenerys turned in her seat to see Beric Dondarrion step into the firelight. The orange glow illuminated half his pace but cast his covered, ruin eye in shadow. “They’re not vain or foolish. They’re not men. They’re not even living.”

Judging by the expressions the assembled men now wore, Beric was not to be considered among the living either. *Six times, he has been brought back by his god, she knew. Jon will seldom talk of his coming back once.* Daenerys did not fear him as others seemed to. He had often ridden beside her on the march and took a peculiar yet welcome interest in her time in Essos and her dragons. Of his Lord of Light, he said little enough. *Only that he ‘favors me’. At least I can count on one Lord to support me.*

Jon had ceded command of the audience to Lord Beric, who continued to speak. “They will not concern themselves with holdfasts and fields. It is the living they hunt.” *Perhaps too well,* she thought grimly. *But no.* There had been fewer than a dozen men beyond the Wall. Now they had ten thousand here and more at Winterfell.

“And we shall be hunted,” Jon said. “I’ve fought them before, my lords. I know their ways. They are like hounds on the hunt. Once they catch the scent of blood, they rush in for the kill. Once they see our men, they’ll pursue them, right into our lines.” It was what they needed to hear. A few lords pounded their fists on the table or else shouted as if they had already won a great victory.

The discussion descended into a maze of minutiae after that. Daenerys’ attention failed her as the
lords discussed weaponry and provisions and battle tactics over the meagre evening meal. As one of the few proven commanders they had, Ser Jaime proved rather useful with respect to those topics. She hoped he would proved equally useful in the field.

Her mind had turned to thinking of their two greatest weapons, who had no doubt settled into the snows somewhere nearby. She would ride Drogon if the battles to come required a dragon in the sky, but Rhaegal had yet to accept Jon. *Or is it Jon who must accept the dragon? We must try again tonight.*

Mercifully, tonight came sooner than she expected. The lords left the pavilion and the cumbersome furniture with them. Some of the Stark men set up a makeshift bedchamber for the queen and their lord before leaving the pavilion for the evening. Jorah, Tyrion, and Missandei all wished her a good evening as they left; the first with a frown, the second with a smirk, and the third with a warm smile.

Then, it was just her and Jon. *And Ghost...* The great white wolf had padded in from the cold during the meeting and nestled near a brazier in a corner. His presence made her feel safer. She disrobed as much as the cold would allow and settled under the furs beside him. After hours of planning, explanation, and discussion, her lover was content to simply listen to the winds outside. She was not.

“Tell me a story.” Daenerys shifted closer to Jon as she pulled the furs up to fully cover them both. They were different furs than those upon their bed in Winterfell. She liked them far less, for they failed to keep out the chill that permeated the tent. Indeed, the braziers, torches, even her nearby dragons failed at that. She only had Jon to keep her warm.

“A story?” he asked as he turned to accommodate her movement. He furrowed his brow as he reached for a memory. “Well... there was the time I knocked on your cabin door and-”

She placed a hand on his chest to cut him off, though she laughed softly at his suggestion. “No. Tell me a story that you would tell our children.”

His eyes widened and he sat up, the furs falling to his waist to reveal his scars. “Children? Daenerys are there...?”

“No,” she laughed again, “but you’ve proven yourself... capable,” her eyes tracked his naked form, concealed as it was under the furs. “I should hope that when all this is over we might have a true family. It’s a terrible thing for a child to be alone.” *You know as well as I...* He had been raised a bastard and she in exile, fleeing from one city to the next. Home was something neither had truly known until they found the other.

“Aye,” he sighed out the word on a pent-up breath. “A story then, for a boy or a girl?”

“Either. Both? Does it matter?” she responded, each word spoken faster than the last. “I see no reason my daughters should be treated differently that my sons. Do you?” She felt herself tense for a moment. *What if he says yes?* She loved this man, but every so often she was reminded they had known each other for less than a year. *He was raised with Westerosi customs. What if he thinks differently?*

“No,” he said. *Good.* “But the high lords of Westeros won’t like that,” he said, “they would expect your eldest son to inherit your land and titles.”

“Our land. Our titles,” she corrected him, pushing away and propping herself up as if the new position augmented her authority, “that’s what *together* means, Jon. And the high lords of
Westeros currently serve one queen and will serve another. I see no reason that should not continue if I should give you a daughter.”

He dipped his chin in agreement. “Nor do I,” he said, a smile appearing on his face. Daenerys felt flustered for a moment as she realized the frenzy she had slowly worked herself into. She took one slow breath of the cold night air and settled back against his chest. They lay in silence for a moment, listening to the sounds of each other’s breathing and the odd bits of noise from the encampment outside their own tent. “There was the time I found Ghost in the Wolfswood.”

Daenerys looked over to where the massive white wolf slumbered in the opposite corner. His ears perked up at the sound of his name and he lazily opened one eye. “And how did you convince a direwolf to follow you home?”

“We had all gone with my father to see justice done to a deserter off the Wall,” Jon’s eyes were impassable as he stared off into the distance and the past, recalling memories from a lifetime ago. “A madman who had claimed…” his voice died in the midnight air.

“Claimed what?” she urged him to continue.

“Claimed to have seen the White Walkers,” he finished grimly. *I had never heard that before.* Perhaps Eddard Stark had been as skeptical as she had been herself back on Dragonstone, and Jon as well. The thought gave her little comfort on the eve of battle. “My father – Lord Eddard took his head and we came across a dead direwolf in the wood. We found six pups, five for the trueborn Starks and the runt for me.”

“That,” she moved her leg a bit and adjusted her position so as to look into his eyes, “was not a story.”

“No?”

“No. Stories have beginnings, middles, and ends. They have tender moments and hardship in equal measure. And the best ones….” she drew herself equal with him and placed a soft kiss on his lips before pulling away again. “The best ones have happy endings.”

*Will we?* Their survival was no sure thing, even against a fraction of the Night King’s army. *If Viserion could die, why not Rhaegal? Why not me? Why not Jon?* It was a frightening thought and made her hold him all the more tightly. She had faith in her soldiers and her men, to be sure but fear pressed in from all sides like the evening cold. *For me, at least. For us.* She and Jon had seen they army of the dead. Like Jorah, or the wildling Tormund, or Beric, they knew what their enemy could do. The others did not.

Even her child’s survival was not guaranteed. The witch’s curse might yet linger inside her and cause the babe to be delivered still born or not at all. *And Cersei still ravages the lands in the south. How many battles must I fight before I can find peace?*

“Aye, that they do,” he said. “Do you still mean to have ours when we return to Winterfell?” *The wedding, he means,* she realized at once.

“Yes. It need not be extravagant. I’ve already suffered through such weddings before,” she said.

“Simple, then. And before the heart tree,” Jon responded. She saw him smile, but the gesture did not reach his eyes. Talk of weddings and children, of family, home and happy endings were nice and well within the safe confines of their bed and tent. *But we both know what awaits us on the morrow, and the days thereafter.*
She did not want to wait here for it. She did not want to wait at all. Drogon was close by. She could feel him and his brother. *I could take them now, fly off and burn the dead before sunrise. Then we could go home.* It was a foolish notion, but Daenerys rose and tossed the furs aside. Cold air rushed in. She shivered.

Jon looked at her inquisitively as he mirrored her movements and joined her in standing naked and shivering in the frigid night air. He wrapped his strong arms around her and held her close for a moment. “Are you alright?” he asked quietly.

“Yes,” she answered as she pulled away and went to dress herself. Jon shrugged and did the same. She saw the bruises from his fall from Rhaegal on his back as he turned.

Moments later, Daenerys had garbed herself in her fine dress lined with soft furs and her cloak, gloves, and boots. The various other accoutrements that signified her royal status would not been needed so late at night.

Fastening the cloak about her slim shoulders, she turned to regard Jon. He was already dressed in his usual garb and was securing Longclaw to his left hip. On his right, he wore the long dragonglass dagger with which he had slain the wight in the dragonpit. Upon his face her wore a look, halfway between anticipation and confusion. He had not asked what spurred the rise from the warm bed and impending midnight adventure; but then again he did not have to. *He trusts me,* she knew.

Together, they left the tent and stepped out into the greater camp. The sky was black and starless. No light had broken through the grey wall of clouds for nigh on a week. Only dim firelight lit their way forward. Her Unsullied guards fell in around the pair as they walked. At a word, Daenerys told them to keep their distance. It was only a short walk to the edge of the camp where Drogon and Rhaegal lay resting and the snow around them had melted quite a bit.

Her dragons were always with her. She could feel them in her mind like a favorite memory. Daenerys felt them stirring from sleep as she and Jon cleared the final line of tents. Drogon’s presence burned hot and fierce like some blazing wild fire. Rhaegal’s was more measure and subdued, or at least it felt as much compared to Drogon’s. Then, for a brief moment, she felt a third presence. *Viserion?* No, that was not possible. *He is gone. Far from here and not living anymore. Not truly.* She pushed the feeling from her mind and felt it melt away.

Dark outlines lay ahead. Drogon stirred first, eyes of molten gold burning against the darkness. She felt the tremors of his waking through the frozen earth. Rhaegal joined him a moment later. Two massive heads turned to greet the two Targaryens.

Daenerys reached out and took Jon’s hand in hers as they approached. She had brought him to the dragons a few more times over the course of their march, but always thought it best to assure Jon she was by his side. *He took that first attempt with Rhaegal a bit personally. As I did, once.* She could still recall that odd feeling of shock and betrayal when Drogon had first lashed out at her some years ago. Taming him had been a long process and Daenerys could remember the doubt that had harried her every time Drogon ignored a command.

“You should try yourself, this time,” she urged him ahead as they approached the dragons. “Just once.”

Jon leg out a ragged, nervous breath that instantly turned to mist in the cold night air, though beside Drogon and Rhaegal it was quite a bit warmer. He looked at her and nodded solemnly before removing his gloves, tucking them under his sword belt, and pacing cautiously toward Rhaegal.
Daenerys watched with apprehension as the scene that had happened half a dozen times before repeated itself before her. Rhaegal extended his head to meet Jon’s touch. His pitch-black pupils widened in recognition and he let loose a deep thrum of satisfaction as Jon ran a bare hand along his scales. *At least they like each other,* she thought and smiled.

Yet the gentle strokes along his maw or side were all the green dragon would permit. Whenever Jon had tried to mount him as Daenerys had shone, Rhaegal had shrugged him off. *He has the blood of the dragon, but not as much as I,* she reasoned with herself. To his credit and her admiration, Jon never gave up trying, though his confidence was often shaken after an attempt. *Bold.* The word from earlier in the day returned to her. *You must be bold, Jon.*

As Jon spoke some whispered word to the green dragon, the black moved closer. Drogon used his massive head to nudge Rhaegal aside. The green almost lost his balance and toppled sideways as his larger brother moved in front of Jon. Without too much hesitation, Jon gave his new companion a few gentle pets and received thrums of satisfaction in return.

Daenerys stifled her laughter at the scene, for it was not two dragons she saw, but two young children vying for their father’s attentions. She found herself wondering what sort of father Jon would be to their child. *Children,* she hoped, *and a good one.* That was plain enough already.

Suddenly, she felt a soft warmth running between her gloved fingers and looked down to see Ghost pushing his head against her hand. *He must have followed us out.* She almost laughed again and gave the direwolf an affectionate scratch. “Not one to miss the excitement, hmm?” He looked at her with red eyes that seemed to glow even in the darkness.

After another moment alone, she moved forward to join Jon and her dragons. She stood alongside him and reached out to touch her dragon. His scales warmed her cold, stiff fingers. Beside Jon and with her dragons and his direwolf, the world felt warm for but a moment. It felt safe. She felt safe.

Having regain his confidence, Rhaegal moved toward Jon once more in search of attention. Jon gave it willingly. “You should try it again,” she said quietly, unsure of how he would react. There were two dragons for two Targaryens. That was no coincidence. She knew it to be true; believed it was a part of their shared destiny. Why was he so reluctant? *Be bold. Be a dragon.*

“No now,” he responded. *You’ll have to eventually. I will help you see.*

“There are commands you can give him, old Valyrian words that he can understand,” she began to explain. In truth, Daenerys was not quite sure how it worked. Perhaps the sorcerers and magi of the old Freehold had imbued their language with power. Perhaps dragons were far smarter than she realized. Perhaps the bond between dragon and rider meant that Drogon simply knew what she wanted.

*I suppose that would make sense.* He had been drawn to her in Daznak’s Pit when all seemed lost. It had been one of the few times she was truly afraid. She had looked inward for the power to face her enemies, but that power had found her instead. *Perhaps it will be the same with Jon and Rhaegal.*

“I’ve heard you mumbling some of them in your sleep,” he laughed softly, “tell me.”

*Dracarys,* she spoke the word with dragon rider’s confidence. Beside her, Drogon reared his head and opened his black maw. She saw the furnace glow from deep inside him. “No! Drogon…. No.” The simmering light died as he resumed his resting position.

Jon looked from the dragon to the dragon queen and back again, a look of concerned amusement
on his face. “Drackeris, was it?”


“Dracarys,” he repeated the word. Hearing him speak her mother tongue was, well, rather attractive. *It’s in his blood. He has a knack for it… and a talented tongue.* She felt warmer now.

“And sōvegon, that means ‘fly’”, she said as she walked towards him. It was so warm here between her dragons and her lover. She could not even feel the cold. Jon turned to regard her with a bemused expression, but his hand never left Rhaegal’s green scaled side.

The sight woke something within her, making her feel warmer still. Her heartbeat quickened with her breath. She swallowed and found her mouth dry. *From the cold,* she told herself. That was a lie.

“And ilagon is down,” she continued.

“Allright,” he laughed again, “sovegun and ilagun and dracarys, one at a time now.”

The stirring she felt grew hotter still, and she reached out to pull Jon’s hand away from Rhaegal and to her. Jon understood. She offered more words and corrected his mispronunciations as the pair turned away from the dragons and walked back to the camps.

It was not as cold on the way back to the pavilion. Daenerys taught him a few other words in her mother tongue as they passed the sentries and entered their pavilion once more. Once inside, she made to turn away and disrobe, but Jon held her hand firmly and did not let her move away. She saw that familiar hunger in his eyes. *Be bold,* she had thought. As he closed the distance between them, Daenerys knew he could be. Jon Snow would ride one dragon tonight.

Chapter End Notes

I know I said I was writing an original POV, but once I put pen to paper it was not all that compelling at this point in the story, so I’ve bumped it to later. I did incorporate some elements of that chapter into this one, so the first half probably has a slightly different tone than the second.

I’m writing the battle now, in two parts. Going to write it all and have it reviewed so you all don’t have to wait like 9 days in between the first and second parts. Count on that coming in a few days after the new year.

The number of main characters that die in the fight will be directly proportional to the number of points Alabama wins or loses by in the CFP semis. If we get crushed, the story ends with the Others raising Jon and Daenerys as wights. They will live together forever #HappyEnding. If we blow out Clemson, I suppose the opposite is true, so count on seeing some Ned, Shireen, and Waymar Royce POVs soon thereafter.

In all seriousness, hope everyone had a Merry Christmas! See you all next year! (I despise that joke...)
Jaime III

Chapter Summary

And now it begins.

Chapter Notes

All hail Da'ron Payne.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The horns and trumpets were already blaring when Jaime Lannister stepped outside his tent and into the miserable northern winter. *Today is the day*, he might have sighed, but the freezing air seemed to steal every breath as it stung his lungs. The bitter winter winds were rising with the sun. He looked upwards in the hope of spotting it, but only saw a flock of ravens flying off toward the north and east, specks of black against the dark grey sky. Their harsh calls faded as they went onward.

He tugged on the straps that secured his golden hand to his arm and gave the rest of his armor a cursory inspection. Gone were the proud lion pauldrons and gleaming golden breastplate. His armor was simple steel and black leather. *And this*, he pulled the fine sable cloak about his shoulders. The only things that marked him for a Lannister were *Widow’s Wail* at his hip and the golden hair upon his head.

Only that was beginning to fade as well. He had noticed a few grey hairs whilst examining himself in mirrored glass in his chambers at Winterfell. *Everything is grey in the North*, he had thought then. *Or white*, he noted as the morning snow flurries piled atop his short-cropped hair. It had snowed these past two days, though it had been nothing like the storm that had so smothered Winterfell just after his arrival. Then again, it did not need to be. A sword’s length of snow might have slowed their march to a crawl. A spear’s length would trap them here.

*At least we are here*, thought Jaime as he peered across the tent lines to the grove of barren trees beside the frozen river. They had arrived yesterday near midday and immediately began fortifying their side of the river. There had been no word from the wilding Tormund, but another groups of scouts had returned to say the man had baited the dead at a distance and now fled back toward the northern forces. Battle would soon be joined.

The plan, which they had discussed last night in some detail, was rather simple: these smaller scouting parties would lure the dead into the waiting arms of the Unsullied. The eunuchs would further draw in these battle-hungry corpses, bending their lines to pull the soldiers away from their commanders. Then the Dothraki would sweep around the flanks and do away with the White Walkers that had so foolishly separated from their king and his undead dragon.

It was hunting, not fighting. They were luring a mindless beast into a trap. *As long as we hunt better then dear old Robert, I should think we’ll be fine*. Still, there was something unsettling about it all. *Perhaps this is how Robb felt before the Whispering Wood... and even there I slew a dozen*
men before they had my sword. What if these dead men broke the lines? He had watched Clegane cut that dead man in half in King’s Landing and still it fought with a lion’s ferocity. Facing twenty thousand of those monsters would prove to be a challenge.

A long line of Unsullied marched past in lockstep formation, the dragonglass tips of their spears glinting in the pale morning light. They were a curiosity. Jaime was eager to see them fight. Two hundred, perhaps? He guessed at the number before him as they moved by his tent toward the river. They marched away to join with the rest of the queen’s armies. At the end of the line an entirely different sort of warrior trudged along through the snow, ice, and mud.

“Lady Brienne,” he greeted her with a casual turn of his false hand as she neared. She wore the armor he had gifted her some years earlier, along with Oathkeeper. The fine Valyrian steel blade was his own’s twin, re-forged from Ice, the ancestral blade of the Starks. It seemed only fitting that the steel be reunited in defense of the Stark people.

“Ser Jaime,” she responded with that odd, half-frown of hers as she stopped in front of his. As welcoming as a northern winter’s morning.

“I take it Oathkeeper is ready for the fight ahead?” he motioned at the gleaming, golden sword at her left hip.

“It is. As am I. A swordswoman is only as good as her sword,” she reached down and gave the tilt a gentle tug, rattling her sword belt.

“Lucky for us,” Jaime said.

“Indeed,” Brienne huffed, “Widow’s Wail is readied as well, then?”

I’d sooner re-forge it again into a steel hand, he might have said. For all his practice, he was still near useless with his remaining hand. He had considered giving the precious weapon to a more capable fighter, as the Tarly lad had done with his own family’s greatsword, but something had stayed his hand.

Her offered her a silent nod in response before motioning for her to join him in the long walk to the commander pavilion where they might find Daenerys and Jon. The pair had given him his blade back before the march, alongside their thanks for saving the queen’s life from the assassins Cersei had sent north.

The very thought made his blood hot. What sort of fool sends cutthroats? Not even father would have stooped so low. Has she gone mad? But no, that was not right. Father arranged for Edmure’s Red Wedding. Father wanted Tyrion dead. It was not madness, only miscalculation. Perhaps Lord Tywin had dug his own shallow grave with his missteps. Perhaps Jaime’s sister was just now doing the same, for if Daenerys and Jon defeated the enemy to the north, they would surely move to destroy the woman who had betrayed their trust and their peace.

He did not relish the thought. For years, he had loved her. Part of me still does, he knew. And she carries the child. My child. He had ridden north to protect it and protect her. At least, that was what he told himself. Another part of him had hoped that riding north would distance himself from his sister and her plots. Yet if he survived, he would surely face Cersei once more.

It did no good to dwell on such things now, for if they did not prevail in this battle and in this war, nothing else mattered. Everyone would die, including the child.

Time for that later. He pushed the thought from his mind with another topic. “How did you get
“I commanded Podrick to stay and guard Lady Sansa and Arya… and I can put my own armor on well enough,” she explained, still tense and rigid as cold iron.

“Was it not your vow to Lady Catelyn to guard her daughters? How can you guard them from fifty leagues away?” the questions came out faster and far harsher than he had wanted them to, yet there was not taking them back now.

“Lady Sansa thought it best to see that my sword and skill in battle were used to defend the North,” she said proudly. Ahead of them, Jaime could see the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen rear its head above the command pavilion. Brienne had seen it too. “And I doubt Lady Arya needs much protecting, as you no doubt saw when you helped defend Her Grace from those men. You took a wound, no?”

“I did,” he said, twisting his wrist and feeling the fresh scar where the man’s blade had cut him. *Were he more skilled at arms, I might have had a shorter stump.*

“It was admirable what you did. Honorable,” she stopped walking and, squaring her shoulders to his, placed a hand on his shoulder. “Riding to join Her Grace, defending her… even with the history between your houses.”

_I was on my way to fetch firewood._ Jaime had only done what he thought was right. *No, not even that.* He had not thought at all. He had simply taken action to survive. His defending Daenerys was no more motivated by honor than his killing her father had been. *This is about survival, she told me in the capital,* he thought as he looked at her. *She might understand, but she won’t want to hear of it now.* “Thank you, Brienne,” he said, attempting a genuine smile against the cold stiffened muscles of his face. “I think it best if we keep moving. Jon will be expecting his Valyrian swords and commanders in the pavilion soon enough.” She nodded.

A rush of warm air greeted the pair as they entered the pavilion. A few of Daenerys’ Dothraki riders and Unsullied serjeants stood off to Jaime’s hand side whilst the queen herself stood facing away from the entrance. The bastard boy Gendry was helping the queen into her armor while she discussed something in hushed tones with his brother Tyrion, Ser Jorah Mormont, and Missandei.

Other advisors stood around the table they had used on previous nights; its surface covered in maps and bits of parchment. Davos, Clegane, Dondarrion, Grey Worm… He recited their names. *No fingers, no face, no heartbeat, no cock. And no hand, of course,* he glimpsed at gilded metal that hung uselessly at his side. *What a magnificent army we make.* They looked at Jaime and Brienne as the pair moved toward the table, though no words of welcome were exchanged.

“Ser Jaime,” he heard Daenerys call out his name. He turned to face her. *Oh.* He felt his heartbeat quicken as she walked toward the group at the table. The queen wore her dark grey dress underneath the polished black steel armor inlaid with dragonglass. The armor hugged her womanly curves while her silver hair hung in a tight braid at her back. *Beautiful… and deadly.* He was not a man to steal another man’s queen - *well, not anymore -* yet, Jaime Lannister could not deny that Daenerys looked beautiful; every bit the image of Old Varyria, and every bit the rightful queen of the Seven Kingdoms.

“Your Grace,” he bowed as much as his armor would allow. “I should hope you won’t be needing that armor today.”
“My dragons will protect me and my people, but my advisors urge caution,” she said.

“We do indeed,” Tyrion called out from behind him as he entered the command pavilion and moved to warm himself by the fire. “Caution is a rare enough thing in battle, wouldn’t you agree brother?” he asked with a wry smile. *The Blackwater*...

“Sometimes boldness wins the day,” he argued for the sake of an argument. He would never let Tyrion win that easily.

“And sometimes it gets you killed,” Daenerys responded. Jaime might have offered a witty retort, but just then Jon swept into the pavilion with Lord Glover in tow alongside a dozen black brothers and northern guards. Jaime did not know any of the sentries, but he thought they looked a rather sorry lot. One, a particularly frail lad with a thin longsword and sheathed dragonglass dagger, had eyes only for the bastard smith who sat on a low bench in the corner. *And those eyes feel familiar...* Jaime could not say where he had seen them before, yet they gave him an uncertain feeling.

Familiar eyes were the least of his concerns. The frail northern soldier moved aside as two wildlings entered, their reddish-brown beards covered in hoarfrost. *The scouts,* he knew at a glance. One of them looked his way. His eyes shone with fear.

Jon moved to Daenerys’ side and the pair shared a whispered word before the Lord of Winterfell addressed the gathering. “Tomund,” he began, “rides for our position with all haste. The dead march behind him.” The statement had its intended effect and Jaime heard Sandor Clegane mutter a curse under his breath. “If they keep a steady pace, they’ll be here by midday.”

“And what of the dragon?” Lord Glover asked. *The dragon*... Jaime remembered that day alongside the banks of the Blackwater Rush and offered a silent prayer to whatever gods would hear it.

Jon plucked a scroll from the table and held it aloft. “Another message from Bran and Samwell Tarly in Winterfell. He has not seen the Night King near our men.” There was an audible sigh of relief from those in the pavilion. “But, he believes our enemy wargs the dead.”

“And what does that mean?” Jaime asked at once, partly out of curiosity and partly to divert attention away from the mention of the boy he had crippled. “Must our plans now change?”

“No,” his brother responded, “so far as I understand it, this information means our strategy shall succeed.” *I’d thought you might have learned the difference between planning and fighting by now.*

“Lord Tyrion is right,” Jon said, “when we kill the White Walkers, the corpses they control will die as well. It’s just a matter of drawing the wights away from their masters.”

“The bodies cannot die,” Beric said in his typically eerie tone, “they’re dead already.” *I suppose you are the maester in such matters.* “They must be burned if we are to truly shatter that connection.”

“We have two dragons,” Lord Glover stated. *How observant.*

“And both of them shall remain on this side of the river,” Jon’s response was hard as iron and Jaime understood why. He was not willing to risk his betrothed or their best hope for victory. That was not the official strategy, of course. Daenerys would stand by her great black beast and take to the skies should they need her. He hoped the would not. “The men will burn the bodies with torch and oil once the walkers are destroyed,” Jon continued. “Lord Glover will hold the northern forces
in reserve behind the Unsullied. Ser Jaime will ride with me in command, alongside Beric, Sandor, Lady Brienne, and others who would join us.” He gave a nod to Gendry as he spoke.

“That’s it, then,” Jorah said with an air of finality, “we should join the men across the river.”

The gathering began to fracture into a dozen smaller conversations: Lord Glover and his men; Tyrion and Jorah; Grey Worm and Missandei; and Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen. Jaime watched the two pairs as they spoke in hushed tones. A whispered word here, a soft smile there, a tender touch of the arm, and finally a brief but meaningful kiss. The sight made him feel empty, as if the armor he wore was all that he was. He turned and left the pavilion, moving to find his horse and make his way east across the river.

The crossing of the White Knife was a quick and easy affair. The river was frozen and the ice thick enough for their army to traverse with ease. Jon had claimed the river held strategic significance as well, for they might break the ice and flee westward without fear of pursuit. Low hills rose up on the banks of the river. They would conceal the Dothraki.

The landscape itself was unremarkable. Hills rose up the north and east, white capped ridges and slopes against a grey sky. Between those barren hills and the river lay an expanse of flat, white ground upon which the Unsullied were already assembling their mighty formation.

He found a spot on the eastern slope of one of the hills and waited for the rest of the commanding retinue to cross. Slowly, the group gathered around him. Beric and Clegane and Gendry with his odd hammer found him first. Then Grey Worm and his commanders joined the group. Last came Jon, riding along with Brienne, Davos, Jorah, and perhaps a dozen others in tow, including his great while direwolf. Quite the retinue.

As the greater bulk of their armies moved into position, the commanders waited. Silent minutes turned to silent hours, or so it seemed to Jaime. He sat shivering upon the chestnut brown horse that had served as his mount during the march. The beast’s labored breath turned to white mist in the freezing air. Jaime’s cheeks were raw and red, his eyes stung with every gust of cold wind. He could barely feel his toes. Perhaps this king means for us to freeze to death.

He looked out across the landscape and saw an eagle flying off in the distance, traversing the sky from the east to the north. At least, it seemed like an eagle. It was just a black speck really, circling higher and higher still before swooping low in one rapid movement. It must be an eagle. What other bird could fly like that? As the bird rose into clouds, Jaime felt an odd chill set in.

“It’s said the First Men considered eagles to be good omens,” Beric said, nodding toward the northern sky. Jaime looked to his companion. At least the remaining eye is a good one. He looked over the rest of the man. Beric seemed untroubled by the cold.

“Perhaps they are,” Jaime agreed, his words turning to white mist like every other breath he had taken in the past week. Beric exhaled slowly too, though his own breath created a far larger cloud of white that took more than a few heartbeats to dissipate in the winter air. That seemed odd. “Are you not cold, ser?”

“The Lord’s fire keeps me warm,” Beric said. Oh, of course they do. Jaime had never been a religious man. Perhaps some deity had saved Beric six times, but it was just as likely to be some man’s magic. Still, he was curious.

“Pity your Lord didn’t see fit to light some fires for the rest of us,” he responded.

“He has,” Beric motioned with one gloved hand to the thousands of torches burning in the hands of
the Unsullied and northmen. “His fires burn here, and in the dragons, and in the Dragon Queen. His fires burn in you, Lannister, and your sword.” Jaime gave him a quizzical look. Being of the Kingsguard, he had known Thoros of Myr in the capital. Though the man had spent years in Robert’s court, the priest had been more interested in red wine than his red god. Jaime had only heard whispers and rumors.

“It’s said the Red Priests of the east can see things in their fires. Visions. Can you?” he asked, curious as to what power drove Beric onward.

“They can, but I cannot. Not always or at will. I serve the Lord of Light in a different manner,” Beric regarded him with an odd smile.

Jaime would have asked in what manner he meant to serve his god, but a booming war horn cut him off. Two more answered the first, then another half dozen sounded their low calls. The noise echoed through the hills. He felt himself tense. His hand fell at once to his sword’s hilt. That’s the signal. The enemy was approaching. But where?

His eyes scanned the horizon for a sign of their foe. He looked north. Then east. Then his eyes flashed south to follow the meandering banks of the White Knife. Where?

“There,” Jon motioned to the northeast. Jaime strained his eyes and saw it too: a dozen riders cresting a whit ridge in the distance, riding as fast as the snows would allow. Tormund and his men. The dead would not be far behind.

Another war horn signaled the advance and two score riders rode forth to meet the returning scouts. Jaime watched the horsemen escort the bedraggled wildling men back behind the lines of stalwart Unsullied. Soon, he could see the red of Tormund’s beard and the whites of his eyes. They shone with fear.

“Tormund,” Jon dismounted his horse and moved to greet the man as he approached the commanders’ retinue.

“You’ve got what you asked for,” the wildling responded as he grasped Jon’s forearm, “they chased us all night. Thousands or more, like your broken brother said.”

“And where are they now?” Jon demanded. Tormund pointed to the ridge he had crossed moments earlier. Jaime could see white and grey clouds swirling in the hills. The beginnings of a storm? It seemed as if the warmth of the land itself was being leached into the air, the earth’s breath turning to white mist. Like a cold and deadly tide, it began to flow toward the assembled armies, drawing itself across the snow with long, wispy tendrils of cold air.

Jon turned to the rest of his commanders, his visage serious and concerned. “Ready the men. Grey Worm, see that the Unsullied are prepared. Advanced to engage the dead when they approach then withdraw when the signal is given.” The eunuch nodded and marched off with his brethren. Jaime wished them a silent good fortune as they went. “Jorah, ride for the Dothraki lines and remind them of the signals. Three long horn blasts, then sweep around the dead and make for the walkers. They won’t mistake the sight.”

“Aye,” Jorah said before digging his heels into his mount and riding off to the south where the Dothraki lay in wait. Ice and dirt flung up from his horse’s hooves as he galloped away.

Jon turned to Davos next. “Ride back to the camps and tell Daenerys and Tyrion the dead are here.” The older man nodded solemnly and spurred his own black horse into action. Tyrion… Jaime thought of his younger brother. He should be here with me to see this.
Finally, Jon turned to him. “Ser Jaime, ride with me. We shall oversee the field and command the
northern forces,” he said. Jaime nodded in acknowledgement. Brienne, Beric, Sandor Clegane, the
black brothers, and the boy Gendry uttered their acknowledgements as well. “Tormund, fall back to
the camps with your men. You’ve done enough.”

Jaime watched the man’s wide eyes sweep over the retinue. He considered Jon’s command as he
looked around. Tormund’s gaze found Jaime’s face for a moment, then met Beric’s, Clegane’s, and
Gendry’s in rapid succession before settling on Brienne’s. “No,” he said, chest still heaving with
exertion, “I’m not going to run. It’s time I fight these fuckers on even ground.”

“We with me, then,” Jon said solemnly. They moved toward the rear center of the Unsullied lines,
where Lord Glover had assembled the northmen some distance behind the ranks of dragonglass
spearmen. They made a disorderly half crescent formation upon the slope of a hillock. They
muttered nervously at the approaching enemy, unseen though they still were. Many held spears,
swords, shields and torches. Jaime doubted any of these soldiers could hold a torch to the fighting
prowess of the queen’s armies, but they did have certain advantages. He noted with some interest
the strung and readied yew longbows held by a few hundred men. *We won’t need dragons to rain
fire down on the enemy.*

Jaime guided his own mount into position next to Jon and his direwolf, his back toward the river
and the camp. From their place atop the small hill, they could see all of their own forces and the
hills to the north and east. *At least, there were hills a moment ago.* The rising mist had hidden
much of the horizon. Onward it crept, low clouds rolling down the sloped hills and creeping
toward the imposing wall of black the Unsullied had made on the flatter ground below.

Jaime watched it with a queer fascination. Jon had mentioned the mist before, but only in passing.
The focus was always on the dead, the Night King, the dragon. This mist was almost worse.
Fighting corpses might proved terrifying, yes; but at least you could swing at it. See it. *How did
you fight mist?*

He listened as he watched, for while foes often underwent great pains to conceal themselves from
prying eyes, they often forgot that ears were just as able scouts. Jaime cocked his head sideways
and pointed his left ear toward the encroaching cold. *There… What’s that noise? Thunder?* He
remembered the sound of spring storms. This felt familiar, but threatening. The sound grew louder
as the wall of white crept closer still. He heard Ghost growl menacingly in response. The winds
picked up speed, howling and moaning as if they meant to drown out the rumbling noise. The icy
air sliced through his steel and leather armor like a knife made of pure ice. He saw the northmen
around him shiver too.

A chill set into his bones, worse than any cold he had felt before. His teeth began to chatter and he
shivered violently after a strong gust of wind cut through the lines of the living. *No…* It was more
than a chill. Jaime felt afraid, truly afraid. He could not remember the last time he had been gripped
by such a sensation. This was more than cold air and clouds. This was a storm.

Of dead men and White Walkers, Jaime could see no sign. There was only the mist. It came ever
closer to the first rank of Unsullied spearmen, like storm waves surging toward a black shoreline.
He saw Grey Worm’s men close ranks as they raised their shields and lowered their spears. The
clatter of their movement granting a temporary reprieve from the cold thunder and icy winds.

Jaime heard low curses being muttered around him as the swirling storm engulfed the first line of
Unsullied. He watched as it swallowed rank after rank of spearmen. If he strained his eyes, he
could see their black leather armor through it, but it became harder and harder still as the wall of
white moved toward him.
It was here. They were here. The icy tempest loomed overhead. Jaime shivered again and drew in a deep breath as if he were about to plunge under water. The freezing air stung his lungs. He glimpsed the grey sky one last time before he shut his eyes against the cold.

The storm fell over the commanders with a rush of howling wind. Freezing fingers clawed at his raw cheeks and stung his ears. Specks of snow and ice peppered his face and forced him to close his eyes against the assault as he tried to see.

Finally, he raised his hand to block the worst of the assault and peered into the storm. He could not see much. Jon stood stalwart beside him. Clegane sat a horse just beyond him, the man’s armored arm raised above his brow to block the worst of the unnatural blizzard. Beric stood confident too, his sword now alight and blazing against the cold. The storm seemed less powerful around the man.

Others had lit torches too, though they flickered feebly against the twisting winds. Jaime could see shadows dancing in the fog. Not the dead. The dead have blue eyes. Burning blue eyes. He remembered the corpse from the capital and looked for something similar, but found nothing. A disturbance behind them almost made him draw his sword, but it was only Jorah returning from his task. He nodded at his comrades as he took up a spot behind Jaime.

They continued to wait. At times the clouds thinned and the winds mellowed. Jaime could see the faint outlines of the Unsullied through the winter haze, though the landscape beyond was still beyond his sight.

Then he saw them. Just a glimpse at first, a flash of burning blue. Jaime thought he had imagine it, but as the mists thinned momentarily he could see them clearly enough. There were a hundred now. Five hundred. Countless points of otherworldly blue emerged from the grey void. He drew in a quick, nervous breath as his eyes swept over the enemy host. Some thousands, tens of thousands, or more… he knew. They moved forward, their advance as unrelenting as the preceding storm’s had been.

As they approached, he could see them more clearly. The dead men were not what he had expected them to be. Jon had compared them to animals on a hunt, yet these were more disciplined soldiers than ferocious beasts. Clad in bits of hide and old steel and grasping rusted, ancient weapons, the wights stood in what Jaime could only describe as a formation. For a minute or more then stood as motionless as the Unsullied. No. They did not move at all.

This isn’t going to work.

He glanced at Jon again and this time the man met his gaze. Jaime recognized the look. He knows as well as I. They needed to draw the dead away from the White Walkers. They needed them to charge forward as the Unsullied drew them back. That was the plan. They would not win a war of attrition.

Jaime looked at Jon, then to the company of longbowmen, then back again. Jon nodded and both men spurred their mounts down the slope of the hillock. Lord Glover greeted the commanding retinue with a curt nod and grunt. His house’s levies surrounded him, green boys and grey beards armed with dragonglass and steel. Jaime noticed the familiar face from earlier; the scrawny boy from the pavilion. He silently wished the lad well in the battle to come.

“Ready men! Archers with me!” Jon called out to the northmen as he approached. They turned to regard him. Gone was the bravado of young men marching off to war. These men are terrified. Jon had surely seen it too, but he did not waver in his command. “Form up and prepare to fire! Notch arrows!” Hundreds of archers moved to obey their commander, spreading out along the slope and
Jaime could see the endless ranks of dead men holding steady beyond the wall of Unsullied spears. The northern levies could see them too. “Aim for the dead!” Jon called out, straining his voice to be heard above the rising wind and rolling thunder. “Draw!”

The archers drew back their bowstrings. Jon paused for a moment before giving the final command. He could see the men’s bow arms shaking, though he could not rightly tell whether it was from the strain or the cold or fear. He counted the seconds as they passed. Now, he thought. Now! Do it now!

“Loose!” the order came at last. Some men heard it before others. Some had not heard it at all and only let their arrows loose after seeing their comrades do the same.

Jaime heard the oddly musical twang of hundreds of longbows letting their arrows fly into the air. The winds scattered some and buffeted others, carrying them far afield. Most found their mark. A great, rasping cry went up from the blue-eyed horde as the arrows struck true. A few dozen corpses fell motionless to the ground. Then, the dead began to advance.

They were soldiers no longer. Seemingly of a dozen different minds, the wights cried out with twenty thousand guttural calls as they broke formation and ran at the long, unyielding line of Unsullied. The winds carried the sounds of Grey Worm’s lieutenants shouting harsh, foreign commands at their men. Jon shouted too, just three words over and over again. “Notch! Draw! Loose!”

Hundreds of arrows missed, but hundreds more found purchase in the dead and rotting flesh of the enemy’s foot soldiers. Yet for every body that fell lifeless once more to the ground, three more trampled over it. They were almost upon the living. “Fire at will!” Jon relented the command of the longbowmen. The arrows made little difference.

With a great crash, the horde of wights slammed into the Unsullied shield wall. Jaime watched the scene with bated breath. The dead men fought with a wild ferocity that the living could not match. Some leapt over the first line of spear or else dragged the queen’s soldier’s out of formation. More corpses charged into the fray, adding their calls to the great roar of the dead.

The press of bodies was too great for the spearmen to bear. The first rank was pushed into the second. The second into the third. Grey Worm’s men struggled to hold the line. This was not the orderly retreat he had in mind. Too many, he thought. They are too many. The great line of black on the ground below was collapsing in on itself, buckling at the center and fraying at the edges. They were being overrun.

Then, a cacophony of those queer eastern war horns sounded amidst the shouts of the men and growls of the dead. The front ranks of Unsullied gave a great shrug as the spearmen pushed away the wights with their shields then struck out with their dragonglass spears. Jaime saw an entire line of blue-eyed corpses fall limp onto the white field.

The wights surged forward to fill the void left by the slain. Again, the Unsullied moved with a single mind and single purpose, thrusting their spears forward and skewering another rank of dead men. They moved forward slowly. One step with their shields, then a thrust of their spears. Step by step, the lockstep legions drove the dead back. Jaime felt a slight sense of shame wash over him at his moment of panic. Of course, he reminded himself, feeling a fool. The finest infantry in the world.

Even so, the wights kept coming. The mass of bodies against the shield wall was too much in some
places, and the line faltered for a moment as swarms of skeletal soldiers filled the breaches only to be slain by those Unsullied in the rear. The flanks of the great formation were the hardest pressed. Wights had spilled around the edges to attack the deeper ranks. Arrows continued to fall upon the wights, but still they emerged from the storm. It was time to act.

“Jon!” he shouted at the man still commandning the archers. Jon turned and looked at him, then regarded the situation on the field below. He nodded, understanding the situation.

“Sound the retreat!” Jaime called to the northern men standing close at hand. Three raised old war horns of polished ivory and blew a long, low signal to the forces below. Ghost raised his head and joined in their call. The buzzing horns of the Unsullied answered a moment later.

“Now…” Jaime muttered to himself as he watched the ranks of Grey Worm’s men begin to move backwards. The retreat was as methodical and deadly as the advance. With each step, the Unsullied thrust their spears into the temporary gulf between the two armies. Mindless as they were, the wights seemed to simply throw themselves upon the dragonglass weapons of their foes.

“Ceasefire!” Jon called out to the archers as he held up a hand. Silently, the Westerosi watched the Unsullied’s measured retreat. The center of the formation moved faster than the flanks. Ah... Jaime could see the plan unfolding on the field below even as Grey Worm’s lieutenants carried out the maneuvers. The solid black line slowly morphed into a crescent as it moved backwards, ceding the battlefield. The dead rushed up into the trap.

Poorly commanded, he thought to himself as he watched the mass of wights surged forward into a circle of spears. By the time they seemed to realize they were almost surrounded, Grey Worm had executed his maneuver in full. The Unsullied’s hemmed in the horde on three sides, their spears holding the dead at bay.

Still, they were outnumbered. Though they kept their formation, the spearmen were pushed back by the sheer weight of the army of the dead. Yet the wights seemed almost confused. Here they surged against one part of the Unsullied’s lines, there another. There was no concentrated effort, no method to the attack. No one was in command.

The terrible cries of the wights grew even worse as the battle drew closer. Jaime could see the horrible details of the closest dead men clearly now: skeletons with scarcely a scrap of flesh on them wielding jagged blades; fresh looking corpses with bright blue eyes wearing the stitched furs of the wildings; bodies clad in black leather missing arms or pieces of their torsos. And there... One wight wore a dented steel breastplate. Faded though it was, Jaime thought he could make out the moon and falcon of House Arryn of the Vale.

That dead man fell like many of the others. The Unsullied held the line and drew the dead inward. Even so, the queen’s forces were beginning to fray and fall. On the left flank, a great brown bear with burning blue eyes barreled into the side of the formation, knocking aside a dozen soldiers and killing a half dozen more with its claws before being brought down by a swarm of spears.

On the right, the wights had overrun the flank and were beginning to break the formation apart through sheer force of numbers. With a shout to his men, Jon directed the archers to concentrate their fire far to the right. Hundreds of dragonglass arrows fell upon the wights surging around the tip of the black crescent.

More spearmen fell. The crescent shattered in two places and wights surged into the openings. The formations devolved into broken combat in a dozen places. The trap was beginning to come undone. We don’t have much time left.
“There!” Beric raised his flaming sword like a beacon, pointing across the field to where ten pale figures sat atop horses. They were surrounded by a few hundred wights, but otherwise alone and unguarded. The White Walkers… These are the monsters that slew a dragon? They did not look so fearsome from here on the hill. Black specks swirled above them, their calls barely audible over the din of battle. Ravens? The birds marked the position of the enemy and made them easier to see.

“Jon!” Jaime called out to his companion, “Now! Before we’re overrun!”

“Sound the charge,” Jon called out to the northern horn blowers. Three long blasts momentarily drowned out the din of battle below. Each seemed a painfully slow breath. Finally, after the final low notes had faded, Jaime heard the terrifying cries of the Dothraki further afield on both sides.

With a swiftness to match the dead’s own charge, the horse lords spurred their mounted forward from where they sat hidden on the sloping banks of the frozen river. Thousands of riders screamed their war cries in foreign tongues as the queen’s bloodriders led them in two great, sweeping motions around the Unsullied’s formation and toward their otherworldly foe.

He watched the massive pincers close in on their target from either side. The screamers were whirling their arakhs above their heads or else couching dragonglass tipped lances. The thunder of their horses’ hooves could be heard clear across the battlefield, even above the sounds of the Unsullied clashing with the wights.

“Almost there…” he heard the boy Gendry mutter. The entire force on the hillock was staring with fixed eyes and locked jaws at the battle below. Like the fingers of some great closing fist, the two lines of Dothraki moved toward each other and toward the group of White Walkers. Outnumbered ten to one at least, Jaime smiled. They have never fought a true battle. They don’t know what it is like.

Some of the wights seemed to realize what was happening and thousands broke from their fight to charge back to the ridge, but it was too late and the distance too far. With a great cry and a crash, the horsemen smashed through the thin group of wights and fell upon their masters. Though the storm clouds were thinning, Jaime could not truly see what was happening across the battlefield.

It did not matter. As he watched the encircled wights press against each other in an effort to reach the living, he noticed something strange happen. A group of wights in the middle collapsed of their own accord, untouched by either fire or dragonglass. Then some few hundred corpses scattered throughout the battlefield fell limp and useless to the ground. Then more fell. Soon enough, the blue eyes of the dead had faded away to nothing. There were no more wights for the Unsullied to fight. The boy was right. It worked.

As the white mists dissipated some, he could see the mass of Dothraki waving their weapons about wildly on the far ridge where the walkers had stood a few moments before. The riders’ victorious war cries mingled with the joyous shouts of the northmen. Jaime could see some already dismounting to loot the dead. Only the finest rotting flesh for our warriors. Only the Unsullied remained silent and still as the bodies they had been battling.

Jaime turned to regard the group. Gendry was laughing. Beric had an odd smile on his face. Even Robett Glover wore a happy expression. The archers were cheering and patting each other on the back. Jaime was pleased too; their plan had worked. The battle had not been without its costs, of course. Even from here he could see the Unsullied begin to separate their fallen brothers from the mass of now still and silent wights. Yet something felt wrong. This is it? This is the ‘Great War’? A few confused corpses and ice demons trampled beneath horse hooves?

“Nice to be on the winning side, for once,” the black brother he knew as Edd quipped. Jon shot
him a look that bespoke annoyance, but even his relief was palpable.

“We should burn the bodies,” Jon said. “Lord Glover, send some of your men to assist with the effort. The sooner we’re back across that river and making for Winterfell, the better I’ll feel.”

On the field below, the great black crescent the Unsullied had formed melted away like snow in spring. They milled about like lost ants, dragging bodies into piles and collecting the weapons of their fallen brethren. The Dothraki were even more disorganized, the thrill of victory scattering the horsemen across the field. The ravens he had seen flying above the White Walkers had descended onto the field, their black beaks pecking at bits of rotten flesh and old bone.

Jaime spurred his own horse into a soft trot down the hillock’s slope as he moved to find one of the bodies and inspect it for himself. Brienne joined him. They made no conversation on the brief ride to the battlefield. Just like old times.

The queen’s soldiers had already lit two great corpse fires. Smoke rose into the clearing air. With the destruction of the White Walkers, the storm had dissipated. Yet there were still some twenty thousand left to burn. The work would be slow, tedious, and would require many able bodies to finish in full. Thank the gods I only have only hand.

He and Brienne dismounted and moved on foot toward the closest wight. He gave the limp, ruined body a nudge with his boot. Brienne only looked on in disgust.

“Not as fearsome now, eh?” a hoarse voice called out behind him. Jaime turned to see Tormund walking toward the pair, his eyes fixed squarely on Brienne. She regarded the wildling with the same look she had given the corpse. He did not seem to mind.

“That was…” he paused. What was it? What had he expected? The march had lasted a week and the battle not even an hour. He could not find the proper words. Tormund only laughed as he drew even with Brienne and nudged the broken body with his own foot.

“There are still tens of thousands more out there,” Brienne said, nodding toward the hills on the horizon.

“Not here!” Tormund gave a shrug, lifting his hands upwards as if to show Brienne the obvious results of the battle. He loosed a great, booming laugh that seemed to shake the ground itself. Yet Jaime heard something else, too…

A shout went up from somewhere in the distance. Is this how the Dothraki celebrated after the Blackwater? But no… This sound was not the same as the victorious whooping calls he had heard a moment before. Another cry rose from his right. Then another to his left. He looked at Brienne. The woman had already drawn Oathkeeper and assumed a defensive posture.

He caught a flash of burning blue at the edge of his vision, just before the wight he had been inspecting reached upward and grasped at the wrist of his false hand. Taken by surprise and off balance, Jaime fell forward as the wight dragged him to the ground. It was strong; far stronger than he realized. He could not reach for his sword nor force the body away.

As he called for aid, the wight raked his throat with broken, bony fingers. He felt the blow draw blood. He turned his head and saw the thing’s blue eyes gazing into his own... Then they faded away into nothingness once more. The body fell limp.

Jaime turned onto his back and saw Brienne pulling her sword from the corpse. She offered him a hand and helped him regain his feet. Around them, the cries of shock had multiplied a hundred-
fold, now mixed in with the familiar growls of the dead men. All across the field, the fallen bodies of wights and slain Unsullied alike were rising, their eyes blue. He felt a cold panic grip his chest. *It did not work.*

A thousand small skirmishes broke out across the field as wights rose and began to swarm the smaller groups of Unsullied, Dothraki, and Glover men. Though the buzzing horns of the eastern soldiers signaled a return to their great formation, only smaller groups could be formed in the rising chaos.

Jaime looked to Tormund, but the man’s eyes were transfixed on the northern horizon. Dark storm clouds swirled in the hills just as they had earlier. Ravens *quarked* in panic as they scattered across the sky. Amidst the screams and shouts and blowing horns, he could the steady, familiar beat of wings.

There, some distance beyond the growing chaos, Jaime saw a great winged shadow rose from the nearest northern ride; and on its back, a rider.

Chapter End Notes

This was sort of non-action action, like a battle viewed from the RTS camera perspective. I have a few more notes on this battle, but I'll include those at the end of the next chapter. Will hopefully have that out in a few days because I don't want to have folks wait too long (and will not be writing on Monday night).

I pretty much write this in every note, but I do look forward to people's thoughts and comments. So please do consider leaving some feedback.
He watched it all from the hillside.

The wights that had fallen in battle rose once more. Just one at first, then another; their blue eyes beginning to burn like the first twinkling stars in an evening sky. In the span of a dozen breaths of cold air, over ten thousand corpses had resumed their ferocious assault on the living. They were of one mind now, one purpose. They attacked.

The queen’s soldiers were taken by surprise. Nearly half the Dothraki had dismounted their horses in their fruitless pursuit of loot. The Unsullied’s great crescent formation had broken apart as well, the soldiers having cast aside their weapons to drag the bodies into the piles of corpses just now being set afire. The field devolved into a hundred skirmishes as the Unsullied fought to reform their lines. *It wasn’t supposed to be like this. This wasn’t supposed to happen.* The White Walkers were destroyed. The dead should have fallen with them, as had happened beyond The Wall. *Something is wrong.*

Jon drew Longclaw and steeled himself for the task ahead. The enemy had to be destroyed. Here. Now. They could still fight. They could still win, but they needed help. If the walkers were dead, so was the threat to their greatest weapons. He turned to one of the men behind him.

“You!” he shouted, “make for the camps and find Daenerys. We need her—”

*Dragons,* he wanted to say, but a terrible, broken screech cut him short. The soldier he faced stood wide-eyed and began to tremble. Jon turned around. There, to the north, he saw it. Saw *him.*

*Thump. Thump. Thump.* The risen dragon’s beating wings made a steady rhythm as it rose higher into the sky, buffeting the swirling grey clouds. It called out again, harsh cry echoing across the hills. Ten thousand wights joined in, guttural screeches rending the air. The bitter cold winds picked up the sound and carried it to where Jon stood.

He froze in fear, but only for a moment. *This is our chance.* The Night King was here, but only with a fraction of his full strength. If they could destroy him, they could end it. He could save the North, could save his family. *Arya, Sansa, Bran and Samwell, and Daenerys…*

He turned to the man with whom he had just spoken. The man was not really a man. He looked at the few hundred northern soldiers standing in shock upon the hillock. *Boys… They’re all frightened boys,* he realized as his eyes scanned the crowd. Even in their armor, the soldiers looked thin and weak. Jon swallowed, then spoke.

“You,” he said, calm but stern, “what’s your name?”

“Farlen, m’lord,” the boy stuttered in fear.

“Aye, Farlen,” Jon said, “Do you know how to ride?” He nodded. “Good. Make for the camps and find the queen. Take my horse. We need her dragons with us.” He dismounted and handed the reins to the lad.

“Y-yes m’lord,” he nodded rapidly, yet stood so still Jon thought him frozen. *There’s no time for this.*
“Now!” he barked, jerking his head in the direction of the river. Farlen scrambled atop the grey gelding and spurred the horse onward. Then he turned to the rest of the men. Gendry was there, holding his hammer high against his chest. Sandor Clegane stood beside him, and Jon and Beric and dozens of other familiar faces in a sea of hundreds he did not know.

Ghost shifted beside him and moved toward a frail looking Glover lad who carried a thin steel sword. He looked at Jon with oddly familiar eyes. Perhaps his wolf felt the same, for he gave a boy a long sniff before pacing back around. A hundred other pairs of eyes were on him too. Now was the time to act, to help the queen’s soldiers; to fight.

“With me!” he raised Longclaw high above his head as he shouted his rallying cry. Hundreds of northmen answered the call, raising their own swords, dragonglass spears, longbows, and torches high into the air as they shouted. Jon spun and made for the closest group of wights. His men followed.

As he ran, he saw the battle unfolding below. The Unsullied had begun to gather themselves in dense, black squares, a few hundred men in each, while the Dothraki fought the dead in a thousand duels. Some of the queen’s bloodriders had rallied those horsemen still mounted and made to charge a group of wights. They trampled the corpses as they rode.

The queen’s banner flew from between the two greatest smoldering piles of corpses they had gathered earlier. The sight reminded him of the smoking hills on Dragonstone. One man waved the banner back and forth while Grey Worm’s horns called the Unsullied to their commander’s formation. Hundreds hurried to join the powerful ranks, locking shields and lowering spears against the growing chaos of the battle.

Jon turned toward the waving Targaryen banner. *I must reach them...* he told himself as he moved down from the top of the hill. Together, his men and Grey Worm’s could form a line of battle and drive the dead back.

Another screech rent the air. He looked up. Viserion was closer now, far closer. He could see the beast’s torn wings and gaping hole in its neck where the ice spear had struck. It screech again as it flew. It was fast. *Too fast.* Even Drogon could not cover so much ground so quickly. Jon slowed his own charge as he watched the dragon swoop lower and lower, descending from the northern sky toward the ranks of Unsullied Grey Worm was just now gathering about him.

No...

He shouted a warning, but there was nothing else he could do. A ghastly blue glow illuminated the dragon’s broken maw for but an instant before it swept over the tightly packed lines of spearmen, bathing them in cold, blue fire. Scores turned to ash in an instant. Others began to burn. The proud three-headed dragon on a black field fell to the bloodied snow amidst the chaos. The screams of dying men filled the air.

Jon stopped the charge and the northmen stopped with him. He watched the dragon fly higher, bank, and ready itself for another pass. The Dothraki began to fire arrows at the beast, but they either missed or bounced harmlessly against hardened scales. A few found their mark in the beast’s torn wings, but they had no effect.

He had to do something. “Archers!” he called to the men. The longbowmen had already notched their dragonglass arrows, though few enough remained in each quiver. “Fire at will!” he shouted. The clicks and twangs of loosed bowstrings momentarily filled the air as a cloud of arrows rose toward the dragon.

They all missed. With an unnatural swiftness, Viserion banked and turned, swooping far below the fired arrows and making for a different group of soldiers. Jon watched, helpless and horrorstruck,
as the dragon loosed a jet of blue fire against another group of spearmen.

With another great beat of its torn wings, the dragon reared up and hovered in the air, spitting its deadly flames at the nearest soldiers. The fires caught some of the wights too. The bodies flailed about as they searched for some impossible salvation. He saw the rider on the dragon’s back. Cold blue eyes met his own.

Jon felt his jaw lock in anger. That rare, red fury was rising inside him. His grip on Longclaw tightened. Ghost growled. “Keep firing!” he shouted to the archers without looking back. Another volley sailed forth on the howling wind and this time some of them found their marks before bouncing off or breaking against the white scales.

Then, the dragon turned and regarded the longbowmen with cold blue eyes. He’s coming for us, Jon realized. He turned to the terrified men. “Scatter! Now! Run!” They dove to the left and right, some dropping their weapons and others falling in their haste to evade the oncoming dragon. It did not matter; the Night King’s mount was too swift.

Jon dropped his sword and retrieved a discarded bow and quiver. He notched the arrow and drew the bowstring taught in one practiced movement. The Night King’s eyes met his own again. Closer… He waited, angling the bow upwards a bit more. Then he fired.

The arrow flew straight and true. Jon watched it go, willed it to find its mark. Perhaps he did not see… he hoped. Heartbeats turned to hours as the shaft grew smaller against the sky. Yes! A gust of wind carried it above the dragon’s serpentine neck. The Night King raised one armored forearm and stopped the dragonglass arrow from striking true. Jon watched the tip shatter and fall to the earth with all his hopes. The dragon banked toward him and opened its jaws.

Twin roars, deep and furious, sounded behind him. A massive shadow passed overhead in the blink of an eye and slammed into the pale, white dragon. A cheer went up from the northmen as Drogon locked his jaws around the neck of the beast and forced him back. Viserion gave another terrible shriek. Rhaegal answered his brother’s call as he swooped around from the side, making for the growing horde of wights.

Viserion began to writhe as he slashed at Drogon with his claws and tail, but the larger dragon kept his grip. Bits of broken scales fell to the earth as Drogon pressed his advantage, his powerful wings forcing the enemy backwards and lower.

Daenerys sat on Drogon’s back, gripping his great spikes and moving with the dragon. Even from here, he could see her silver hair, grey dress, and black steel armor. He looked at her, pride and relief filling him in equal measure. She did not look back.

“Jon!” Jaime called out to him as he ran to his side, Brienne, Tormund and his wildling rangers were close behind. “Sound the retreat,” the man said through gasping breaths, “we need to get our man out of here!” His lips were thin, jaw tight, and green eyes opened wide; a look of conscious fear. Jaime Lannister had been here before.

Jon forced his eyes away from Daenerys’ form and scanned the battlefield. He’s right. The dragon’s attacks had shattered the main formation of Unsullied. Without a rallying point, the others were being overrun and driven back in a dozen directions. The Dothraki that had found their mounts were skirmishing with the blue-eyed bodies around the edges of the battle, yet their efforts did little to stem the rising tide of death. There were too many wights.

“You do it,” he told Jaime, “Find a horse and see our forces safely back across the river, then shatter the ice.” He would not abandon the field, not when Daenerys and so many others were in
danger.

“And you—"

“I will hold the line here, with any men who will join me,” he said, raising his voice so that all would hear. Gendry moved to his side without a word. Clegane and Beric did too. Then a dozen other, then two dozen, then a hundred. The boy with the familiar eyes made to stand by Gendry while older northmen readied themselves for a fight. “Edd,” he turned to his friend, “you know the dead as well as anyone. Stay with Ser Jaime.” The man nodded grimly.

Jaime nodded too. “Sound the retreat!” he called to the horn blowers. They raised their ivory war horns to their lips and blew long, low blasts. Once, twice, three times. They kept blowing. The Unsullied’s buzzing horns answered their call, scattered though they were. Slowly, the groups of spearmen made a cautious withdrawal across the field as they fought the swarms of dead.

Another screech drew Jon’s attention from the battle below to the battle above. Viserion’s lashing tail struck just above Drogon’s eye. The blow had avoided the vulnerable tissue, but Drogon had loosened his grip for just a moment in surprise. That was all the enemy needed. The white dragon writhed and broke free, rising higher as it made to escape Drogon’s fire and fury. Daenerys pressed herself against her dragon’s back and urged him in pursuit.

His eyes found Rhaegal next. The green dragon flew over the battle, making pass after pass against the legions of the dead, burning hundreds with each breath. Lines of golden fire crisscrossed the battlefield, blocking the wights’ advance in a dozen places. Even the unnatural blizzard that once more crept inward from the hills seemed held back by the dragon’s flames. It’s a wall, Jon knew. Whether by his own intuition or his mother’s command. Rhaegal was creating a thin line of fire that was trapping the dead on the far side of the field; beyond where most of the living still fought for their lives.

The northern horns were still blowing as many of the soldiers battling had made their way safely to the lines. Jon saw Lord Glover, assisted by two household guards, limp up the hill. His looked at Jon with a silent understanding. Other northmen were joining making their way to the slope, yet the bulk of the Unsullied and Dothraki still fought below.

The signal for retreat had attracted wights as well. Thousands of burning blue eyes turned to regard the growing defensive line before they began to charge. Jon drew in a deep breath and raised his sword. Ghost crouched low beside him. Then Jon lunged forward at his closest foe.

Longclaw cut clean through the first skeletal wight with ease, the corpse crumpled in a pile of broken bones as the dragon steel broke whatever magic animated it. Jon spun and brought his sword up for another blow. He swung his sword in a great, sweeping arch and held the hilt firm as his blade sliced through the layers of old leather and rotten flesh of another body. Ghost leapt forward and savaged a third wight, his jaws closing around the thing’s neck and tearing the gruesome head from the body.

Around him, others were fighting for their lives. Gendry smashed in a wight’s skull with his hammer then drove the weapon’s dragonglass pommel into a second’s chest. Beric danced about with his flaming sword, each strike from the blade setting a different enemy alight. He seemed stronger than before, as if some power lent him aid and drove him onward.

The others battled just as fiercely. Clegane met three charging wights with a swing of the greatsword Heartsbane, the Valyrian steel shattering the bones of the assailants. He kept his distance from Beric. Tormund hacked wildly at body that had rushed him and driven him to the ground. Brienne helped him regain his feet before the pair parried a flurry of blows from armed
enemies. In the rear, Jaime commanded the archers to direct their fire to the base of the hill where the press of bodies was thickest.

The line held, but the dead kept coming.

Overhead, Drogon loosed another furious roar as he pursued Viserion across the sky. Yet he could not catch his foe. The advantage of Daenerys’ initial assault had been lost. Jon felt his throat constrict as he watched her duel their enemy. *I should be up there with her.* In one moment, Drogon loomed over his foe and shot a jet of crimson flame at the Night King. Yet the enemy’s mount was too quick, and Viserion tucked his wings and spun in mid-air to avoid the dragon fire before loosing his own blue fire against his brother. Jon watched in horror as the column of glowing blue flames shot toward Daenerys… then breathed a desperate sigh of relief as she turned Drogon’s body away from the assault. The flames dissipated against thick black scales.

He kept an eye on Daenerys as he fought back the charging wights. Onward and upward she flew chasing the thing that had been her child. The beasts traded breaths of fire and blows from tail and claw. *He’s better,* Jon realized with a sinking sense of dread. Mother of Dragons Daenerys might be, but the Night King proved a masterful rider. He seemed of one mind with his mount, weaving through low clouds and evading the larger dragon’s attacks… yet offering none of his own.

Jon lowered his gaze for a moment as a blue-eyed corpse charged at him. He took a half step backwards in shock. He knew those eyes… Though broken and rotting, the body was massive. A torn, stained cloak hung limply from a single fastening of a great bronze breastplate that was dented and engraved with runic symbols.

The thing that had once been Yohn Royce rushed him, raising a longsword and giving a guttural cry as it came. Jon gripped Longclaw tight and parried the first blow, then the second. Then he spun to the left as swung his sword with all the force he could muster. The steel bit through the bronze armor and lodged itself deeply in the corpse. He lost his grip as the lord’s body fell limply to the dirty snow, eyes dead and empty. Jon let out a breath he did not know he was holding in, then looked up to find Daenerys again.

Flashes of blue and orange lit the grey sky like bolts of colored lightning, but he could not see either Viserion or Drogon. Only Rhaegal was visible, flying low and burning groups of dead men as the Unsullied and Dothraki worked their way back toward Jon’s men and the river. Some of those horsemen who had already remounted their steeds had fled back across the White Knife and towards the camp. At Jaime’s command, the horns continued to blow.

Then, like a thunderbolt, Viserion dropped from the sky. He watched in silent awe and his heart soared. Had they won? The dragon was dead and plummeting to the earth! He watched the white dragon fall. Something seemed wrong…

*No… Not falling.* The Night King’s dragon was diving, its torn wings tucked and folded back as it cut through the clouds and grey smoke rising from the field. Jon’s eyes traced an invisible line from the streak of white to the green dragon below.

Cold panic gripped his heart as he watched helplessly. With an awful roar, Viserion spread his wings and raised his claws, readying himself for the kill. He slammed into Rhaegal at full force, claws digging into the green dragon’s side. Rhaegal was taken by surprise. He called out desperately to his brother as he fell, wings struggling uselessly against Viserion’s momentum. With a great, shuddering boom, the Night King drove Rhaegal to the ground.

Drogon roared, a sound of pain and fury, as he emerged from the low clouds and saw his brother fall. Jon watched him dive after his enemy and watched Daenerys on his back. He could feel her
anger. A burning fire coursed through Jon’s veins, too. His vision ran red as he watched Viserion rise again to challenge Drogon for supremacy of the skies, leaving behind the bloodied body of the green dragon. The two began to dance again, but the unnatural swiftness of the Night King’s mount made Drogon’s size and power counted for nothing in their duel.

Jon stepped forward and swung Longclaw hard at an advancing wight, removing its head with a single strike. He drew the sword back and made for another body. Then another. He wanted them dead. Gone. Finished and defeated. His anger gave him strength.

After forcing another foe to the ground and driving Longclaw through its chest, he looked up. A cold wave of clarity washed over him, but only for a moment. He had fought far beyond the lines and down the hill, leaving a trail of broken bodies in his wake. Yet no other wights came at him.

He looked across the battlefield. The wights were pulling away, retreating. Why? They scrambled down the hill while those fighting the Unsullied and Dothraki charged off to the east, leaving the avenues of retreat open to their armies.

And then he saw it. Rhaegal was alive. His right wing was bent and broken and steaming blood poured from where Viserion’s claws had raked him, but he was alive. Thousands of wights made for the downed dragon, a storm rushing toward an island. Though he seemed unable to move, he battled the oncoming flood of wights with claw, tooth, and tail. He can’t fight that many.

Jon started running. He needed to save Rhaegal, no matter the cost. If the Night King claimed a second dragon, the North would be lost. The war would be lost. He willed his legs to move faster as he kept his eyes on the green, bloodied scales some distance away. Someone was shouting, but he could not hear the words nor did he care to. Flashes of blue eyes and black armor raced past him as he ran. Off to his left, he saw the dragons fighting in the sky once more.

More wights were on Rhaegal now, hacking at hardened scales or clawing and clawing at the membrane of his wings with dead fingers. The dragon roared with fury and lashed out with his tail, sending two dozen corpses flying into the air. Still they came.

Jon reached the outer ranks of dead men and cut through the press of corpses with a flurry of quick strikes. He broke through to where Rhaegal lay injured and ran to the dragon’s side, slaying those wights the dragon had not. Then he turned.

Hundreds and thousands of hungry, burning eyes regarded him; the one man defending a dying dragon. He could not fight them all. He would not have to.

Yes. His heart swelled with hope. He looked up to where a jagged arrowhead of soldiers cut through the enemy’s line to his position. The others had followed his charge. He could see them fighting through the loose, uneven ranks of the dead: Ghost was first, followed by Beric with his flaming sword; Clegane with Heartsbane, Gendry with his hammer, a few hundred northmen and as many Unsullied. They made their way to the dragon and formed a tight perimeter around the injured creature, driving back the wights that made any attempt at and assault.

He could see the rest of the field from here. The queen’s armies had successfully withdrawn to the hills and banks of the White Knife where Jaime held the line. He would oversee their crossing. In another moment they would be safe. The wights continued to move toward Rhaegal, surrounding the men that had followed Jon’s charge.

Above it all, Drogon clashed with Viserion. To Jon, it seemed like a white sparrow pestering a hawk. The smaller dragon dove and rose with a swiftness Daenerys’ mount could not match. The efforts of evading and striking at an opponent he could not reach was beginning to tire the black
dragon. He was losing. Daenerys realized it too. She guided Drogon into a steep dive to escape the fight. Viserion folded his wings in pursuit.

The two dragons raced toward the earth, though Viserion was gaining on his target. It was going to happen again, this time with Daenerys still mounted on the dragon. *What are you doing?!* He wanted to shout at her. *Get away from it! Flee!* He did not want to watch, but he could not pull his eyes away.

Then Drogon twisted in his dive and spread his massive wings. Jon could hear the great, thunderous beats as he buffeted the air and drew himself up. Even from here, he could see the furnace glow in that black maw. The Night King had no time to adjust. Daenerys had him. Drogon loosed a stream of golden and crimson flame so hot Jon could feel its uncomfortable caress from where he stood. The flames caught the dragon full in the face and washed over his back, consuming the pale rider in the burning cloud.

The jet of fire poured forth longer than Jon could hold his breath in awe. Yet when the flames died and smoke cleared, the white dragon and his riders appeared unharmed. His scales cracked and blackened, yes, but unharmed. *Impossible.* With a roar, Viserion surged forward and attacked. He locked his jaws around the shoulder-like joint of Drogon’s right wing. The beast cried out in pain, but turned and bit down hard at the base of the other’s neck.

Jon watched the quicker dragon’s wings beat an unsteady rhythm as it made to escape the assault. Daenerys did not pursue him. She could not. Drogon’s wounds had exacted their own toll. Steaming drops of blood fell from the spot where Viserion had bit him. He could not keep himself in the air.

*Get out of here,* he thought again, willing Daenerys to get to safety. She did. There was nothing more she could do just now. He saw her look back to where he stood as her dragon flew across the river.

Around him, the situation was growing dire. The men that had joined him fought ferociously against the wights, keeping them away from the dragon and elsewise holding a steady line; but where Jon had once had a thousand men defending Rhaegal, now he had half that number. The enemy pressed in from all sides, standing twenty bodies deep in some places, perhaps twice that in others.

Yet the living held their own. The wights seemed so intent on killing Rhaegal that they forgot to fight the wounded dragon’s guards. Two wights charged at Jon, throwing their weight against him. He caught one with Longclaw’s length and side-stepped the other’s advance before drawing the dragonglass dagger from his sword belt and driving the weapon through one of his attacks blue eyes as it came around again. Another enemy advanced. He whirled, bringing his sword around as he moved, and delivered a killing blow across what had been the thing’s gut.

What remained of the Unsullied had formed small shield walls against both of Rhaegal’s legs. They killed any wight that approached, but without the proper formations they slowly fell to the endless onslaught. Rhaegal’s tail was its own defense, it lashed back and forth, crushing bodies or sending them flying into the mass of dead men. For every dozen he slew, a score took their place.
The rest of the force that had followed Jon defended Rhaegal’s head and flanks. Clegane proved the most effective, cleaving corpses in two with Sam Tarly’s sword. He brought Heartsbane about in great arcs so as to catch as many bodies as he could; but each subsequent blow was slower than the last. Brienne stood close by him, her own sword parrying the blows of three different wights, all armed with old steel. Her counterattacks caught her foes in the neck, head, and chest. Her victory earned her little respite, though. Four more wights surged forward, stepping over a growing mound of corpses to attack the lady.

Jon brought Longclaw down and split the armored skull of another foe. The blue faded from its eyes. He looked around. The enemy was surging forward everywhere. They were being overrun. For a moment, he hoped to see Daenerys flying overhead with Drogon, but he remembered the dragon had been injured. They were alone…

Except for the dead. The wights grew still more aggressive in their lust for Rhaegal’s blood. Jon heard the shocked, foreign cries as a wave of wights overran perhaps a dozen Unsullied guarding the dragon’s flank. Around him, others were falling or failing.

Each of Gendry’s hammer blows came slower than the last. His friend’s face was covered in ash, grime, and blood. Clegane and Brienne fought side by side, cutting down countless enemies even as countless more pushed them back. For every defender still standing, a dozen wights or more advanced with guttural shrieks and cold blue eyes. Four pairs of eyes found Jon. The wights charged.

Jon moved out to meet them, bringing Longclaw high above his head as he rushed forward. With a decisive step, he swung down and cut the first rotting corpse in two. He held his stance and drove the bastard sword up and into the second attacker, then moved to pull away. The blade was stuck. The other two wights slammed into him, their cold dead hands clawing at his cheeks and eyes as all three fell to the bloody snow. Another wight joined in the assault. For all his fury, Jon could not force them off. Worse, he could not even muster the strength to reach that shard of dragonglass. With a great heave, he tried to spin from under the bodies, but it made little difference.

Then a familiar voice cried out in anger. Jon saw a rush of movement to his left and felt the wights’ bodies go slack and lifeless against him. He pushed them off and stood to thank his rescuer.

“Arya?!” His sister wore the ill-fitting garb of a Glover soldier. In her left hand, she clutched her Valyrian steel dagger with a handle made of dragonglass. In her right, she held a bloodied, blackened Needle. At her feet, some crumpled flap of skin lay discarded atop the slain wights. “I-Arya- What are you doing?!”

“Saving you,” she shouted back above the sounds of battle all around them. His mind raced against his frenzied heartbeat. It was not his little sister he saw. It was Ygritte, with her last breath escaping her lips. It was Rickon, coughing up blood and calling for his mother. It was the hundreds of brothers he had known on the Wall. Not again. This will not happen again.

He reached out to grab her, meaning to pull her back to safety behind him. She danced away from him and ran to rejoin the fight. In a few lithe steps, she had made her way to where Gendry stood stalwart against the hordes of dead men. Gendry’s sharp blue eyes found her beside him a moment later. There was shock there, yes, but understanding. All he did was nod, though Jon though he saw a smile flash across the man’s face. Arya nodded back. For a brief moment, just before Jon rejoined the battle, he understood too.

The battle raged all around him, closer then before. There are less than a hundred now, he thought grimly. The wall of encircling wights were not more than a stone’s throw from the dragon’s head. The living seemed as weak as the dragon. Clegane’s blows slowed and Jorah’s attacks missed their
mark again and again. Brienne drove a shoulder into her foe but was knocked off balance by two more. With a great shout, Tormund threw himself at the wights to free her. Ghost rushed to Jon’s side once more, panting heavily and bleeding from three deep cuts; his life’s blood staining his white fur. He looked into the wolf’s red eyes, then up at the darkening sky.

A black shadow rose in the distance. No… Jon thought in desperate panic once more. They could not battle the dragon. Not now. But no, it seemed to have a more ethereal shape, wispy like a cloud. Here it flowed, then there; black specks growing ever larger as it moved toward him. Ravens. He knew at a second glance. The large birds quarked in excited panic as they reached the soldiers and circled overhead like some whirl of black wind. They seemed to be waiting for something, or else calling out to it.

The wind picked up speed around him, yet it was neither bitter nor cold. It whispered words he could not truly hear. Jon… He felt himself pulled toward the dragon. Jon… Was it him? The Night King? Jon…

“Jon!” Gendry shouted as he moved backwards, hammer in one hand and a kicking Arya in the other, “we need to get out of here!” He nodded and scanned the field for a weak point. There were not any to be found. And we don’t have the numbers to fight through to the river.

Arya wrestled free of Gendry’s strong grip and turned to regard him with angry eyes. She did not say a word, only jerked her head toward the injured dragon beside them. The pair turned again to meet the enemy’s onslaught. Jon knew what to do.

“Rhaegal!” he called out the dragon’s name. There was no response. “Rhaegal!” he shouted it louder. One golden eye blinked open and the green dragon struggled to uncoil his neck to regard Jon in full. He placed a hand on the dragon’s side. He felt warm, but less so than before; more a hearth fire than a blazing furnace. It was that furnace they now needed.

I need to get us out of here, he thought, hoping the words might pass through his fingers and into the dragon’s mind. The dragon gave a low, rumbling growl. What was it she said? Those words. Jon had never been the quickest of studies, but this was a poor time to forget his lessons. He closed his eyes. The cries of the dead and dying filled the air around him.

He pushed them out. In his mind’s eye, he saw her, silver hair and violet eyes in the dark of night. He heard her sweet and stern voice. Dracarys, it means dragonfire, he heard her say in his memories. He shouted the word aloud.

Rhaegal’s eyes narrowed. Jon felt a fire stirring inside him. The green dragon lifted his head high and turned toward an advancing group of wights. Heat washed over him as the wounded dragon bathed the enemy in golden flames. A hundred corpses turned to ash.

Rhaegal loosed another jet of fire, then another. Great walls of flame erupted where the dragon fire scorched the earth and incinerated the wights. They continued to burn against the cold, keeping some of the dead at bay and forcing others into bottlenecks at which the living met them with steel, obsidian, and flame.

Yet each new breath of fire seemed weaker than the last. Jon looked up at the dragon. Steaming blood still seeping from deep wounds on his side and neck. “Dracarys!” he shouted the command again. Rhaegal opened his jaws, but only black smoke rushed forth from within. With a shuddering thud, his head fell back to the ground.

Jon turned around and let out a desperate sigh. Only two or three dozen stood where there had been a thousand or more. While the fires held some wights back, thousands more moved inward to
claim the survivors and the dragon for their own. Brienne gasped and cried out as she dragged
Jorah’s bloodied body back behind Tormund. The wildling’s own strength was failing too.

Gendry and Arya held their own, but both were losing ground and being pushed back toward
Rhaegal’s side. Only Beric had the spirit to take the offensive. He hacked and slashed his way
through groups of skeletal bodies and rotting wights armed with rusted steel. One by one, the
bodies went aflame as they met his sword’s fire. Still, he found himself pushed back with the rest,
almost tripping over the dragon’s tail as he moved to the pitiful new perimeter.

The ravens called and screeched overhead. The wights raspéd and rattled in response, moving
closer all the while. Then they stopped. Cold winds blew from the north and east. The freezing air
stung Jon’s cheeks and eyes, but he forced himself to look around. The enemies’ eyes shone like
blue stars in a grey sky. Almost beautiful, he thought sadly.

The mass of bodies parted slowly. All living eyes turned to regard their foe. Clegane muttered a
low curse. Tormund drew in a sharp breath. Arya drew closer to Gendry. Ghost crouched low and
began to growl.

He emerged from amidst his army, armored in black and wielding a great, curved weapon carved
of pure ice. The blade’s razor edge glinted in the now subdued firelight… but nothing could match
the glow of his eyes. They met Jon’s own. His foe took a step forward.

“Climb on the dragon,” he turned and gave Gendry the order, silently willing Rhaegal to obey this
time. His friend nodded and made the climb atop Rhaegal’s back. Arya watched Jon step forward
and screamed her protests, kicking at Gendry in an effort to escape. Though she broke free, Sandor
Clegane seized her around the chest with one muscle arm and drew her back. He gave Jon a sharp
nod. Jon turned to the others and instructed the same before grasping Longclaw in both hands and
moving to face the Night King.

His enemy stood still and silent. Jon saw the now familiar spires of ice upon his head and the
jagged, glacial lines along his cheeks. He raised his own weapon in challenge.

Jon closed his eyes for the span of a single breath. He thought of Arya behind him, Bran and Sam
and Sansa back in Winterfell, and of the tens of thousands of people in the North. Lastly, he
thought of Daenerys. His fingers tightened around Longclaw’s hilt. Lifting the blade to his side, he
went to meet his foe.

A harsh, shrill tone rang out as Valyrian steel struck ice. Inner fire rising in his chest, Jon lashed
out at the Night King, raining blow after blow down upon him. High, low, high again, a sweeping
cut and a quick strike. His opponent parried each attack with all the effectiveness and emotion of
the Wall itself. Backwards and forwards they danced, the Night King initiating no attack but
blocking each assault.

A raven quarked again and his blue eyes left Jon for but a moment as they considered the swarm of
black birds. Now! He lashed out with his blade, trying to drive its length through his opponent’s
black armor and icy flesh.

Now the Night King struck back, bringing his blade to bear with unnatural swiftness and swinging
it to meet Jon’s own. The impact of the parry rattled his very bones and shifted his feet in the
bloody snow. The Night King spun the hilt in his hands and swung it around again. Jon caught the
attack with the flat of his blade just in time.

Jon stumbled back as the attacks rushed forth. At the left. To the right. Above his head, then at his
shins. Each blow was more powerful than the last. Each took more from Jon. He had mistaken his
enemy’s strength. His ears were ringing. Someone was screaming behind him. He could not hear them.

He watched the great ice sword descend on him again and tried to parry the move, but he was too slow. The blow forced Longclaw from his grip and sent him sprawling into mud and ice. He instinctively reached for the dragonglass dagger, but could not feel it at his side. The Night King stepped toward him, weapon in hand.

White streaked across his field of vision as Ghost threw himself at the enemy. His powerful jaws closed around the Night King’s armored armed. He turned to the direwolf and cast it off like some untrained puppy. Wounded, Ghost limped to Jon, determined to stand by his friend. The Night King advanced.

Another shout rang clear across the battlefield, then another. No! Arya had climbed down from the dragon’s back. She was charging the Night King, dagger and Needle in hand. Gendry followed her wearing a look of terror. Brienne, Clegane, and Beric moved forward after them.

The Night King turned to regard his new opponents with a look of detached curiosity. He raised his sword to strike Arya first. He swung.

She ducked and roll to the left. He brought the blade about and lashed out in a curved arch, but missed again. Arya brandished Needle and drove it where the heart should have been in any human. The Night King looked down at where the thin blade had punctured his armor and grasped the steel with one hand. The sword shattered.

He lashed out with the same hand and caught Arya in the chest. Jon watched in terror as his sister flew backwards, landing with a dull thud amidst a pile of slain wights. She did not get up. Gendry cried out in a cold rage as he charged forward, hammer high in the air. Strong, he might have been, but he was not quick. The Night King lashed out and caught Gendry in his thigh. The blade sunk deep into his leg. Jon saw hot blood steaming then freezing on the ice.

Gendry fell to a knee, but before the Night King could move again Jon had retrieved Longclaw and moved against him. His anger renewed his strength. They traded blows again, but this time he knew he did not fight for victory. He looked back to where Sandor was supporting Gendry and Brienne had scooped up Arya. The others had climbed atop the dragon. Ravens screeched murder above them.

With another powerful swing, the Night King forced Jon back. His heel caught on some corpse’s shattered skull and he fell back, sword flying out of reach once more. His foe raised his weapon to deliver the fatal blow, his eyes burning… White?

Then blue again. The two colors danced before him. He seemed frozen. Jon pushed his palms and heels into the ground as he scrambled backwards. Around them, the wights’ eyes revealed a similar strangeness. White, then blue, then white.

*Something’s happening. I can finish this,* he told himself as he retrieved Longclaw and stood tall. Yet, as he looked at the Night King, the whiteness faded away. Above him, the ravens scattered in a hundred directions. The moment had passed. The enemy advanced.

“You need to get them out of here,” Beric’s voice sounded behind him, “this is not your time.” Jon turned and looked at the man, then at the dragon. Beric seized his shoulder and shook him, his eye boring into Jon’s own grey ones, trying to make him understand. He opened his mouth to speak but Beric simply seized him and threw him back toward Rhaegal.
The green dragon’s injuries were severe, but still he stirred. Clegane and Brienne had brought Arya and Gendry atop the dragon’s back, whilst Tormund and the others had found purchase further back. Jon looked back to where Beric, flaming sword in hand, made to face the Night King.

“Rhaegal!” he called out again. The dragon’s molten golden eyes flashed open and Jon felt that something stir inside him once more. He scrambled atop his wing and back and settled himself between two great spikes. This would be their only chance.

Behind him, Beric made to draw first blood as he swung his flaming sword. The Night King caught the blow with his own weapon, yet Beric’s ordinary steel did not shatter. Jon watched him press the attack even as he pressed a bare palm against Rhaegal’s scales. “Sōvegon,” he told the dragon. Weak though he was, Rhaegal obeyed. He stretched his wings out and struggled to stand. Jon could see where Viserion and the wights had struck him.

The wights surged forward, making for the dragon and the survivors. The dying dragon fire that Rhaegal had loosed moments before rose to block their path. All around him, the fire was higher, spreading even. It stopped the dead in some places and consumed them in others. In front of him, the flames made an odd sort of passage through the ranks. To his left, Beric held his own against a superior foe.

It was time to flee. “Sōvegon!” he said again. This time, Rhaegal beat his mighty wings and launched himself skyward. Jon held on to the spikes on his back as he lumbered forward, Arya, Gendry and the rest on his back. Only Ghost and Beric stood below, but where the direwolf bounded off through the gap in the flames as he followed the dragon’s path. Beric remained.

As Rhaegal struggled against the whipping winds, Jon looked back. Beric had been struck down. Body and sword shattered and extinguished. The fires that had roared to life for that crucial moment faded away before the oncoming blizzard. Jon whispered a silent thanks to his fallen friend.

The river came into sight. Jaime had broken the ice where he could. Drogon, unable to take to the air again, stood on the banks and melted the ice with his fire. The dead would find no easy crossing today.

With a word, Jon commanded Rhaegal to land just beyond the camps. He saw the clusters of survivors as he passed overhead. Rhaegal slumped into the snow as he landed, torn wings folding inward. Scores of people rushed to aid Jon’s party. They saw to the wounded first, carrying off Arya and Jorah and aiding Gendry. Others limped off or marched away, broken and terrified.

Jon descended slowly from the dragon’s back. Tired and shaken, but alive. In the distance, he could see others making for him and Rhaegal: a rider grasping reins with his left hand; a greybeard and a dwarf; and there... a slim figure with silver hair. He ran to her.

Chapter End Notes

Well...

This entire part of the story began with me thinking of a Jon/Arya fight scene that parallels the Return of the King scene when Pippin stabs an orc that’s about to stab Gandalf. I have other such examples yet to come.
Not really going to comment on the action/battle itself unless someone wants something clarified. The reality here is that fighting an army of dead dudes and an 8,000 year old demi-god ain’t all rainbows and butterflies. I suppose this sort of marks the transition into the next phase of the story, which I hope with be tighter, more dramatic, more fun to read, and more-thought provoking in a number of ways. Most of the ideas I have jotted down will be laid out and explored in the coming chapters.

Unfortunately, about 15 minutes after I finished proofing this chapter I received a long expected call. A good friend who has been struggling with an illness passed away rather suddenly. I'll be away helping folks deal with stuff for a few days. Always end your conversations on high notes. You just never know.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The dead did not pursue them across the river of broken ice, but the storm did. Its great grey clouds enveloped the northern hills and its harsh winds cut through the tent lines of her defeated armies. A blizzard. A great blizzard, Daenerys had thought when she first saw it in the midst of battle, yet the snow did not fall like it did during that storm at Winterfell but instead whirled about in the freezing air.

That was good, for those Unsullied and Dothraki who had retreated from the field uninjured now patrolled the western banks of the White Knife, searching for signs of the dead through the grim storm. There were none. The Night King had pulled his legions back to the hills and beyond the sight of even her bravest scouts and riders.

Why? That was the question ten thousand hoarse and weary voices whispered into the frigid night air. Why did they not follow? Whispers of the enemy’s power crept through the camp like the icy fog. Some of the northmen claimed the Night King could do all Bran Stark could and more; that he could see them all, even now. He had been prepared for her dragons beyond the Wall and he had met them in battle despite Bran’s assurances otherwise. Is it true?

It was that question Daenerys now considered as she lay abed alone. Jon was still out in the camps, making certain the dead were gone. She had been with him earlier, but retired to their pavilion when the night still and quiet. Rest was ever-so-important now.

Thrice she woke to the sounds of the howling winds outside the tent. Each time, Daenerys struggled to embrace sleep’s sweet relief once more. She found it difficult. Images danced inside her head: Viserion’s burning blue eyes, the hordes of dead men, Jon on her wounded green dragon.

His now, she thought as she considered what she had seen. For Rhaegal was truly bound to Jon now. She felt it, even if he did not. Dragons chose one rider. Rhaegal had chosen Jon in the chaos of battle. As it was with Drogon and me. Though she had already known Bran’s visions to be true, she knew this proved it all. Two Targaryens and two dragons. The thought gave her a glimmer of hope. She resolved to teach him to ride the dragon properly, to understand Rhaegal’s thoughts and make her child understand his. I must, for we must each ride a dragon if we’re to have a chance at victory.

Victory... Perhaps she had never truly considered the sweet sound of the word. How are we to triumph if that thing can see all our plans? Jon had fought and lost beyond the Wall. Together, they had fought and lost here, though the choice of the river as a battleground and the Night King’s disinterest had saved their armies from total annihilation. Never before had Daenerys suffered a defeat on the battlefield. Love ones lost and struggles endured had made her strong, to be sure; but defeat was another thing entirely. Doubt crept into the edges of her mind. She felt weak and she hated it.

A rush of cold air and the sound of a rustling tent flap made her look up from the bed. Two Unsullied entered bearing a third upon a stretcher. One of the commanders, she recognized the bronze dragon signet upon his left breast, but could not place the name without seeing his face. They set him down beside the others, two other Unsullied and two of her bloodriders. Of Grey Worm, there had been no sign. With Missandei, I should think, she told herself.
Daenerys had insisted her wounded commanders be treated in her own pavilion. That was only proper. There were others, too. Jorah had suffered grievous wounds fighting to defend her injured dragon. Her dear friend lay abed, unconscious and unawares of the deepening darkness around him. Across the pavilion, another enclosure held Gendry Waters and Arya, sleeping silently side by side.

The bastard boy’s leg had been cut to the bone. Those Unsullied trained in the healing arts had said he should have died only minutes after the battle for it was an usual wound. Yet he lived. The blood had frozen in the severed veins and bits of crimson ice rimmed the wound. The muscles had blackened as if from prolonged exposure, but the flesh did not rot or give off a foul stench. To hear one healer tell of it, the cut was even cold to the touch.

Arya fared little better. Daenerys had watched Jon carry his sister from the dragon to the camp. The girl’s face and clothes had been covered in ash and blood and the wound she suffered serious. There were no obvious signs of outward injury, but underneath her garments a great black bruise had formed. Jon said she had been struck fighting the Night King himself. No doubt she had suffered a few broken bones, but some greater evil was at work inside her as well.

Troubled by her thoughts and unable to sleep any longer, Daenerys rose, garbed herself in her fur-lined dress, and made to sit by Jorah. She put a hand on his bandaged forearm as she looked over his broken, unconscious form. It was hard to see him like this.

“You’re strong,” she whispered to her dearest friend, “and almost home. Bear Island is not so far. You must not give up yet.” His chest rose and fell slowly, but he remained silent. Only the howling wind outside answered her.

Perhaps I am only speaking to myself.

She almost jumped up in fright as something nudged her in the small of her back. She turned to find two red eyes regarding her curiously. Ghost. She had not heard him enter. It was a fitting name. The direwolf had suffered his share of wounds as well; dried blood stained his otherwise snow-white fur.

“You’re strong too, my friend,” she said softly as she ran her fingers through his fur, sitting down as she did so. Daenerys looked over her wounded commanders again. My men, she thought, a bitter bile rising in her throat. My people. She had asked them to follow her across the sea to win her family’s throne back. Then, she had asked them to follow her north. Hundreds had died, maybe thousands for all she knew. Many more would before the end. My children... I am a mother who cannot protect her own children.

Even the dragons had been hurt, though if Drogon’s wounds from Daznak’s Pit were any indication a dragon’s injuries healed far faster than did a man’s. For months she had brooded on her failure and the fate of her child. Watching Viserion’s body break against the ice had broken something in her, something not even Jon nor his child now growing inside her could rightly mend. She had thought facing him – it - might have brought some small measure of peace. It did not. It only made her angry.

Yet neither anger nor boldness nor her remaining dragons’ fury had mattered in their defeat. This Night King wielded powers beyond hers and had smashed her armies against the river bank. He had claimed some of her men for his own, just as he had her dragon. Why he had declined to cross the river and give chase, she could not say. Does it matter? She wondered as she looked at Jorah once more. His magic is strong and his will as remorseless and relentless as this storm.

No. She would not permit herself to continue with these thoughts. If I do not believe in victory, why should my people? I must be their strength. Though it had been her first taste of defeat in war, it was only a single battle. Our hopes will be reborn, as I was. I have magic, too. I must do more.
And so there she sat for hours on end, fingers idly stroking the top of Ghost’s head as her eyes swept over every detail of her oldest friend’s broken body. Once, she tried to remember a prayer from one of those small books he had gifted her at Drogo’s wedding feast so long ago, but she could not remember the words nor to whom she was supposed to speak them.

The pavilion’s entrance opened again and more cold air blew inward, stinging her eyes for just a moment. She blinked and saw Missandei step into the dim firelight. Daenerys rose to greet her.

Missandei did not move. Her head was bowed against the cold, her fingers bent and palms pressed together near her navel. Holding something, Daenerys guessed. When she looked up, Daenerys saw tears rimming her amber eyes. Then she began to weep.

Rarely did Missandei of Naath shed a tear. Fear’s icy fingers clutched at Daenerys’ heart as her eyes found the familiar but half-melted silver dragon brooch clutched in her friend’s hands. Her stomach sank.

Daenerys embraced her. Missandei trembled in her arms as she cried, dropping the silver piece to the floor. Daenerys wanted to cry too. I must not, she told herself, swallowing her sadness and holding onto her friend. There was a certain emptiness to it all, a hollowness in her chest that just would not go away no matter how hard she willed it to. Daenerys blinked back tears.

After another moment, Missandei stepped back and brushed her own tears away with a sleeve. “How?” Daenerys asked her.

“T-they said it was the dragon,” she forced the words out through ragged breaths. “It fell upon his men as they fought the dead and…” her tear-filled eyes fell to the disformed silver on the floor between them.

Daenerys looked over her friend as she began to weep once more. She joined us on this march to be with him and now he is gone. Grey Worm, who had led the Unsullied in her name, was dead. Always faithful and ever vigilant, he had been slain away from the woman he loved and the queen he called his mother. It was not fair. It was not right.

Her thoughts turned to the dragon. He has stolen my child and turned him against my other children. Her fingers curled into fists. He has killed those who would kill for me. He would do the same to her. Her teeth clenched together. He would do the same to Jon. Her veins coursed with rage. He would do the same to me.

Her heartbeat quickened. The fingers of her right hand unfurled as she brushed her navel and felt the soft swell of her womb beneath the dress’ fabric. This monster will take no more of my children.

Daenerys looked away and around the room. There lay Jorah, weakened from half a dozen wounds. Close by were her bloodriders. Further left, Gendry and Arya still lay motionless. The girl seemed so small just now. Daenerys wondered if she would ever fight again. Finally, her gaze fell to the dragon brooch on the floor; all that was left of Grey Worm. All that was left of another friend.

I’m sorry, she might have said, but words would do not good now. Empathy could not return the dead to life. I must protect them. I must do my duty as queen.

She picked it up and pressed it into Missandei’s soft hands. “We will avenge him,” she said, “I promise you that, we will avenge him.” Missandei looked at her as she blinked back more tears. It is comfort she needs right now, Daenerys knew; but she could not offer that now. “Stay here,” she
ordered. Then she made for the exit and stepped into the night air.

Or at least it felt like it was night. Daenerys could not rightly say what hour it truly was. *It could well be the morning. Missandei might not have troubled me in the middle of the night.* The sky, or what she could see of the sky, was the same deep grey as Winterfell’s walls. The sun had hidden its face for more than a week now, but that did not matter. She did not need its warmth just now. The news of her friend’s death had lit a fire inside her.

Onward she went, down the tent lines toward the edge of the camp. Thin sheets of ice cracked underfoot as she walked. Unsullied spearmen and Dothraki riders were returning in the morning gloom, their pursuits obviously failed and fruitless. Hers would not be.

“Your Grace!” Tyrion shouted from her right. His tone betrayed a certain anxiousness. Her Hand moved to join his queen at once. His black cloak flapped wildly in the wind, making him look like a particularly inept bat. “Your Grace!” he shouted again, pulling even with her for a moment but struggling to keep up. “I must insist we return to your tent!”

She ignored him and continued onward.

*There.* Daenerys saw him before Tyrion did, lying just beyond the last group of tents. Drogon’s wounds were significant, but not severe. Viserion had caught him in the same place the Lannister spear had. *He can still fly,* she knew. That was all she needed.

“Daenerys…” Tyrion said, his tone growing more serious as he too saw Drogon. She turned and looked at him for a moment. Realization was writ plain on his face. “You musn’t. You’ve already lost one dragon. If you-”

“Enough,” she said. “Stay here or return to the tents, but do not get in my way.” He left.

She walked to her dragon and placed a hand on his black scales. Even here in this storm, the fires burned hot inside him. For a few long moments, she stood there admiring him. Great slashing marks were cut across his side where Viserion had attacked him with tooth, claw, and tail. He hummed a greeting as she reached out with her mind; a low, thunderous, and powerful sound. *You know what I must ask of you now, my sweet.*

The Night King’s dragon was wounded and his closest lieutenants destroyed. It might only take a moment for her to swoop down and bathe her foe in Drogon’s fire. She could end it here and now. She made to climb on.

Fingers closed around her wrist and pulled her back. She struggled against her assailant’s grip even as she turned and recognized him. Jon held her firm. Tyrion stood behind him alongside a dozen northmen and half as many Unsullied. Perhaps she had lingered longer than she meant to.

“Let me go,” she insisted, anger roiling inside her still. Drogon let loose a low, rumbling sound as he uncoiled his neck and turned to face the assembled group. The northmen stumbled backwards, but Jon kept his ground.

“So you can do what? Fight them all on your own? Did you see what happened?” he shouted against the shrieks of the wind. *Yes, I saw. And I shall burn them all.* Daenerys twisted her wrist. He did not let her go. He grasped her shoulder with his other hand and pulled her body into his. His grey eyes stared deep into hers. For a moment, it was just the two of them in a winter tempest.

“Together, Daenerys,” he said, loud enough so that only she could hear. “That’s what you promised me.”
I have made so many promises. His words brought forth a wave of memory more powerful than the storm. She saw Jon falling into the ice and Jon laying upon her bed on that boat. She saw Viserion falling from the sky while shrieking for his mother.

More ghosts swirled around her, phantoms only she could see: her brother’s golden crown and desperate cries for mercy; Drogo’s languid corpse beneath a late summer sun; Irri’s and Jhiqui’s ruined red throats in Qarth far away in the east; Barristan the Bold upon that sorry altar and the bodies of the children who had shown her the way to Meereen. She saw Jorah in the tent and Grey Worm as he had been in life, stern but proud. She had failed them all.

Tears welled in her eyes and she buried herself in Jon’s embrace. Her men would not see her cry. They must not see her weakness just now. I must be their strength, she told herself again, but she felt so weak. How many more would die if she failed again? How many expecting mothers and little girls? How many bastard boys and kind old men? Fear and anger whirled inside her. Jon held on.

Together... It had been a meaningless word at first; a seed cast carelessly into the wind. Then it had grown; an alliance at first, then companionship. Trust, lust, and love, she thought as she recalled their journey south then north once more. Together was a promise. She did not have to save her people by herself. She did not have to do this alone.

Wordlessly, she and Jon returned the way she had come a moment earlier. Daenerys noted the look of relief on Tyrion’s face as they passed. She was of half a mind to apologize for she knew it had been that madness that had overtaken her for a moment. Targaryen madness some call it. Yet it had been that madness that won Aegon the realm. And that madness that lost the throne, she noted. Still, it might be the Targaryens who would save the realm and its people, in the end. Madness had its uses.

Daenerys distracted herself with more mundane tasks as the camps surrendered their ground to the storm. Tents were taken down and mounts readied for the march. The sky grew darker and the winds whipped up great clouds of ice and snow. Daenerys had to hold her own cloak high against the wind as they began to ride westward.

That night they made camp again in a frozen field. Night fires were lit around the perimeter and scouts were sent out into the midnight storm. She and Jon took their meal in the relative comfort of their own pavilion. Only Ghost and the wounded kept them company. They sat in silence for a few moments.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. “It was just – Missandei had told me of Grey Worm and...” she could not find the right words. “I was angry.” I still am.

Jon sighed and moved closer. “I understand, I’ve felt the same,” he glanced to where Arya still lay motionless. Perhaps Jon felt something similar, but if he did he hid it well. “I lost myself in anger and charged the Bolton bastard. He killed my brother. He killed hundreds of good men.” He took her hand in his. “I thought it would be different. With the dragons, I mean, and the dragonglass and the rest.” She could sense the subtlest hints of fear in his voice.

“So what now?” she asked.

“We make for Winterfell,” he said. Silence settled in between them for just a moment. The wind howled outside. “We need to be careful, Daenerys.” His eyes fell to her navel. Us, our child, our family, our people. If we fall, so will they. She understood.

She slept soundly that night. Just having someone beside her drove the fear from her mind, though
doubts still lingered. Jon’s arm was wrapped around her in a protective fashion. The storm’s cold air seeped through the stitched coverings of the pavilion, but Daenerys felt warm. The fire lit that morning still burned inside her.

For three days, they kept a pace as relentless as the storm itself. Jon was determined to be home. She knew why. Arya remained abed and asleep; her condition worsening with each passing day. Gendry and Jorah fared little better, though even they were granted comfortable spots on the sleds that pulled the wounded along the low roads. Winterfell’s warm halls, hot meals, and proper care would surely improve their conditions. Home was still far away.

The unnatural storm raged around them day and night. Some snow fell, but by the grace of some powers unseen it did not hinder their march. Despite their injuries, Drogon and Rhaegal kept pace with the army. Both dragons seemed to grow stronger by the day. They were the only ones who did.

The northern winter exacted its toll on her men. Dothraki mounts died by the score and riders by the dozen. To hear Tyrion tell of it, some illness was making its way through the ranks of riders. Bodies were set aside where they fell, only to be doused with oil and set alight. Daenerys tried to avoid looking back at the long trail of flickering flames that marked their retreat. Instead, she kept her gaze westward through the storm, searching for the now familiar towers of Winterfell.

Each evening, her men would build pyres for the warriors who had died closest to the camps. Proud Dothraki warriors were laid upon whatever dry wood the men could find and burned in the tradition of their people. Some of the riders had even cut their braids to show their defeat, but others proudly insisted that they had slain the White Walkers. To most, the shock of what they had seen kept them silent and in their saddles.

On the fourth day, they were met by a dozen Vale knights flying the falcon banner of House Arryn. We must be close, she had thought at first. They were not. The knights had ridden for days with a dire message for Jon.

“It is your brother, my lord,” he said sternly. “He has, well…” the knight hesitated as he considered his words, “taken ill,” he decided. Daenerys noticed the shift in his eyes. There’s something he’s not telling us.

“Bran is sick?” Jon pressed the man for answers.

“He was two days abed and under the care of your maester when we left. He’s,” the knight chose his next words cautiously, “not well, my lord.”

Jon only nodded and offered the men the meagre company and comforts of the march. There was nothing he could do for Bran just now. Daenerys knew that it must have been Sansa, having realized Arya had left Winterfell with Jon and finding herself alone, who had sent the riders forth with urgent news. The dozen knights of the Vale joined the sorry column and learned of the defeat in battle as they rode along.

That night, they hosted the evening meal in their pavilion. No wine was served, for they had none, but the hot stew helped in bolstering flagging spirits and warming cold exteriors. Daenerys sat with Jon on one side and Missandei on the other. The woman kept silent as she ate, but Daenerys did not want her friend to be alone with her grief.

Indeed, it was a rather silent affair. Tyrion, Jaime, and Davos made quiet conversation at the end of the table whilst Sandor Clegane engrossed himself in the meal. Brienne did not sit at all, but stood watch over Arya’s bed as if her presence might heal her lady’s wounds. Daenerys bade her
come and eat, but she politely refused. *She feels she has failed, too,* she knew.

Occasionally, Tyrion sallied forth from his seat with conversation; but all his topics soon turned to grim matters. By his own account, rumors were spreading through the army. Some northmen claimed that the Night King could not be killed, nor could his dragon. Others said the dragonglass had had no effect against the wights.

Even news of Bran’s condition had made its way into the camps, and Daenerys had heard one Glover man claim the boy had died and that, without the boy’s magic, they could not hope to prevail against the enemy’s might. *Fear of the dead has bound this army together, now fear of the dead threatens to break it apart.*

Soon, the discussion turned to the war itself. The notion of fighting the enemy in the field was as dead as the enemy itself. Winterfell would be properly fortified and readied for a siege whilst they worked out another way to combat the Night King. Jon had tasked the two Lannisters with readying Winterfell for war. After that, the assembly broke, weary and ready for rest.

After two more miserable days, they reached the low hills that surrounded Winterfell itself. Daenerys’ thoughts turned to hot food and a bath with waters drawn from the keep’s hot springs. The storm clouds thinned as the grey walls came into view.

By the time evening fell at midday, they were safely behind the walls. The yard was alive with frenzied, fearful activity. The wounded had been rushed into the keep and the maester and healers summoned with all haste. Jaime was already mustering men to once more prepare the walls for siege.

Across the way, Daenerys saw Missandei walk solemnly towards the stone arch that led to the godswood. *She needs me,* Daenerys told herself. She cut across the frozen mud and followed her friend. Then she paused. *Or perhaps she wants to be alone.*

The grove was empty save for her handmaid. Missandei took the melted silver brooch from a pocket and held it in her hand. She gave a choked sob that echoed around the godswood. No one but Daenerys heard. Slowly, Missandei sank to her knees and, pulling some green moss aside, pressed the silver piece into the earth. Holding back her tears, she placed the moss back over the brooch and stood. Then she began to weep once more.

Watching from a distance, Daenerys Targaryen had never felt so utterly powerless.

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**Chapter End Notes**

First of all, thank you all for the kind words of support. Ended up back home (where he was) for a few days and everybody got together to watch the ball game. Think it kinda helped. Humans are weird like that.

This chapter was short. There was a big scene here that I’ve punted to later because it worked better.

I've written three chapters simultaneously and this is my least favorite. It's difficult to follow up last chapter with something as excellent, but I think some slow and somber
moments were necessary. Also, my Daenerys has been kind of melancholy. That's OK, but at the end of the day she's still a Targaryen and needs that inner fire.

I've received some complaints about my notes detracting from the story/suspense, so I'm gonna try to hold back on answering questions related to potential future events, foreshadowing, and whatnot as best as I can. That said, always enjoy engaging in the comments.
Tyrion IV

Chapter Summary

Tyrion talks.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The darkness was deepening. Each day seemed shorter than the last. A bleak sky reigned overhead. Though, it’s only on the good days we can see the clouds, Tyrion mused grimly. That unnatural storm that had followed them from the river had broken against Winterfell’s walls after two harsh nights. The white mists and whirlwinds loomed off on the northern and eastern horizons. To the west, where the sun might be setting even now over the shrouded trees of the Wolfswood, there was only darkness.

The peculiar weather played tricks on his mind. Tyrion might wake to break his fast and find it was already time for a midday meal, or else discover he had risen several hours too early. It made him tired. Well, it’s that or the desperate march we just ended.

They had been six days in riding back to Winterfell. Six days of bitter winds and bitter emotions. Daenerys, for all her strength, had taken Grey Worm’s death and Ser Jorah’s wounds rather hard. Two of two thousand or more, he thought. The count was unreliable at best, but there was one thing that was certain: they were losing this war.

He had never been quite sure what to make of Jon Snow’s claims of this ‘Army of the Dead’ and their king. Mormont and old Maester Aemon had claimed as much some years ago, and Jon had insisted upon the urgency of the threat during his time on Dragonstone. Daenerys saw them, he reasoned with himself. Looking at her after that foray beyond the Wall, that was when he knew. A woman’s tongue could offer lies, council, and comfort in equal measure, but her eyes always told the truth.

His mind turned to those eyes as he carefully waddled down ice-slick steps of Winterfell’s inner wall. Daenerys had never suffered defeat on the field of battle before. She would not be here if she had. He had sensed some anger simmering within her after the retreat across the river and had found her meaning to mount Drogon and fight the enemy by herself. A hint of her father. Yet, just as her family might provoke her worst instincts it could also keep them in check.

Once, Tyrion had thought Jon Snow’s attentions would lay his own plans low. How many worthy rulers have been undercut by their own carnal passions? The boy’s own father came to mind. Yet this felt different. Indeed, it seems this has worked out rather well. Through him, we have the North and the Vale. Through him, we have another dragon to direct against our enemies. Through him, we have a Targaryen heir to the Iron Throne.

Tyrion served Daenerys and he liked Jon Snow, but he knew it would be the babe who needed his protection most of all. Should Cersei find out our queen is to be a mother… She will try it again… she will try something. Tyrion knew his sister would not suffer another claimant to the throne, even a mother with a young child. Especially a mother with a child. He would have to anticipate her next moves.
Cersei was only one threat, though. They had just been dealt a stinging blow on the field of battle when all signs and visions had pointed toward a swift and easy victory. The dead might soon be upon them and they had no effective means of fighting back. Daenerys’ unborn heir was in danger even here and now. The child shared its fate with Westeros.

*The realm’s fate might well be decided beneath these walls.* Around him, men shouted orders into the evening air. Part of his and Jaime’s task now was to properly prepare the massive castle for siege. He would oversee the stockpiling of supplies, creation of artillery, and the like. *Not tonight though,* Tyrion thought, shivering.

The few sentries remaining outside stoked pitiful night fires that danced and flickered in the wind. Tyrion did not envy these men their task for the nights were altogether too cold now. He reached the frozen mud of the yard and made for the closest doorway, passing a cluster of Valemen armored in intricate steel and wearing cream colored traveling cloaks. Their whispers faded away on the evening air as he passed. Cold eyes regarded him with something close to open hostility. *Charming,* he thought.

Then he looked closer. *Armored and cloaked? I did not think we were planning to sally forth so soon.* He made note of their faces and sigils as he passed.

Across the way, he saw Samwell Tarly pushing Bran Stark’s rolling chair. The frail boy looked ever so pale under his furs. Bran had reportedly taken ill soon after the battle, but by the time they had reached Winterfell he was… *well, not in good health.* His skin was as milky white as the weidwood’s bark and his arms had withered. *He’s still looks as if he’s becoming the tree himself.*

Blue eyes met his own from across the yard. Bran stared at him for an unsettling span of time. Tyrion shivered and wondered whether the boy had heard his silent quips. *It would not surprise me. Rumors of Bran’s powers had spread like wildfire. He can see the past and present, he knew, and he can control his birds. Powers he shares with our enemy.*

Feeling a chill set in beneath his own clothes, Tyrion turned away and entered the keep, thumbing the hilt of a newly acquired dragonglass dagger as he walked. Only a fool would walk around unarmed now.

He huffed with exertion as he made his way up the stairs. A serving girl passed him, her arms full of bloodied bandages. Tyrion looked down the passageway through which she had come and turned at a whim. At the other end, Ser Davos stood in the frame of a doorway. *The girl’s own quarters,* he recognized the hall.

“Ser Davos,” he called out as he approached.

“Tyrion,” Davos turned and nodded at his new companion. Dark circles surrounded his eyes and his face seemed sunken. He only met Tyrion’s gaze for a moment before he looked back into the room. As he approached, Tyrion saw why.

Arya Stark lay abed, eyes closed and chest wrapped in linens. Maester Wolkan sat by her bedside as he grinded some dry herb with mortar and pestle. Tyrion knew she had suffered wounds on the battlefield, but Davos offered an explanation anyway.

“The girl tried to fight it,” he said, voice oddly emotionless as if he were trying to stifle his own humanity. *“Thing swatted her away like a gnat. Broken ribs, bleeding… wonder she’s alive.”*

“Has she woken yet?” he asked. Davos bowed his head and shook it slowly. “How is it Arya Stark managed to steal away on the march?”
“How?” Davos shrugged, “I only know why.” He nodded at a lower, makeshift bed. Tyrion recognized its occupant at once. The bastard boy Gendry lay as still as Arya, his leg propped up a bit and wrapped in a fresh layer of white bandages. “Took a cut to the leg fighting after her.”

“And they…” he did not want to say it aloud.

“They shall live, my lord,” Maester Wolkan set aside his tools and rose to face them. “The boy is young, strong, and healthy. He wakes for an hour or two each day. The wound leg may trouble him for some time, but the worst is passed. The girl…” his eyes darkened noticeably, “the girl’s injuries are severe but treatable. I have done much and more, but some wickedness still lingers inside her. She has yet to wake.”

“Do see that she does, Maester,” Tyrion said. He turned to walk away, leaving the maester to his task. Davos went with him.

“He cares for her,” the older smuggler said.

“And she for him, obviously,” he responded. “I pray they both make swift recoveries.”

“Do ya?”

“Pray? No. The weirwood faces would likely laugh aloud if they heard my attempts. I was raised in the light of the Seven, but I could not tell you before which statue I would kneel. The gods have no love for me, else they would not have made me the way I am.”

“A Lannister of the Rock? Poor way to grow up, ya never even tasted a proper bowl o’ brown,” a small smile appeared on Davos’ face, but to Tyrion that smile seemed the sun come once more. It was good to laugh.

“I do know something of stews…” he said absentmindedly, “speaking of which, I am rather famished. Shall we launch a daring raid on the larder?” Davos dipped his head in agreement.

Together, they found a bit of ale, bread, and salted beef to enjoy in the light of the dying fire in the hall. They spoke of pleasant things: their misadventures in King’s Landing as youths; voyages at sea; and strange things they had eaten at one time or another. Not once did the conversation turn to the battle or the war. Only towards the end of their meal did Davos mention Gendry once more, concern coloring his voice.

“Robert took near mortal wounds on the Trident and survived. If Gendry is truly a Baratheon, this cut will only make him stronger,” Tyrion assured him. And perhaps give him an increased affinity for Dornish Red.

“It’s the girl that worries me,” he admitted. “If she doesn’t make it through, he’ll…” his words faded into silent thought.

“You think he loves her?” Tyrion pressed.

“Or she loves him,” Davos looked off into the fire. He cares for them, Tyrion knew at a glance. Davos Seaworth had lost his own son upon the Blackwater and witnessed countless other horrors. Whether he blamed Tyrion for some, he could not rightly say. If he does, he’s a good enough man to sit with me now.

Tyrion laughed. Davos looked up with one eyebrow raised. “A wild, northern Stark girl in love with the heir to Storm’s End. Perhaps these gods do have a sense of humor.”
“Heir?” Davos asked, “the boy is a bastard.”

“King Robert’s bastard,” Tyrion corrected him, “and a loyal friend to Daenerys. Perhaps his father’s keep might be of interest, once the wars are won.” If, the word caught his happy thought like a hook. He struggled to push his dire thoughts aside. “Besides, House Baratheon is built upon bastards.”

“I’d sooner see him out of bed before seating him at a high table,” Davos said. Maybe he is right. There might be time for all this later. Always plotting, always thinking, always trying to move two steps ahead. Tyrion knew it was a mighty strength and major flaw. Even so, he could not help himself for he knew how well he played the game. And we all enjoy what we’re good at.

“Do keep an eye on him,” Tyrion said, “and the girl. Might be we shall need two able fighters before all this is over.” Davos nodded and stood as Tyrion did the same. They went their separate ways then, Davos back the way they had both entered and Tyrion off to his own chambers.

The halls were darker than before. Faint glimmers of light shone from beneath each door he passed. Not one empty room, he knew. People slept wherever they could. It will only get worse. Tyrion found himself wondering how many souls they could pack within the walls as he walked. He turned a corner, paced down the hall, then turned again. Winterfell was starting to become rather familiar. It was starting to feel like home.

A warm glow off to the left caught his attention. The Lord’s Solar, he recognized the hallway. The door had been left open and a fire was no doubt burning brightly inside. Varys, perhaps? Or Daenerys. He knew the queen enjoyed moments of solitude in that room. Tyrion walked toward the light wondering what he would find.

He heard their voices first, solemn tones to match the evening gloom. Tyrion made to linger in the shadows for a moment, curious as to what he might hear.

“-found some way in. Those faces… I was unable to recognize her,” the Lady Brienne said. “When did she become herself once more, I tried, but…” Tyrion knew at once of whom she spoke. He had seen the girl Arya’ injuries for herself. Jon had been wroth and almost made to fly her back to Winterfell upon his newfound dragon, only the beast could not fly nor was it certain his sister would survive such a journey.

“You did all you could,” Sansa’s voice replied, “she’s always been like this. She never listens.”

“Might you?” Brienne asked.

“Might I what?”

“Listen, my lady,” Brienne began to explain. “I fought the enemy. I watched your brother fight this Night’s King and the dragons battle in the sky.” She exhaled so loudly Tyrion could hear it from where he stood silently. “It’s not safe here.”

“This is the safest place in the North,” Sansa responded.

“The North is not safe,” Brienne explained. “Allow me to escort you and Lady Arya south to the Vale.” A curious choice. How will a lady knight, a squire, a Faceless Woman and a highborn lady fair on the Vale’s eastern roads? No doubt Shagga would enjoy Brienne, of course, but they’d need a far larger escort. He tilted his head to listen more. “Your cousin would surely welcome you home.”

“This is my home,” Sansa said. “I’m not leaving. Arya’s not leaving.”
“Forgive me, my lady, I only meant to—”

“Thank you, Lady Brienne, but I fear I’ve grown rather tired,” Sansa said with a practiced courtesy. “Might you see that my sister is well guarded and cared for before you retire?”

With a rustled of armor and without a word, Brienne dipped her head in acknowledgement and turned from the room. Her eyes found Tyrion skulking in the long shadows of the short hall. An odd mixture of emotions contorted the muscles of her face, and for a moment Tyrion thought she meant to seize him by the collar and drag him into the solar. She simply huffed in indignation and continued walking.

*How does Varys do this properly?* He thought as he moved forward into the warm firelight.

“My lord,” Sansa called out from the darkened corner between the windows and the hearth. Tyrion squinted against the bright light as saw a flash of auburn hair against black and grey furs.

“My lady,” he responded, turning to close the door behind him as he moved into the room and found a seat across from Sansa. “Is your own hearth not large enough?”

She narrowed her eyes at his pitiful jest. “I like it in here,” she admitted, gaze returning to the dancing flames, “it’s…”

“Like home?” he suggested. She gave him a look that told him he had been eavesdropping.

“It is home,” she said. “Winterfell… its changed. The people, the castle, the weather, all of it. There are rooms I’d rather avoid, if possible. Sometimes it’s just…” He knew what she was thinking, even if she did not want to give voice to her pain. He stood and moved to comfort her. She stopped him with another look.

“But it feels the same here, in this room. This is where father would come tell us the history of our house,” she said as she looked around at the faded tapestries on the walls. “This is where Jeyne and I would sit and talk for ages. One time,” the ghost of a smile appeared on her face, “Robb brought us both some wine. My first taste. I don’t even know how old I was. I drank some, but Jeyne spat it out, all over Robb. She fancied him, of course, but he…” he could hear the hurt in her voice.

“Your family survives, my lady,” Tyrion said.

“Does it?” she asked bitterly, “Arya hasn’t woken up. Bran spent two days in the same state. I don’t even know what happened to him. And Jon is,” she looked around the room nervously, “well, Jon.”

“And yet all three live,” Tyrion raised both his hands as if to show Sansa the world around her.

“They do, for now. You heard what Brienne said. You were out there, too. How long will it be before this Night King comes to Winterfell?” she asked.

“Sansa I don’t.”

“And if he does? Then what? Fight? Flee south? I wonder how your sister will take to thousands of refugees in the capital in the midst of winter.” *Poorly, as you well know.* Fear crept into her voice as she spoke. The confident, noble façade she had presented to Brienne a moment ago was crumbling.

“Fight, I should think,” he said, “Winterfell is the strongest keep in the North. A thousand men on
the walls are worth a hundred thousand outside them.”

“A hundred thousand…” she breathed out the word in awe.

“We struck a blow against the dead,” he tried to offer some hope, though he knew it to be a lie.

“A blow?” she scoffed, “how many men did we lose?”


“Thousands. And how many did they lose?” Gained, by now, my lady. Wherever their foe had gone, he was surely gathering more men to him. And that’s not even the main force… He did not have the heart to say it.

“Some thousands as well. Our queen’s Unsullied battled the dead with the dragonglass weapons and her two dragons burned hundreds of corpses,” he said. Even, then the loses were too great. They had lost Grey Worm in the fighting. Tyrion had never felt particularly close to the man, but Grey Worm had stood by him in Meereen and beyond. He was loyal. To a fault.

“We’ll need more men to defend the north; men to replace those we’ve lost in battle,” she said.

“Perhaps,” he said, “but Winterfell’s defenses are stout and strong, as I said.”

“Winterfell is not the North,” she argued, “I dealt with the stockpiling of grain when you were all in the south. I know my people. If the dead claim everything and everyone east of the White Knife, they’ll overrun us and everything south of the Neck.”

Tyrion could not argue with that assessment. Indeed, he understood her expectations. The North was fighting this battle to defend an ungrateful – and largely unaware – realm. Of course, we tried to convince one southern army to join us. “You and Jon sent those southern men south to find and fetch my uncle,” she spoke into the fire. “Has there been any word?”

“None, I’m afraid,” Tyrion said, wishing it were otherwise. Not that I expected any. Ryn Hill and his men might well be rotting in the Black Cells of the Red Keep by now, or else staring with empty gazes out over the snow-covered Crownlands; their heads tarred and picked apart by carrion birds.

“We need southern aid. More men from the Vale or the Riverlands,” Sansa stood at the idea. “Or perhaps the Reach. I was good friends with Queen Margery and I know Highgarden once fought for Daenerys’ father.”

“Thirty thousand Reachmen would certainly make things easier,” he admitted. So long as they bring their own food. And wine. “But House Tyrell is gone. I would not know where to send a bird to rally the Reach, nor do I think they would march north.” Sansa sighed as if to acknowledge that her own hopes had been… Out of Reach. Tyrion almost cracked a smile before stifling the urge.

“What about sellswords? You said your sister sent for twenty thousand men from Essos.”

“She did,” he said, recalling Varys’ old reports of the Golden Company’s exploits in the south, “but I don’t think we can expect any help from across the sea.”

“Then what do we do?” she asked.

“Make do with what we have,” he answered.
Sansa sank back into her chair, her posture breaking with her noble demeanor. It was a sign of honest emotion; that they might cast aside titles and reservations and speak frankly of the situations at hand.

“And what do we have? I’ve heard the whispers. The remaining knights of the Vale speak of returning to their keeps,” she said. That explains the men in the yard. “Lady Brienne hoped that I might ride with them. They’re afraid,” she sounded almost bitter. “They’re craven. And the northern lords are equally fearful. Some have even considered returning home as well.”

Tyrion had heard the rumors spreading through the army. Those who had witnessed the defeat on the White Knife had told others of the power of the enemy; a power that seemed to grow in the retelling. Rumors could poison and break the spirit.

“They’ve proved fickle followers before, if your own recounting it to be believed,” Tyrion said. Sansa’s eyes widened in sudden anger.

“They’re fools,” she spat, “worse; traitors. One moment they cling to the Starks and in the next the Boltons. They might pledge themselves to the Night King if offered good terms and land. Glover and the others are as reliable as the winter winds. They have no loyalty.” Oh... is that so?

“No loyalty indeed, my Lady of Lannister,” he said, hiding his smirk.

“I-” she began. “What?”

“Forgive me, Lady Bolton. That was most egregious of me.”

Her blue eyes cut like ice as they bore into his own. “What are you playing at?” she asked, though Tyrion thought she already knew.

“Stark, Lannister, Bolton. You’ve worn many a surname since you rode south with your father,” he said.

“I did what I had to do to survive,” she argued. Color rose in her cheeks.

“No more than the rest of your northern brethren,” he said. “Lord Glover’s family were taken hostage by the ironmen. Young Lord Cerwyn’s father was flayed by your late husband. Lord Manderly’s son was butchered at the Red Wedding, Lord.”

“I understand,” Sansa insisted.

“Do you?” he asked. “They’re afraid, and rightfully so. Glover returned bloodied and broken from the field of battle. Three score of his own household guard died in the fight. The Knights of the Vale watched five hundred of their own ride off to the Last Hearth and never return.” She averted her gaze at the mention of that particular mission.

“And they’re losing hope,” Sansa continued his thought.

“They are,” he said, recalling a speech he gave long ago to a desperate crowd of besieged men in the capital. “Men don’t fight for lords and lords don’t fight for titles, at least not in times like these. They fight for their lives. They fight for their families. They fight for their homes.”

She considered his words for a moment. “Then how do we give them hope?” Tyrion shrugged.

“A victory, I should think.” Yet that was far easier said than won. The dragons were vulnerable and their men too few to meet the enemy in the field. We cannot match our foe in numbers, might,
or magic. “Or perhaps a distraction.” They both knew what the word truly meant.

“A wedding?” she asked. “Jon and Daenerys still mean to…? Even after what’s happened?”

“Because of what has happened,” he said. “This was always the plan.” Well, it became the plan after they tumbled in her bed. “And there’s nothing quite like the specter of defeat and death looming over the land to hasten preparations.”

“When?” she asked.

“A few days? A week at most,” he said, pushing off his cushioned chair and standing up. Sansa remained seated by the fire. He took a detour around the far side of the room, along the wall of darkened windows that only reflected the hearth’s orange glow.

He reached the doorway and, placing a hand upon it, turned to Sansa again. “I expect it will be a modest and uneventful affair,” he said. “Any weddings we both attend usually are.”

Chapter End Notes

Well I meant to have this written and published yesterday, but the hangover gods threw me down and smote my ruin upon the mountainside.

Yes, this was a short chapter and obviously just setting up a few things. The show sometimes has long conversational scenes and so does this thing. If it's any consolation, the next chapter got so long that I had to divide it into two, but will hopefully have those out within a few days of each other.

Comments are always appreciated. Think I brought up some interesting questions/topics here so like to read what others think!
I meant for last chapter's conversation to showcase that the "Northern Lords", among other minor characters, have emotions too. They're trying to look out for their families and homes, just like the main cast is. In some cases, their interests might not line up with Jon and Daenerys'. Fear is a powerful emotion.

“You’ve no bloody honor, Jasper,” the younger knight said with a bite in his tone. He was a thin man, only a few years older than Bran was. *He looks as weak as Bran is, too,* the Three-Eyed Raven thought as he watched the two men argue. His sky-blue eyes were sunken with fatigue. Coarse, brown stubbled covered his shallow and unimpressive jawline while his battered and dented steel armor hung loosely around his frame. Only his voice was strong and determined.

“No?” the other knight chuckled harshly as he stood. He was an older man, of an age with Jaime Lannister. He looked stronger than his companion. His own steel breastplate, emblazoned with the red gate and towers of his house, shook as he laughed. “Better to abandon my bloody honor than my own blood, Jon *Stone,*” he emphasized the bastard’s surname as if to prove his point. “I mean to be in the Vale when the dead come to Winterfell.”

“You’ll cower behind the Bloody Gate like some craven fool, then?” the younger man asked incredulously.

“It’s the fool who would stay here, boy,” he said whilst fastening his sword belt around his sides. “That gate has held out invaders for six thousand years. Winterfell has fallen twice in *six.*”

Jon Stone’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “And what of your oaths, *ser*?” he asked.

“To who?” Jasper Redfort challenged

“Lady Stark.” *Sansa, he means.*

“I swore no oaths to Lady Stark. I rode north with Lords Baelish and Royce to fight the Bolton bastard, same as you,” Redfort said.

“Baelish,” Stone spat, “the man who murdered her own aunt, our Lady Lysa, the gods give her rest.”

“Gods might need a bit of rest of their own… they’ve already put so many of ours in the ground,” the older knight said. “Baelish was a damned traitor, yes, but it was the Lady Stark who sent Lord Royce off into the wilds to die.”

“That was no fault of Sansa’s – Lady Stark’s – own. My lady sent those knights to escort women and children to safety,” Stone countered.

“Safety, aye,” Redfort sighed, “and for how long? We sacrificed five hundred knights so northern peasants and wildling savages could live another few months, is that it?”
“That’s hardly—” the younger man began, but his words were interrupted as the tent flap opened and
a third armored knight strode into the canvassed gloom. The Three-Eyed Raven looked him over.
This man could have matched Lady Brienne in height, if not in skill. He too was fully armored,
with the blue falcon and moon of House Arryn upon his own steel.

He passed right through the Three-Eyed Raven’s ethereal form as he strode forward. He had been
watching these two knights for some time now. He needed to know the truth.

“What are you two shit-stained stable hands muttering about?” the newcomer asked.

“My little lord Redfort here speaks of fleeing south, Ser Eon,” Jon Stone mocked, confident the
knight’s arrival had brought him the numbers he needed to win this argument. The tall knight
raised an eyebrow.

“Hmph,” Eon grunted as he considered the accusation. He loomed over the two others, looking
back and forth as he silently passed judgement. His closed lips moved around wordlessly as if he
were chewing some sour meal. Then he spoke. “And you Stone? What say you?”

The lad looked shocked. “We are knights, ser!” he stammered, his words flowing quickly like
water over a jagged ridge. “What respect would we command if we fled at the first sight of the
enemy? What lord would take us into his service? What woman would look upon us with approval?
The gods themselves would curse us for cowards and oath breakers.”

“The gods already have cursed us, boy,” Jasper Redfort hissed. “Open those bastard’s ears of yours
to the camps and you’ll hear the truth. Unnatural storms, corpses that won’t die, and an ice dragon
twice as large as that dragon queen’s own great black beast. We’ve no business here, fighting
that.”

“This isn’t our fight,” Ser Eon agreed.

Jon Stone shook his head in shock. “Cravens,” he said. “Fools! Both of you. I’ll… I should…” he
took a half backwards as he crossed sword hand to sword hilt.

Redfort stepped forward. “Should what?” he smirked, “thrust your sword through my gut? Betray
your own kind and kin?” He reached for his own sword.

“Enough,” the tall knight said, drawing himself up to his full height. The other two backed down.
“It’s the Vale we must protect, Ser, and we cannot do it from here. The mountain clans were
already growing bold when we rode forth. Beasts armed with castle forged steel. Winter in those
hills will not have made them kinder. It will take the Knights of the Vale to drive them back.
Would you abandon your own people to rape and slaughter at their hands?”

The Three-Eyed Raven stepped around Ser Eon to get a better look at this Jon Stone. They share a
name, my cousin and he, he mused. Only, Jon Snow would do the honorable thing; the right thing.
Might this young knight?

“We cannot abandon the Starks. If the dead should come south…”

“Then they’ll break against the Bloody Gate,” Redfort finished the thought. He sounds uncertain.

“Gates don’t much help against dragons, Jasper, be they living or dead. If we flee, either the dead
will chase us or the dragon queen will,” Jon Stone argued.

The two older knights shared a knowing look. They’re minds are already set, the Three-Eyed
Raven knew. I must tell the others.
“We’ll not ride until the dragons and their riders are away,” Ser Eon explained coolly.

“Riders? It’s just the Targaryen queen who—”

“Did you not hear me, boy?” Redfort spat. “I said open those bastard’s ears. Jon Snow rode that green beast in battle. Robett Glover’s men saw it themselves when our dear king and queen led them to the slaughter.”

_Slaughter_… The Three-Eyed Raven reflected on the man’s anger. _It is my fault. Our fault. I did not see him. I did not know._ The Night King had deceived him somehow, had hidden his presence from the Raven’s sight. He did not know it was possible. _I told Jon that it would work._ Yet, it had not.

_I saved them, too_, he reflected on his scattered memories and visions of the battle. It was difficult to recall. He had been there, within his birds, flying above the carnage and chaos. Only, when Rhaegal had fallen and Jon rushed to the dragon’s aid, he had left the ravens behind for a new host. _I was in the bodies. Hundreds of them. Thousands. How?_

Flashes of blue and white were the last things he could remember before the Night King had driven him from the corpses. The had been pain, like a thousand steel daggers being driven into his skull. The mark on his arm had burned. Darkness had taken him for two days. _But I saved them._

The current scene was fading before him. Blackness crept in from the edges of the vision. His strength still eluded him even a week after the battle itself. Samwell brought him the foods he requested and aided him about the keep, but still his spirit tired far too easily. He had not been able to see much farther than Winterfell’s walls. Sometimes, the boy Bran made his presence known when the Three-Eyed Raven’s concentration flagged. _That must not happen now. I must see._ He redoubled his efforts and refocused on the three arguing knights.

“It doesn’t matter what Bronze Yohn would have done,” Redfort answered some question that the Three-Eyed Raven had not heard. “He’s dead, Jon, and we will be too if we don’t leave soon.”

“Leave then!” the young knight was almost shouting in pain and anger. “Run back to your wives and hovels and your bloody Bloody Gate!” He shoved Ser Eon aside, walked through the Three-Eyed Raven, and stormed out into the cold.

Jasper Redfort tilted his head sideways and looked up at his solemn companion. “Best go after him,” he said grimly. “He’ll likely tell the Stark girl what we mean to do and when we mean to do it.”

“Why’s that?” the taller knight asked.

“The boy can’t keep his eyes off her. None of them can. This talk of a wedding has turned every up jumped squire’s heads to baser stuff,” Redfort drew the length of his blade and, sitting down, set its flat edge across his thigh. He retrieved a whetstone and began to give his sword the coarse attentions that had until then been reserved for his comrades. Eon rolled his eyes.

“And so he’ll betray our plans to curry some favor, is that it?” he asked. Redfort only nodded. “Well… I’ll go speak with the lad and set him right. You tell the others,” Eon said. He paced out into the winter air after Jon Stone. Jasper Redfort sat alone in the tent, sharpening his blade.

Bitter winter air filled his lungs in a gasping breath. The sting felt good after the days spent recovering in the still, musty air of his chambers. _What is it he just saw? Was that today? Just now?_ He could not be sure, for he had been within the tent. Not that it mattered much; the sun’s light seldom shone above Winterfell these days. Soon night would truly be upon them.
And we shall need the Knights of the Vale. They could not afford to lose fifteen hundred men. I need to tell Jon. I need to tell Sansa. Other names rushed to the forefront of his mind. He wanted to shout out for aid, but his voice was hoarse and throat constricted from disuse. There was no one in the godswood anyway.

Samwell, he told himself, find Samwell. He had sent the man for food earlier; the kind of food that would give him the strength to continue his work; to see further. He reached out with his mind to find his friend, but Sam found him first.

The large man came trudging into the grove. He was still clad in bits of black leather, but had otherwise abandoned his Night’s Watch garb for more comely winter clothing. He walked toward the heart tree with an unsteady gait, his eyes focused on the sloshing contents of the wood bowl he carried.

“Sam,” he greeted his friend, “you’ve brought what I asked for?”

“I did,” Sam’s chins quivered as he approached and offered the bowl. “Are you quite sure you want just this? I could fetch some proper mutton from the kitchens, or some good bread.” He shook his head. “Turnips, maybe? There are still some vegetables in the cellars, too,” he said with a smile that almost hid his disgust.

“No, Samwell,” the Three-Eyed Raven said, “this will do fine.” They both looked down at the bowl. Its contents were a deep crimson, almost the same color as the leaves of the weirwood. Steam rose off the surface. Blood. He liked the smell. Small pools were beginning to congeal on surface and edges of the bowl. Streaks of lighter red ran from the sides where the liquid had sloshed back and forth. They seemed to him the markings of spent waves upon a darkened shore.

He spooned it into his mouth and relished in the familiar, coppery taste. The liquid warmed him as is merged with his own being. Heat rushed from his neck and chest to his arms and fingers. He felt alive, just as he had in those wolf dreams so many years ago. Bran’s boyish protestations receded to the back of his mind. He emptied the bowl quickly and handed it back to his friend.

“Jon has called for another small gathering this…” Sam looked up at the dark sky with a worried expression as he spoke, “evening.”

“And he wants to know where the dead are,” the Three-Eyed Raven responded.

“Well, yes,” Sam said rather meekly. “I know you’re not feeling all that well, but we need to know what’s going on out there. The Night King could be ten leagues from here for all we know.” No. I would have felt that.

“Can you bring the boy?” he asked of his friend. Sam’s eyes fell.

“I know whatever you did during the battle has hurt you some,” he said, “but do you think we could try without Little Sam just now? He doesn’t like it much and Gilly grows angry with me every time I bring him out here. It’d only be once, just a try.”

The Three-Eyed Raven considered the request. The boy’s connection to the enemy had proved necessary in finding them before. Yet he felt stronger just now, with the blood inside him and cold air caressing his face. We can try without him, Bran urged. Do it.

“Very well,” he responded. Sam smiled with relief.

“Now, when Jon and Daenerys last saw the dead they were-”
“I will find them, Samwell,” he interrupted. He nodded at the tree.

His friend moved him closer to the weirwood and, turning his thoughts to his task, the Three-Eyed Raven reached out with outstretched fingers and thoughts.

The world flashed white then faded into cool winter colors. The sight came easier than before. *Perhaps we do not need the boy any longer.* Weeks and months ago, he had thought the Night King’s presence was affecting his own abilities, yet that presence felt diminished. The Night King had grown weaker, or else the Three-Eyed Raven’s own abilities had grown stronger. *Perhaps the death of the others has weakened him some,* he thought. *Perhaps that is how I did what I did during the battle.*

He opened his other eyes and turned them all to the dead. *The White Knife,* he thought. His thoughts took him there. The vast expanse of the North flew under him; hills and forests and moors all covered in snow and ice. Storms raged on the horizon. Cold, white mists crept across the country beneath him. The sky was a seamless wall of dark grey.

He found the battlefield first. Great blackened scorch marks crossed the earth where the dragons had battled. Blood and dirt still stained the snow, though fresh layers had covered some of the evidence of slaughter. And there, off to the east and south, a long trail of disturbed snow and ice. *That’s where he took them.*

The Three-Eyed Raven knew the enemy had split his forces in two: one smaller force to march west and another to ravage the eastern lands. Whether that was still the case, he could not say. He followed the frozen river south as it cut its path through the winter wilds. Hill, hall, and forest flashed by as he flew.

He felt them before he saw them: that familiar, unpleasant coldness pressed against his mind. The wounds from his last encounter throbbed with a dull pain. He struggled to focus as he moved closer. There were tens of thousands in the army, perhaps close to a hundred thousand. *And not just men,* he noticed, *but women, and children too. And beasts of every ilk.*

The Night King had once more gathered his armies together. They shambled forward in pursuit of some unknown objective. He noticed the mottled furs of the wildlings, the ruined black leather of the Unsullied, and the various garbs of the northern houses who had already fallen to the enemy’s assault.

Two bodies walked in front of him; boys near enough Bran’s own age, their eyes empty and blue. One’s neck was a red ruin, though the blood looked freshly frozen. The other’s entrails hung loosely from his belly. *He has claimed more Northerners,* he knew. *More of Jon’s people. More of my people.*

Jon had sent word to every keep and holdfast, and more than one raven to the lords east of the White Knife. Many hightborn families and smallfolk had fled to the southernmost towns and castles in the North. By some reports, the population of White Harbor had nearly doubled from the surge of refugees. Lord Manderly had ceased food shipments to Winterfell, for the roads were too poor and dangerous for travel and his own city was overrun with hungry mouths to feed.

Yet while some had fled to the walled city, many Northerners remained stubborn and steadfast. Such hostility to change had no doubt seen them through countless harsh winters and other troubled times. Stout hearts and hearths had not saved these two boys. They would not save the North.

He took in the rest of the horrors passing him by. A shadow cat missing half a face prowled by, its single eye burning blue against the grey gloom. Two giants thundered by after it and a great
mammoth followed that pair, its great hairy hide covered in icicles that swayed to and fro like crystal windchimes. Though he could feel the tenuous connections among them, none took any notice of the idle watcher.

The Three-Eyed Raven looked up at his true foe. The Night King’s mount flew about in circles. Just the sight made his mind throb and his arm twinge in pain. Panic seized him for a moment and he willed himself to remain hidden. The dragon continued to circle overhead. *He does not see me.*

In every vision, his enemy had sense the Three-Eyed Raven’s presence. It had been how he was marked in that cave far to the north and how his connection to the ravens broke when he drew too close. Yet some was different now. Something had changed.

Blackness crept into the edges of the vision once more as his focused began to fade. Then, another presence, warm and familiar, tugged at his thoughts. *South,* it said. *Go south.* It was the boy, stronger then before and eager to see something different. *No. We must stay. We must learn.*

There was little he could do just now. Using his sight had taken too much of his strength. The visions became Bran’s own. The boy urged them both onward, away from the unnatural blizzard and army of wights. They flew south along the White Knife for a moment more before crossing the half-frozen southern of the river and turning west.

He looked down. The ground below them was a mess of deep green underbrush and water, brown and grey in equal measure. The bogs and squat groves of trees sprawled out before them. *The Neck,* he realized as Bran pursued some unseen objective.

In one moment they were high above the swamps, in the next they were flying through the gnarled trees and old, stagnant pools. It was warmer here, though winter still made its presence known. Grey mist slithered through the reeds and roots. Bits of ice clung to the edges of the deep pools. Elsewhere, dead and dying foliage fell to the damp earth. The whole place smelled of rot.

*This is an old place,* he told the boy, *and powerful. The trees here will remember much.* Was that why Bran had brought them here. Was there some power he had failed to sense until now?

As they flew across another bog, the Three-Eyed Raven saw dim, orange lights dancing like angry spirits in the mists. *No, torches,* he corrected himself as they drew nearer. They were attached to something far greater.

Dark brown towers rose from the gloom. They were sorry structures, made of wood and far from the proud stone towers that master masons had constructed in Winterfell. There were low walls connecting them, too; palisades of sharpened stakes with sticks woven it between them like some great wicker basket. Beyond the walls, a low wooden keep rose out of the earth. Bran gasped and the Three-Eyed Raven shared his sense of awe. Though small, the entire keep rested on a massive raft of reeds, peat, and old wooden planks. *Greywater Watch,* he knew at once. And then he knew why the boy had brought them here.

*No,* the Three-Eyed Raven tried to tear them both away from the vision. *We do not have time for this.* He strained to turn their eyes inward, to return to the army of the dead or the godswood of Winterfell. He was still too weak. Bran forced them both over the walls and into the yard between the various low huts of House Reed’s keep.

The yard of Greywater Watch was alive with activity. Smoke rose from a central firepit, whirling around the yard and rising to join the mists of the Neck. Two women sat on either side of a squat hut, weaving fishing nets and tying small stone weights to the frayed ends. Another scraped bits of
sinewy flesh off a drying hide.

His eyes continued to scan the yard. Men drilled with short spears and bows, preparing to fight the enemy that they hoped would never make it this far south. Boys collected the stray arrows and returned them to their brothers and fathers. A group of younger women was training as well. *She’ll be here, somewhere,* he heard Bran’s thoughts echo in their mind.

And there she was, practicing with her bow amidst the other warriors of House Reed. Gone were the mottled wildling furs, replaced by a dark leather jerkin, breeches, and a woolen cloak dyed as green as the moss of the godwood. Meera had grown healthier since returning home; her cheeks were fuller and her bearing stronger. Being home had made her stronger. Bran inwardly smiled as she loosed an arrow. The shaft found its mark in the center of the target across the way. She loosed another, then a third. All flew true. Bran made them sit and watch the proceedings.

The Three-Eyed Raven bided his time and allowed the boy this one folly. *Another arrow or two, then we must leave.* Yet he could not muster the strength to dislodge Bran Stark’s hold on their mind, so there they sat, watching the girl he had known prepare for war.

“Meera,” Bran forced the name from their lips. No one turned. No one had heard. The men continued to drill. The women continued to weave and work. The girl nocked another arrow. Bran called out again. She fired.

The arrow missed its mark and buried itself between two palisades. The Three-Eyed Raven watched her brow furrow in confusion and realization. She turned to where they stood watching. Her deep green eyes scanned the yard for the voice she thought she heard. A chill wind tousled her hair and whispered winter’s threats into her ear. She shook her head, dismissing the moment of hopeful foolishness, and turned back to her task.

The wind picked up, carrying the scents of the warm peat fire and the dying swamps beyond. The Three-Eyed Raven could feel the power in the trees beyond the small keep’s wall. The ancient singers of the forest called to him as they had his mentor. The memories gave him strength. With a silent effort, he forced himself and the boy from the vision and back to Winterfell.

Bran hollered his protestations as the Three-Eyed Raven drove him once more to the recesses of his mind. He ignored the boy.

Samwell stood over him, concern wrinkling his round face. “You were gone quite a while,” he said. The Three-Eyed Raven simply nodded in response. “Did you managed to find them?”

Another nod. “Ah, well, I’m sure Jon and the others will want to know what you’ve seen. They’ll be expecting us,” he sighed as he positioned himself behind the rolling chair and began to push.

Their journey to the solar was slow and unpleasant. Sam seemed distracted by thoughts unspoken. Twice, he drove the rolling chair into low stone steps. The impact rattled his weak bones, but not his concentration. The Three-Eyed Raven was still consumed in his failure to focus. The boy was stronger than he thought.

They arrived at the solar as quickly his condition would allow. He looked around the dimly lit room and found only a handful of people gathered for the council. Jon and Daenerys sat together at the head of the central table that dominated the space. Tyrion and Sansa sat closest to the window while Varys say hunched off to the dwarf’s righthand side. Ser Jaime sat beside the eunuch wearing a poorly concealed look of contempt. Missandei stood alone.

*So few,* he realized with odd pang of emotion. Some of their council had died on the field of battle. Others, like Bran’s sister, had yet to recover from their injuries. He could feel Arya’s presence,
weak though it was. He often felt Bran’s urge to watch over the girl. Still others were seeing to other duties, or had not been summoned by Jon at all.

Jon rose as he and Sam entered and settled themselves at the table. He noticed the faded map of the North laid out across its width. Carved dragons and wolves stood clustered around what he knew to be Winterfell. As many ivory figures stood off at the edge of the map. “Bran,” Jon addressed him, “how are you?”

“Good,” the Three-Eyed Raven answered. Bran wanted to answer in full, but he stopped the boy’s attempt.

“I’m glad you’re well, and strong enough to use your gift once more,” Daenerys said. “Your – Jon and I hoped you had discovered some news of the enemy.” ‘Your brother’, she was going to say, but that would have been a lie. He looked around the room. Surely, everyone here knew the truth.

“I saw them,” he said. The two Lannister men eyed each other and let out defeated breaths. Davos and Varys leaned in, the revelation of dire news capturing their interest. Missandei bit her lip and looked away.

“All?” the queen asked.

“I’m not certain,” he answered.

“Did you see him?” Jon pressed him for details.

“I did… and the dragon, and many others, tens of thousands.” The news sapped what warmth there was from the room. “He’s gathering the others to him, killing as he goes.”

“Where?” Tyrion gestured to the map with an outstretched arm. The Three-Eyed Raven nodded at Sam.

“Bran, er, the Three-Eyed Raven says he saw the dead beyond the White Knife,” Sam said as he shuffled forward and placed an ivory figure in the center of the vellum North.

“So, where we left them,” Jaime furrowed his brow in confusion. “Why would he stay put for over a week when he has the advantage?”

“No,” the Three-Eyed Raven corrected the man. “He’s moving south… and nearing the river’s fork.” The council members traded worried glances: Daenerys looked at Jon; Jon at Sansa and Tyrion; and Tyrion at Jaime. Jaime kept his eyes on the boy in the chair.

“South,” Jon sighed as he moved around the edge of the table and made to stand over the map. He traced his gloved fingers across the faded depictions of ancient keeps and castles that had stood through a hundred winters. “I had thought he would pursue us west to Winterfell, for the dragons and armies…” Jon thought as he spoke, “but south…”

“Will lead them to White Harbor, should the dead hold their course,” Varys concluded the thought. The solar became as silent as a crypt. They know what this means. The crackling fire provided the room’s only comfort, though to the Three-Eyed Raven it felt almost too warm.

“And how many people reside in White Harbor?” Daenerys asked the room at large.

“Fifty thousand at least,” Davos muttered aloud.

“Closer to eighty, I should think,” Tyrion responded, “with all the refugees fleeing the upper
reaches of the North.” The dwarf gripped his chair’s armrests, knuckles turning a blotched white and red.

“Eighty thousand,” Sansa said as she crossed her arms over her chest, “and Lord Manderly won’t have enough men to hold the walls against the enemy.”

“How many does he have at present?” Jaime asked.

“A few hundred of his own levies,” Jon said, “some he kept and others I sent back to defend the harbor in case of a southern attack.” Jaime nodded and looked away.

“Then we need to send him more men at once,” Sansa insisted.

“And how are we to achieve that?” Jon turned on her. He’s angry. Or scared. They all are.

“Our armies couldn’t stand against a fraction of the Night King’s numbers. I won’t sacrifice the rest of our men on another march.” His eyes flitted to the Three-Eyed Raven’s for just a heart’s beat, but it was long enough for him to know the truth of it. He blames me. And shouldn’t he? Now it was the boy asking questions. We failed. We almost got them all killed because we couldn’t see him. Yet he had saved Jon and his dragon, too. He had saved thousands, almost ruining himself in doing so.

Daenerys placed a hand on Jon’s shoulder and his cousin calmed somewhat, though he could still sense his pain and anguish. The Three-Eyed Raven remembered what he had told the man some days earlier: The realm is yours. Its people are yours. All of living Westeros looks to you. That was a mighty burden to bear. Jon could not carry it alone.

“We can’t let the enemy claim eighty thousand soldiers for his army, either,” Tyrion launched himself on his feet to stand by his argument. “Something must be done.”

“Send a smaller force,” Jaime cut the growing tension with a solution. “Some of the queen’s Dothraki, or perhaps the levies of some Northern houses.”

“Wyman Manderly is as like ta loose his arrows on the Dothraki as he is the dead,” Davos pointed out. “Perhaps… the remaining Knights of the Vale could ride south? Fifteen hundred heavy horse might just hold the walls of White Harbor, and they could make it there quick.” Jaime dipped his head in agreement.

“The Knights of the Vale have other plans, Ser Davos,” the Three-Eyed Raven said. At the edge of his vision, he saw Sam turn to him with a worried look.

“I’m afraid I don’t know what ya mean,” Davos responded.

“He means they’re losing hope,” Sansa stood as she spoke, in a mirror of Tyrion’s earlier gesture. “They’re planning to flee back to their own keeps in the Vale. Isn’t that right, Lord Varys?”

Varys’ eyes widened some, but he kept his lips sealed shut as he too rose to his slipper-clad feet. “I fear it is as Lord and Lady Stark say,” he sighed, “many of the lords and noble knights who rode northward to fight the Boltons are eager to return home. Such sentiments are common, of course, but I fear rumors of the enemy’s victory and Cersei’s southern exploits have only hastened their preparations.”

“And is there nothing you can do to quash these rumors?” Daenerys asked.

“No more than I could uproot that great weirwood with my own two hands, Your Grace,” Varys
replied, turning up his powdered palms as if to reveal his impotency. “Fear plants a poison in men’s hearts.”

“Fear,” Sansa said with a bitterness in her tone, “what sort of knight lets fear drive his actions? We should seize any man Bran says is planning to leave.”

“You cannot seize men for breaking an oath they never made, my lady,” Jaime asserted with a furrow brow.

“I suppose you would think that,” Sansa replied. “This is war. Sacrifices, be they of blood or honor, must be made if we are to survive.”

“Inviting a few of the Vale lords to stay in the keep might persuade the rest to remain in the camps,” Tyrion said with a measured tone, looking to Daenerys as he spoke. The queen’s eyes narrowed at the suggestion.

“Enough,” Jon slammed a fist down upon the map. The small, carved figures upon the map shook violently; some toppled over. “We need to stay focused on the dead,” he said, his eyes fixed on Daenerys but not meeting her own. The flames in the hearth seemed to roar their approval of his outburst. A log cracked loudly, sending embers flying into the air. “It will make no matter if we have fifteen hundred mounted knights if the Night King claims another eighty thousand men, women, and children for his army. And I cannot willingly order the Knights of the Vale to ride for the Manderly lands. If the dead are where Bran says they are, they wouldn’t make it.”

“So we abandon our bannermen to defeat and death at the hands of the enemy?” Sansa questioned her cousin.

“No,” Jon said simply, “we need to draw the enemy away.”

“To us, you mean,” Jaime said. “How?” Jon and Daenerys shared a knowing look.

Tyrion knew too, for he walked around the edge of the table to stand by his queen. “Surely, there is another way,” he said. “You mustn’t risk it. Send out the wildling scouts and rangers as we did before. The man Tormund knows them as well as any.”

“I’m not going to risk any more of our peoples’ lives,” Jon insisted.

“A noble notion,” Tyrion said, “but-”

“This is the only keep in the North that can stand against the dead,” Jon said. “When it comes to battle, we must fight them here, and to draw them here we need the dragons.”

“It’s the right plan,” Daenerys moved to confront her Hand.

“Is it?” Tyrion asked harshly, “I was at that battle same as both of you. The moment one of those corpses spots you flying on the horizon the enemy will turn his own dragon loose upon you.”

Perhaps not. He had seen the Night King earlier that evening, had felt his presence and the ten thousand tenuous connections he held with the wights. How long did we watch them? It had been long enough. Yet he did not see me.

“No,” he said at last. Samwell gave him a curious look.

“Ah, well even Lord Bran agrees with me,” Tyrion stepped back and steepled his fingers in contemplation of the argument.
“The dead will not see you,” he continued, ignoring the dwarf’s remarks. Tyrion’s steeple split and crumbled. “Not until you’re already upon them.”

“Are you certain?” Jon asked. He nodded. *I shielded myself from his gaze. I can protect Jon and Daenerys.* His cousin seemed lost in thought for a moment. “The eyes…” he said, just above a whisper, “that was you, wasn’t it?” He nodded again.

“No,” Sansa interjected, “Bran almost died. Whatever he did, he can’t do that again. There has to be another way.”

“There is no other way,” he told her. Another uncomfortable silence settled in among the solar’s occupants. Outside, the wind had picked up and begun to howl.

“So,” Davos spoke once more, “swoop in, burn the dead, and then what?”

“Draw him away from White Harbor,” Jon said again.

“And to Winterfell,” Tyrion finished with a bite in the words.

“To Winterfell,” Jon agreed. “I trust the preparations for a siege are going well?”

“The walls are certainly ready,” Tyrion said, “your men, less so. They’re losing hope, as we’ve just discussed.” He sighed and drew in a deep breath as if preparing for some great oration. “Give them something to long for, to live for, to fight for… or at least distract them from the coming storm. Do it soon.”

Jon and Daenerys shared another knowing look. The ghost of a smile passed over Daenerys’ face.

The council discussed the finer points of preparing for a siege and wedding feast, many of which seemed rather similar in the end. The Three-Eyed Raven grew tired and retreated to his own thoughts. *I told Jon I could help him. I will not fail again. I cannot.* Bran sensed his weakness and pushed against his thoughts once more, but he had enough strength left to silence the boy. The effort left him with an empty feeling.

Around him, the council meeting had broken apart and ended. The two Lannister men had already departed for their own quarters. Davos and Varys had done the same. Sam stayed by his side and Sansa made certain he was all right before departing. Then, Jon walked toward him and knelt by his chair.

“Are you certain you’ll be able to do this?” his cousin asked. Memories not entirely his own flashed before him. He saw Arya and Jon sitting side by side in the godswood, talking about something he scarcely remembered. Yet the image brought the answer to his lips.

“We need to trust one another,” he replied. Jon’s grey eyes widened for a moment, then settled back into their usual impassiveness. He placed a hand on Bran’s limp and useless leg and nodded solemnly. Then he rose, turned, and left with Daenerys.

Samwell escorted him back to his own chambers. The Three-Eyed Raven felt his concentration falter as his mind turned to thoughts of sleep’s sweet embrace. His sleep was seldom without trouble; the greendream with the flashing stars of blue and white came to him almost every night. Yet sleep restored his strength as well.

Bran’s emotional urges took over in that moment of weakness, and he forced him to follow Jon and Daenerys toward their own destination. He knew where they were going and went there first.
The door was closed and Lady Brienne stood sentry outside, but that did not matter in his present state. He entered Arya’s chambers. Within, Maester Wolkan tended to the room’s two occupants. Arya lay in her old childhood bed, with its mess of dark brown furs and light grey, moth-eaten curtains that were drawn back and tied to the posts. Gendry slept on a makeshift cot beside her, with his leg splinted and bandaged.

He stood by the doorway as the maester worked. Wolkan tended to Gendry first, removing old bandages and applying a freshly made salve and new layer of linens around the blackened flesh. The wound was gruesome, but the boy was strong. The Three-Eyed Raven could sense his fire even here.

His sister felt weaker. She lay still and silent in her Wolkan soon moved to her, unlacing her woolen undershirt to examine the great black bruises that covered her left side from breast to hip. Winterfell’s maester had done all he could to ease the healing process, but even he did not understand the wound itself.

The Three-Eyed Raven looked closer. Black and blue splotches marred the girl’s skin. Patches of greenish-yellow crept in from the edges where the bruises were beginning to heal. But there… Four long streaks of cobalt cut across her side. He touched her, he knew. He looked to his own mark and shivered.

Then he heard voices outside. A moment later, Jon and Daenerys entered just as he had expected them to. They greeted Maester Wolkan with tired smiles and tired eyes.

“How is she?” Jon asked of his cousin.

“Physically she is fine, but,” he paused to considered his words, “she has yet to wake, my lord. Whatever… magic these White Walkers command, perhaps some of it lingers within her?”

“And is there nothing you can do?” Daenerys asked.

“I fear I have little enough knowledge of these matters, Your Grace,” Wolkan explained. “Ravens, poisons, accounts, masonry, medicines,” he noticed the man’s eyes flit to Daenerys’ navel as he spoke, “these are matters with which I am more than familiar. I never bothered with the higher mysteries. The Tarly lad might be better suited for this particular area of study.”

“Sam?”

“Well, yes,” Wolkan said. “He has been spending quite a bit of time with your… brother, no? He may understand this northern magic better than I.”

Jon nodded. “I’ll speak with him then,” he said.

“Might I ask you tend to Ser Jorah before you retire?” Daenerys asked the older man. He could see the worry in her eyes.

“Of course, Your Grace,” the maester offered a weary smile as he gathered his tools, ointments, and herbs and made to exit the room. The Three-Eyed Raven remained to watch over Bran’s sister. Jon and Daenerys remained too.

They stood there in silence for a moment, waiting for the maester’s footsteps to fade in the gloom of the darkened halls outside. Then, Jon turned to Daenerys.

“How is he?” he asked.
“Not well,” she admitted, “but I know him. He’s strong.”

“Aye,” Jon sighed, “he survived greyscale. He’ll survive this too.”

“It was Sam who cured him of that disease,” Daenerys said. “You must speak with him about Arya. He’ll know what to do.” Jon looked to where Arya lay on her bed.

“She saved me, during the battle,” he said.

“I know.”

“And then she tried to fight him, And I couldn’t save her.” Jon blames himself, he knew.

“You did. She’s alive, Jon. And she will be fine. I promise,” Daenerys took his hand in hers as she spoke.

“Even a queen cannot promise that,” Jon mused grimly.

“She will survive, Jon. They both will.”

“For how long?” his tone was harsher than before. “You heard what Bran said. I need to keep my sisters safe. I need to keep my brother safe. I need to keep you safe.” His eyes fell to her womb. Daenerys nodded in understanding, but she did not let go.

“We’ll keep each other safe. Your siblings, and the rest of your family,” she pressed his hand to her navel. The gesture calmed him some. The Three-Eyed Raven saw a steely determination set in his eyes. Daenerys nodded toward the door. “Come,” she said, just above a whisper, “we’ve much to do in the morning. We both need to rest.”

The pair exited and he made to follow. We must rest, too, he told the boy. The Three-Eyed Raven could feel his own focus slipping once more. By now, Samwell had surely placed his fragile body upon the bed and lit a fire in the hearth.

He made to return to Bran’s body, but felt the boy’s desire to remain; to stay by his wounded sister a just moment longer. For once, the Three-Eyed Raven did not fight him.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve turned into Low Energy Todd (Sad!). I had some writers block for a few days and had to put this one off. If it seems like it has some jarring transitions in parts, that’s probably why. Didn’t have anyone review this, so we’ll do it live.

As for the chapter’s content, I was trying to depict how the TER’s experience in battle has weakened him enough for Bran to exert some more influence. Happy to answer other questions as long as they don’t totally spoil what I have planned.

Going to echo another writer’s notes and ask that people leave comments when they read this or any story that they enjoy. I don’t need people to stroke my ego because I have a team of associates for that, but feedback helps. I’ve made many alterations to the story because readers have called out things that felt off or didn’t really make
sense. So comment. And please clap.

Next chapter will be a new POV, followed by something I'm sure you all have been waiting for. See you in February.
First of all, let me provide a little more explanation into Bran/The Three-Eyed Raven. It’s not two people in the same body, if anyone was confused by that. I’m working more off of Aang/The Avatar template, where there is this powerful spirit that is a part of the boy, but also at times a distinct presence. Hopefully that makes things a little more clear.

He started every day with a scroll. Or a book. It did not really matter much as long as he got to read something. He had, well, borrowed quite a few works from Winterfell’s library and taken a few more from Maester Wolken’s tower on the southern side of the keep. They were histories mostly, but he enjoyed delving into the odd bit of herblore or what the maesters in Oldtown would have called “the higher mysteries” when he could find the time.

_Not so mysterious now_, Sam thought to himself as he rose from beside Gilly. _I’ve slain one of those mysteries, and the rest are in the godswood, camping outside the walls, or marching on us as we sleep._

He walked to his simple table and grabbed the weathered spine of the _Myths and Legends of the North_, a tome he had borrowed from Tyrion Lannister. He liked the man, crude though he sometimes was. He had a good mind for books and was always kind to Gilly where sometimes others were not. _And he knows how it feels, I suppose, being an unwanted son and all._

His thoughts turned to his own family for a moment. Such strange memories often came to him early in the morning, or else in those hazy breathes between wakefulness and sleep. His own father had cast his lot with the Lannisters and paid dearly.

War was cruel. He knew that, and he knew that his father was equally cruel. Perhaps Daenerys had done him a mercy. _She burned DICKON too._ Guilt weighed heavy on him, even though he had been hundreds of leagues away. His brother had been a boy when he left for the Wall, yet his brother nonetheless.

_An and what of mother and Talla?_ One was widowed and the other fatherless. With Lord Randyll gone and their armies scattered and defeated, who would defend Horn Hill? _I could_, he thought to himself. _I suppose I am the rightful lord…_

He pushed the thought from his mind. It did him little good to dwell on distant possibilities. Distractions would beget more distractions and before he knew it what little daylight they had left would wither away behind dark grey clouds. _The Long Night, they called it the last time_, he knew. _But I never thought they’d actually mean it as ‘night’_. He had always thought it a bit of poetry, as most legends were like to include. This darkness was unsettling. He did not like it. No one did.

Sam opened the large book to where he had left off the previous evening. He had been reading about the first Long Night, and how the First Men and Children of the Forest had united to throw back the White Walkers into the Lands of Always Winter. Each book he read had a slightly different interpretation of the events, but the basics were always the same.
Gilly had been with him last night, reading bits off the pages in a chair beside his own. He turned and looked at her just now, still asleep in their bed with a soft smile upon her face. Little Sam slept beside her, curled up in his mother’s arms. Samwell smiled at the sight.

She was not his lawful wife, of course. The boy was not his son either. *They’re as good as*, he told himself. What did blood matter? Jon was not truly Lord Eddard’s son. The man had claimed Rhaegar’s heir as his own and raised him in his own home and under his protection. *Why should it be any different for Little Sam?*

And Gilly… well, marriage to her would not rightly alter the bonds the pair had already made. She would not leave his side, nor he hers. They had faced White Walkers and wildlings attacks together. They would face whatever else came their way, from north or south. *I’ll protect them both."

Yet that felt like a lie. He had offered the boy as some sort of sacrifice to Bran’s – *The Three-Eyed Raven’s* – sight. It was necessary, yes, but seeing the boy cry and being the target of Gilly’s blame-filled stares did not hurt any less. *It’s what we need to do, though,* he always told himself to drive away the guilt, *we all need to make sacrifices.*

Sam looked over Gilly and the boy again as he drew his arms back in a morning stretch. His left elbow nudged something that moved only a little. *Right. The book.* He turned to find the page he had opened just a moment before he had become lost in the labyrinth of his own emotions.

His eyes scanned the first page, then the next, then flitted from own section to the next in search of useful information. There was little enough to be found in this tome. He closed it and sighed, though in truth he had expected as much. The Long Night had occurred thousands of years ago, long before men had learned to record their stories on vellum and paper instead of old stones. There was little enough to read from that time.

*But plenty to remember,* he thought as he recalled his time with Bran in the godswood. He was Bran and would always be. *“The Three-Eyed Raven” was just so,* well, *wordy. And he doesn’t seem to mind what I call him.*

Jon’s… *cousin* was still something of a mystery. He could use the powers of the Children, or those abilities that Sam’s books described at any rate: visions and warging and prophetic dreams. Sam had sat beside him as he looked into the past and discovered the enemy’s origins: how the Night King had been created by the Children; how they had imbued him with their own powers; and how he had turned the first wights on his creators before disappearing.

*And he can see the present as well,* Sam reminded himself. Bran’s visions – together with Little Sam’s bloodline - had given them the ability to track the dead throughout the North. Last night’s council meeting had proven the usefulness of his sight. *If he’s right, of course.* After the battle near the river, that was never a sure thing. The enemy was strong.

Yet Bran had insisted his own powers could now block the enemy’s in much the same way the enemy had blocked his own sight before Little Sam had stumbled into the crippled boy. Whether that was true… well, Sam had his doubts.

*But something happened the day of the battle,* he knew, for he had been sitting beside Bran in the godswood. Bran’s eyes had flashed white, then blue, then white again. His whole body had shaken terribly, then he had cried out in anguish and fallen still. At first, Sam had panicked, thinking Bran dead; but he had shown signs of life. Both Sam and Wolkan had stood vigil as the boy made his slow recovery.
He’ll be back in the godswood by now, he knew. The boy slept little and ate less. In fact, Bran had only consumed that disgusting blood broth for the past few days. It was Sam’s task to make certain the blood was fresh. Most of the time he just had the cooks and butchers spill a bit of sheep’s blood into a bowl, but occasionally he had been there when it happened. Just the memory of those scenes made him queasy.

Sam rose from his seat and retrieved his black cloak from the hook on the wall. It was the only piece of clothing he kept from his time at Castle Black. And only because it’s so well suited for a winter like this. The rest of his black wools and leathers had been lost somewhere between the Wall and Oldtown.

His thoughts turned to the Night’s Watch as he pulled on his boots and, catching one last glimpse of Gilly, made his way out of his quarters. He had once thought he would spend the rest of his days upon the Wall, first as a steward then as the maester of Castle Black. Bound by two sets of sacred vows, he might have grown as old as Aemon Targaryen while guarding the realms of men.

Those vows were as broken as the Wall, though. The Night King had burned the ancient barrier and Castle Black with dragonfire. He had claimed the Last Hearth, Karhold, and a dozen holdfasts as well. Sam hoped that Winterfell would not be next.

There was little enough they could do to stop him. Alone, the dragons were targets. Jon’s mission beyond the Wall proved that on its own. And we don’t have the numbers, the battle along the White Knife proved that. Skilled and fierce the Unsullied and Dothraki might be, but even the legendary soldiers of the east could not match the countless dead.

Sam stepped into the corridor outside the room. It was a narrow hall lined with ensconced torches that alternated every few feet. He crossed its width and glimpsed the dark grey sky through a window rimmed in frost. It was snowing and the storm’s cold air seeped through the window’s imperfections just as it did in his own room.

He turned, but had barely made it to the end of the narrow hall when a voice called his name from the opposite end.

“Sam,” Jon said in a flat tone, “I’ve been meaning to speak with you.” He seems as gloomy as the sky outside. Then again, he had known his friend for years. Jon was always gloomy.

“Oh?” he asked, his shivering body somehow adding an extra syllable to the question. Samwell Tarly had never truly gotten used to the cold.

“Walk with me,” Jon said as he approached, motion to the door Sam was about to push open. “I’ve some business on the walls.”

Sam pushed open the door and together he and Jon made their way down one winding stair and out onto one of the wooden causeways that connected the keep with the inner wall. Snow flurries peppered Sam’s face as they walked onto the wall itself. These walls were set down by Bran the Builder, he whispered in his mind. They were made of two sets of thick, ancient stones with brick and packed earth in between. And perhaps some ancient spells woven in amongst the mortar as well, he hoped.

All around the inner and outer walls, men prepared for battle. Stones were piled high at intervals, along with barrels of oil, quivers of dragonglass arrows, bundles of long spears and javelins, and plenty of oiled torches. Squires and young levies kept the walkways cleared of snow while older men – and some women - sparred in the yard.
“Do you really thing we’ll need all this?” he wondered aloud as they walked along. Jon looked at him and cocked his head. “Well…,” he continued, “it’s only that, at the Fist of the First Men they didn’t bring ladders or a siege tower, did they?”

“I wasn’t there, but I suppose not,” Jon responded, “but they’ll have giants with them, and mammoths, and-”

“And a dragon.”

“And the dragon,” Jon sighed.

“Do you truly mean to fly off on the green one?” he asked his dearest friend. The shock of learning of Jon’s true parentage had gripped Sam’s curiosity, and to a lesser extent, his envy. It could be rightly argued that Jon was the rightful heir to the throne. And he can ride a dragon!

“It’s what Daenerys and I must do,” he said, looking across the battlements to where the two great beasts slumbered in the low, snow-covered hills.

“Well, I know Bran will be able to help you,” Sam responded. They walked through the passageway of a small tower as they spoke. The tower roof gave them some cover from the snows, if only for a moment. Jon turned to face him.

“How is he?” he asked, concern evident in his voice.

“Oh… well…” Sam hesitated. Sometimes, telling his best friend the truth was easy. Sometimes it was hard.

“You’ve spent the most time with him Sam, you’ll know if something is amiss,” Jon’s storm grey eyes bored into his own.

“Not well,” he admitted, “he eats less every day. Blood, Jon. Bloody broth and nothing else. He’s like a tree in autumn; withering away before the winter.”

Jon gave a great sigh and turned toward the entryway. A small snowdrift crept into the torchlight of their enclosure. Sam watched the advance of the tiny white flakes whilst Jon watched the storm.

“It’s him. It must be him.” Sam’s thoughts raced to Bran’s flashing eyes, the burning blue mark on his arm, and the visions the boy had seen in his mind. He’s right. Something I’d only trust to you,” he spoke the words into the wind, but the wintery gusts carried them back to Sam’s ears.

“What?”

“My sister, Arya,” he turned and regard Sam once more. His eyes were solemn, but with some underlying tenderness that Sam thought he reserved for his family alone. “Wolkan says she is physically well enough, but something is wrong. She has yet to wake and he has done all he can.”

“She was struck, no? Wounded?” Sam asked. In battle, he knew, and against one of the walkers. He had seen the girl’s wounds, a great bruise and perhaps some broken ribs underneath. It had been over a week, almost two. She should be awake by now.

“She tried to fight him too,” Jon said, “and he struck her. She hasn’t woken, not once. I need you to find a way to fix this, or she might not wake again.” He put a gloved hand on Sam’s shoulder. Sam locked his jaw and nodded. “Thank you.”
What am I to do? He had cured Ser Jorah of Greyscale, but he had also had the great library of the Citadel to peruse back then. And now I have a handful of faded scrolls and dusty old tomes… none of which say anything about curing a wound from some ancient enemy. Still, he would have to try. This was Jon’s sister. And if Jon was once my sworn brother, Arya is my family too.

They walked along the next portion of the battlements in silence. Sam looked beyond the outer wall and saw the camps of the Valemen and Unsullied, subdued though they were by the snows. Black and brown tents stood in orderly rows against the rising fields of white. Smoke from a dozen cookfires snaked its way into the darkened sky.

In the distance, the ever receding Wolfswood stood against the western horizon. They drew more wood from the forest every day, though the teams of woodsmen were guarded by at least a dozen soldiers. Dark things had been spotted in the woods and many a hunter’s kill had risen against it instead of staying dead. Regular patrols probed the edges of the forest, looking for blue eyes in the darkness. Nothing in the North was truly safe.

“There was something else I wanted to ask of you,” Jon said as they reached the upper entrance of the Maester’s tower, which offer another covered causeway to the keep. Now Sam cocked his head inquisitively. “And you’re free to say no, if that’s what you wish, but I hoped that when Daenerys and I are wed that you might guide the vows.”

His jaw dropped; just enough for the cold air to pour inward and cause his teeth to ache. “Truly?” he asked his friend. This was to be a royal wedding – in dire circumstance and time of war, yes – but royal. I’ve not even forged my maester’s chain! “Traditionally, I’ts supposed to be the lord of the keep who performs the ceremony, but I’m certain Wolkan would be happy to, or Sansa perhaps, or someone else. And I’m not quite familiar with the Northern vows, or the words that need to be spoken, or-”

“I’d like it to be you,” Jon said simply. Sam dipped his head slowly, accepting the honor.

“Then, I suppose I’ll have to learn it all… and start calling you ‘Your Grace’.”

“Do that, and I’ll have you riding throughout the realm looking after every village wedding for the rest of your days.” They both laughed.

“Oh, alright, but I suppose its rather funny isn’t it?” he asked Jon.

“What is?”

“You’ve broken near every vow you swore, Jon,” he began to explain. He began to recite bits of their old oath. “I shall take no wife and hold no lands. I shall wear no crowns and win no glory. Only, you’re to marry Daenerys and lay claim to the realm.”

“You’re right,” Jon shrugged with a smile.

“And… you swore that you would never father children,” Sam said.


He raised both hands to calm his friend. “No, not Wolkan. Gilly,” he said.

“Gilly?”

“She’s been around expecting mothers all her life, Jon, up in Craster’s beyond the Wall and well… she saw. She knows. And she told me.”
Jon let out a long, low breath that signaled his understanding. “Well then,” he intoned, “might I trust you tell no one else of the matter?”

“I thought you’d be pleased,” he wondered aloud.

“I am,” Jon insisted. He did not look it. And of course not. We’re in the middle of a war with another waiting beyond the Neck. It’s not safe for a child or its mother. His thoughts turned to Gilly and Little Sam. He would do his best to keep them safe, too.

He looked back at Jon, and for a moment it felt as if they were far younger men keeping their midnight watch on the Wall with only braziers and conversation to keep them company. Sam remembered one of their first.

“And I suppose…” he hesitated.

“What?” Jon asked.

“Well, you do know where to put it after all.” Jon gave him a brotherly punch to the chest. Sam winced. They both laughed again.

**Jon is going to be a father... and a king.** And not just of the North either, for marrying Daenerys Targaryen would mean accepting his own claim to rule the Seven Kingdoms by her side. Sam considered his own position. After so much time together, Little Sam was as good as his; but might he and Gilly have a child together?

A low, clearing cough from down the causeway cut their moment of mirth short. Sam looked down the way and saw the two Lannister brothers shivering in their cloaks as they waited for the man who had appointed them to oversee preparations for battle on the walls.

“Lovely morning!” Tyrion called out, “I think.”

“Lord Tyrion,” Sam nodded his head.


“If you’re ready to review the defenses, Jon,” he said to Jon as he approached.

Jon nodded at the brothers and turned to Sam. “Consider what I’ve asked of you. The vows are simpler, the other…” he shrugged and looked up at the Maester’s Tower beside them. Sam understood and nodded. As the trio walked away across the snow swept battlements, Sam entered the relative comfort of Wolkan’s quarters.

The two-tiered study was a spacious room by Northern standards; rooms were smaller to keep heat sources useful and nearby. Vials, scrolls, inkpots, quills, and oddities of every sort lined the shelves. A small hearth cast its light into the room, aided by some four, fat tallow candles grouped together on the center table. They burned at various heights and seemed to Sam the towers of some sorry wax keep.

He pored over Wolkan’s tomes for the better part of an hour; or maybe it was two. He could not be sure. Only, every time he looked back at the candles, each seemed to be quite a bit lower than before. Bits of ash crept from the hearth as well, though some serving girl would surely tidy up after he had left with what he needed.

*If I can find it.* How was he to cure Arya Stark of her affliction? Might he ask Bran to look into the
past for a cure instead of looking into the pages of history? No. Bran was weak enough as it was and had to focus on the dead. This was his task.

Outside, the sky grew darker still as Sam searched the stacks of books and scrolls for an answer. The near-black horizon told him it was night, but the continuous growling of his own stomach informed him that it was only midday.

He continued his search, in vain, for any medical tome. There were a few that showed promised. Yet in the end they only addressed the healing of bruises and broken bones. There was nothing about fighting a White Walker. *And of course there isn’t! The last man to kill one of those things probably carved his thoughts on boulders.*

Sam sighed and resigned himself to the fact he would find nothing useful in the Maester’s chambers. Winterfell’s library and solar might prove useful to a degree, but any tomes and scrolls concerning medicine or herblore were sure to be in this very room.

This very room’s door swung wide open at that very instant and Maester Wolkan entered hurriedly, pursued as he was by a cloud of fat snowflakes. The older man looked up in some surprise as his kind eyes found Sam.

“Samwell!” he exclaimed, “I hardly thought to find you here.” The sound of his low, even voice soothed Sam’s anxiousness at his own failures.

“Maester,” he said as he climbed down from his perch to greet the man. “I was hoping to find a book to—”

“—to aid in the care of Lady Arya, yes, I expected as much,” Wolkan said. “It was I who suggested you might know more of the matter.”

“Oh…” Sam offered meekly. “I suppose…” he was not sure what to say on the matter, so he said nothing at all. He had another task as well. “Jon has asked me to join him and Daenerys in their wedding vows.”

“Ah,” Wolkan stroked his white stubble, though his eyes fell somewhat at the mention of Sam’s latest appointment. “A Northern wedding?”

“He didn’t say,” Sam said honestly, “but I’d assume it would be before the weirwood, as we’re in the North.”

“Indeed,” Wolkan said. He walked past Sam to a section of his shelves that was piled high with scrolls. He pushed a few of the higher ones up slightly and gingerly pulled an unseen book from its resting place. Then he turned back to regard Sam with a smile. “This is *Weirwoods and Wilds: The Faith of the First Men,*” he explained, “a curious title. Archmaester Radell was scarcely a poet, but you will find the proper guidance for a Northern wedding in his works.”


“Not at all,” Wolkan smiled. “And I would be happy to share what I know as well. Now, I suppose we both must make our way back to the keep. I’ve need of more firewood and candles. The nights come so quickly now.”

Sam helped Wolkan carry three days’ worth of dry wood back to his tower whilst a squire he had pressed into service followed up the rear with two dozen candles. Unlike split logs, there were not many candles left, but a maester’s work took precedence over the bedside comforts of lords and ladies alike. The two men talked as they walked, with Wolkan telling him what he knew of the
traditional Northern vows and whatnot.

After completing the task and earning Wolkan’s heartfelt thanks, Sam tucked the tome under his arm and then walked down the man’s tower stairs and out into the yard of the castle. Joyful shouts rang in his ears even as the harsh gusts of wind temporarily blinded him.

When he finally opened his eyes, he saw Little Sam dancing around happily, one flailing in the snowflakes and the other firmly grasped in the only full hand of Ser Davos Seaworth. Gilly stood nearby, her own newly made fur cloak cast over her shoulders to protect her from the cold.

“There you are! – Oh!” Davos encouraged the boy before lunging forward to break Little Sam’s fall with his half hand. The toddler giggled as if it were all some game, then regained his feet and began to dance about in the falling snow once more. Davos caught Sam’s eye and deftly hand the boy off to his mother before turning to meet him. “Sam Tarly,” he spoke in his regular, thick accent.

“Lord Davos,” he responded with courtesy.

“Just Davos, I think,” Davos said. “My own lordship is long gone.”

“Oh, very well then,” Sam said. They both turned and looked at Little Sam, just now leading his mother in small circles around the yard. His shouts echoed throughout the castle and many a squire and grizzled warrior alike turned and smiled at child’s wonder. Sam smiled too.

It was good to see him happy, away from Bran and the horrors of his old family. Whatever his connection to the White Walkers was, it need not trouble him anymore. Bran had learned to see once more without use of the boy’s bloodline.

“He’s a fine boy, yer son,” Davos said, turning and looking back upon the boy’s delight.

“Ah, well…” Sam offered awkwardly, “he’s not mine.”

“I beg yer pardon, then,” he said, “I meant no offense.”

“Oh it’s nothing, truly,” Sam assured the older man.

Davos nodded at the book tucked under his arm. “A bit of light readin’, eh?” he asked with a smile as he danced away from the previous subject.

“A book Maester Wolkan suggested I read concerning the religion of the North.”

“Red gods and tree gods and ice demons,” Davos mused, “I’ve seen enough in my time to believe whatever is written down in that book.” His certainty made Sam uneasy.

“I suppose it’s just the tree gods I’m to learn about today,” he smiled and shrugged, “Jon has asked me to wed him and Daenerys.”

“About damn time,” Davos said, a smile breaking across his face. He looked around the yard at the drilling soldiers. “This place could use some cheer, if only for a day.”

“A wedding?” Gilly had overheard their conversation and was guiding Little Sam over to the two men.

“A royal wedding,” Davos grinned. His eyes flashed between Gilly and Sam. Realizing he was standing in the way of a more private conversation, he dismissed himself while taking care to
affectionately tousle the toddler’s hair as he departed. They waited until they were alone to speak

“We should get married,” Gilly said, as if she were suggesting what to eat that night.

“Oh,” Sam sighed, “I don’t know.” Why not? A voice inside his head asked. We could do it soon, before the weirwood and all.

“Don’t know if you want to marry me?” her voice betrayed a curious frustration.

“No, no that’s not it at all,” he waved his hands furiously in denial. “It’s just…”

“Just what?” she pressed him for an answer. He did not have one. There was such much uncertainty, so much fear. What if we don’t survive? She closed the small distance between them and whispered his old oath back to him. “Where you go, I go too. Remember?”

And so they went, leaving the cold of the yard and making for the solar. There was no further talk of marriage, but perhaps that was because they both knew the vows they might swear had already been upheld in deeds. Sam knew the subject would soon arise once more. I have other things to focus on just now.

The solar was empty when they arrived, but a fire had been kept alight in the hearth as was normal. Sam settled into an armed chair that had been drawn up near the table. Gilly chose one of the wider and more comfortable seats and settled the child in beside her.

And so they went, leaving the cold of the yard and making for the solar. There was no further talk of marriage, but perhaps that was because they both knew the vows they might swear had already been upheld in deeds. Sam knew the subject would soon arise once more. I have other things to focus on just now.

Sam placed Wolkan’s book on the table and opened to the first few pages. He never imagined so much could be written about the religion of the First Men and the Children of the Forest, for so little was covered in the other texts he had read.

He idly – and delicately – flipped through each page; his boredom growing with each turn. Then, a colored illustration caught his eye. It was a carved face, unmistakably similar to the one on the weirwood tree in the godswood outside. Here, on this page, was everything he needed to know about northern wedding traditions. The vows were a bit different, yes, but more or less surprisingly similar to southern customs. His eyes consumed the accompanying text as fast as they could.

Sam noted with some interest the lack of mention of a bedding ceremony. Then again, that was hardly relevant here. Any man who laid a hand on Daenerys might end up as Drogon’s portion of the wedding feast.

He continued to read. And read. Every time he looked from the pages, the snowbanks on the windows stood higher and the fire burned lower. Gilly had woken half a dozen times and Little Sam had taken to blowing on the embers in the hearth. Each little puff of air produced a small jet of flame from between the burning logs. Our very own dragon, Sam mused before burying his nose in the pages of the book once more.

A serving girl entered the solar to place fresh logs on the fire, but Sam paid her no heed. He had delved deep into the book, far beyond the portions of marriage, vows, and traditions. He had found the pages that addressed the deeper mysteries of the North. He read them carefully.

For many thousands of years, the First Men of the northern regions of Westeros continued to practice blood sacrifice before the Weirwood trees. The unwilling victim’s throat was often cut with a ceremonial blade, and his blood spilled upon the roots of the tree in question. The First Men believed that offering living blood to the trees would earn them the favor of the gods, or else that blood was required to keep the trees and the gods within alive.
Lacking the iron and steel tools of the Andals, the First Men most often used copper, bronze, and obsidian – known to some as dragonglass – for their religious ceremonies. It is believed the use of obsidian derives from the Children of the Forest, who used the substance in place of forged metal.

Maesters and septons alike disagree on the underlying beliefs surrounding the practice, which had been outlawed for many hundreds of years. Yet it has been postulated by the more learned members of the Citadel that the First Men believed blood to possess healing and even magical properties – a belief shared by many eastern faiths and mystics.

He knew all this and more. Dragonglass killed White Walkers. He reached down and thumbed the hilt of the dagger he had always carried with him; the same one he had found at the Fist of the First Men. The same one I used to slay the walker that came after Little Sam. Even here, years later, he could hear the thin crunch of the White Walker’s icy flesh as he drove the black glass dagger into its shoulder.

Then it struck him. Of course! How had he been so blind? Dragonglass! The substance had magical properties, or at least broke the magic of the Night King. If he had truly marked Jon’s little sister, might dragonglass help heal her? Might it even draw the other’s influence like poison from a wound?

He slammed the book shut and stood up, his chair scrapping against the old stone floor. Gilly sat up with a jolt. Little Sam seemed unfazed.

“What is it” she asked in a daze.

“Nothing at all,” he assured her. “You stay here.”

He left the room and hunted down the serving girl who had just left, demanding she bring water, linens, and whatever herbs she could find to Lady Arya’s room. He went there at once.

Lady Brienne was standing vigil outside the Stark girl’s chambers. If truth be told, Sam had had little to do with the Lady of Tarth since arriving at Winterfell. He approached with caution and was met with a scowl.

“Tarly, is it?” she called out.

“It is, Lady Brienne,” Sam responded as he walked toward her. The knight shifted uncomfortably in her armor, one hand resting on Oathkeeper’s hilt. She seemed to grow taller with each step he took. He anxiously thumbed the hilt of the obsidian dagger once more. He had drawn the weapon halfway from its snug sheath at his left hip.

“And what is it you have there?” the lady knight jerked her chin at his right hand.

“This?” he brandished the jagged blade, “well, I thought it might help?”

“How will a dagger meant to slay the dead help Lady Arya?” Brienne scowled and Sam took a half step back. Thankfully, the serving girl arrived with a sloshing pale of water and bundle of crisp, white strips of linen cloth. Realization dawned on Brienne’s face.

“Jon himself asked me to try it,” he said. After a moment of awkward silence, Brienne allowed him to pass.

The girl’s chambers, like the rest of Winterfell, were grey. Arya lay motionless upon her small,
four posted bed with its curtains drawn back. Two lit candles flickered feebly on either side of the
bed, though their efforts were greatly aided by the fire burning in the small hearth.

Beside the proper bed was another bed, more of a cot in truth. Gendry lay on it, sitting halfway up
with his shoulders against an uneven pile of pillows. Three more candles sat on the windowsill to
his right. The man held a book in his hands. Reading? Sam had never known a smith to read. The
thought made him smile.

Gendry looked up as he stepped into the room and closed the door most of the way, though not
even enough to hear the familiar click of the latch. “Sam…?” he asked.

“Gendry,” Sam responded, the subdued tones of the room subconsciously quieting his voice.
“Reading, are you?” He did not recognize the work.

The man shrugged and put the book aside, though Sam saw him wince in pain as he moved to face
him better. “Not really. Davos says I need to learn, but I don’t know what good it’ll do,” he said.
“Still, better than doing nothing at all.” He nodded at his leg.

“I’d be happy to teach you,” Sam said. Gendry let out a quick breath that just might have been the
beginning of a laugh, but his eyes remained mirthless. They swept over Sam and found the girl on
the bed. Sam followed his gaze. “How is she?”

“Hasn’t moved. Hasn’t woken up,” he said grimly. “Don’t know what she thought she was doing,
go out there, going after that thing…”

Sam understood. I charged a White Walker when it went after Gilly. I stood between her and two of
my own brothers when they threatened her. Sometimes, people did foolish things for those they
cared about.

“Well, Jon has asked me to look after her.”

“You’re not a maester,” Gendry said.

“No,” Sam shrugged, “but I might have an idea.” He pulled the entirety of the dagger’s length from
his belt. Gendry lurched backward, then hissed in pain at disturbing his bound leg. “It’s fine!” Sam
assured him. “Dragonglass, see?” he offered the weapon to the man hilt first. Gendry took it.

“And what are you going to do with it?” he asked skeptically.

“Dragonglass has, well, magical properties,” he began to explain.

“What are you going to do?” Gendry asked. I’m not quite sure. In his mind, he had imagined
cutting away the marked flesh as he had done with Ser Jorah down at the Citadel.

“I’m going to help.”

That answer did not put Gendry’s concerns to rest and the man sat up as best he could, grunting in
pain as he swung his bandaged leg around to face Arya’s bed. Sam turned too and set down the
materials the serving girl had brought him. He looked down at Jon’s sister.

Her face was less full than before, when she had been a quiet but fierce presence in Winterfell’s
halls. Her dark brown hair hung around her face as the curtains did her bed. He reached forward
and pulled her woolen shirt up to reveal the old bandages that covered her outer wounds.

Wordlessly, he reached back to Gendry with one outstretched hand and felt the now warmed hilt of
the dagger press into his palm. Brandishing the blade, he delicately cut away the stained linens to reveal blotches of black and purple. *Like twilight on the Wall,* he thought as he continued his work.

*And there,* his breath caught in his throat. Faded yet familiar blue streaks marked her side. *It looks like Bran’s, but even worse.* This had to be where the Night King had struck.

*I have the dagger,* he told himself over and over again in his mind. If it could kill a White Walker, it could break whatever magic threatened Arya’s life. Slowly, he leaned forward and gently pressed the flat of the dagger against the mark.

He pulled away at once. Arya’s body began to shake violently, though no sound escaped her lips. It reminded him of Bran’s shocks on the day of the battle. He pulled back at once.

“What are you doing?!” Gendry lunged forward to knock the blade away, but he missed and fell to the floor. He cried out in pain and clutched his injured leg. The door swung open and slammed against the wall. Brienne entered, her sword readied to end whomever threatened her charge. Seeing that it was only Sam and Gendry still in the room, she lowered Oathkeeper, though her gaze felt just as sharp as the blade looked.

Sam fumbled for an explanation. “I was – she was – it-”

“You were hurting her,” Gendry growled from the floor. Brienne paced across the room and help him back to his bed. “Whatever he’s doing with that dagger, it’s hurting her.”

Sam raised the dagger with one hand and held his left palm wide opened as if he were yielding in a duel. “It’s the marks, see?” he motioned Arya’s exposed side. Brienne strained her eyes and examined the wound.

“That’s where…”

“He marked her, yes,” Sam said, “and it’s probably what’s keeping her from waking.”

“You should try again then,” Brienne said solemnly.

“No!” Gendry shouted, springing up from the bed once more. Sam looked back and saw the bandages about his legs were coming undone.

Brienne placed an armored hand on his shoulder and held him in place. “I’ve stood outside that door almost as long as you’ve been in here. Maester Wolkan has tried all he can. If we don’t try something else Lady Arya may not wake at all.”

Her words calmed Gendry some and he laid back in his bed. Whatever weight he had been supported fell on Sam’s shoulders. *May not wake at all.* He had to try again, no matter the pain he caused the girl. This was for her own good.

He turned back to Arya and pressed the flat of the dagger once more. Arya began to tremble again, though no sound escaped her still lips. Sam kept the blade at her side. The markings almost seemed to be showing a bit brighter against the bruised skin. The tremors grew more violent still and Gendry was up and out of bed once more, though Brienne held him in check.

An awful *crack* echoed through the small room. Sam pulled away and looked at the girl then at his dagger. A jagged line ran down the middle of the blade. As he held it up to examine further, one piece fell away and shattered on the floor.

Sam looked to Brienne, whose eyes were as wide as his own. They stared at each other in silence
for a moment before he saw her look toward the door. Sansa stood just beyond the threshold, wearing an accusing expression.

“What’s going on?” she demanded of Sam and Brienne.

“My lady,” Brienne stepped forward and began to speak.

“Jon asked me to try to help your sister,” Sam interrupted her. Sansa’s eyes lingered on Arya’s wound.

“It doesn’t look like you’ve helped,” Sansa said coolly.

“My lady, I saw it with my own eyes,” Brienne’s tone pressed the seriousness of the situation on her liege. “The obsidian shattered when it touched the wound.”

Sam looked at Brienne and saw… what? Fear? She had always seemed stalwart and serious before. Watching the dagger break had woke some lesser instinct in her.

Sansa stepped forward into the room. “It’s the maester’s care she needs, Samwell, and time to heal.” Sam thought that Sansa did not sound all that certain. She hid her grief well.

“Well, allow me to apply fresh bandages then,” he said. She allowed him that much, though he was not sure what linen would do against this sort of wound. He applied the cloth in short order and stood to exit the room.

“Samwell,” Sansa called out to him as he stepped into the hall. “Thank you for…” she could not put her thoughts in order. Sam nodded in understanding.

“Of course, Sansa,” he tried to smile. Then, he walked away.

I failed her. I failed Jon. Dread and shame weighed down every step as he made his way back to the solar. Gilly and Little Sam had left their perch by the hearth. The dancing flames and happily crackling fire seemed to mock him. He silently retrieved the book he had been reading and made to return it to the Maester’s Tower.

The snows had grown heavier since he was last outside. He found a cleared path across the yard, but to either side the snow was already at his ankles. Might be at my knees in the morning, he thought idly. After years on the Wall, he knew how quickly storms could bury a keep.

Luckily, his way was cleared right up to the lower doorway to the tower. Book tucked under one arm, he opened the door and entered the relative warmth of the lower room. Winds shrieked in the chamber above him and he hurried up the stone stairs to find a window opened slightly. The invading storm had already snuffed out four of the fresh candles and blown a growing pile on snow onto the floor.

Sam moved to close and latch the window, but as he did so a rattling quark echoed from behind him. A massive raven hopped forward and examined him with one coal black eye. Sam placed his book on a nearby table and looked over the bird in turn. There was a small scroll attached to its leg.

A message, he knew at once, but who would send a raven through a storm like this?

He reached for the bird’s leg and untied the scroll. The raven protested with angry calls, but made no move to evade his grasp. He turned into the hearth’s glowing light and saw the aquamarine seal pressed against the wax. It bore the print of a three-pronged trident. Sam’s eyes widened and he quickly broke the seal and read the message from the south.
Jon Snow and Queen Daenerys Targaryen,

My scouts and smallfolk have seen the dead not more than a hundred miles north of my gates. I’ve not the men to hold the walls nor the ships to see my people to safety. Help us, or we shall surely perish.

-Wyman Manderly, Warden of the White Knife and Lord of White Harbor

Chapter End Notes

I know you're all gonna be mad because I didn't have Arya wake up, but hey, I have a plan and I’m sticking to it. Save your tomatoes for the end.

We’re approaching some scenes and chapters that have been fermenting in my imagination for months. I’m honestly stoked to get there. Pacing in the coming updates will be faster

Next chapter will be a long awaited scene. I hope to do it justice!

Always appreciate comments! Thanks for reading!
Jon V

Chapter Summary

Daenerys gets a couple inches of snow.

Chapter Notes

Fair warning. I don’t usually write smut, but I also didn’t really imagine Jon and Daenerys spending their wedding night watching the Bee Movie, so I took another shot here. It’s ok. If you’re looking for some words to warm your pants, there are plenty of talented folks on this site whose work you should visit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Just the sight of her made him sad.

It hurt to see his little sister so still and silent where in his memories she had been full of life and laughter; tormenting Robb or teasing Sansa. That had been years ago, of course. Now, after years spent in the Riverlands and across the sea, she was more reserved. But she’s still Arya, Jon thought as he placed a hand on her bed.

He willed her to wake, to look at him with those grey Stark eyes and smile. She remained still, her small chest rising and falling in a slow and easy rhythm. He hated this; hated that she had been on that battlefield and hated that she was here now in this bed. Most of all, he hated the feeling of powerlessness that fell on him every time he stepped through that door to watch over his sister.

Jon had hoped Sam might succeed in waking her. His friend had failed. Worse, he had proven whatever evil kept her unconscious was tied to the enemy. No regular wound would shatter a piece of dragonglass. Perhaps only Bran could help her now. There was no one else within these walls with the skills, knowledge, or power to heal Arya Stark.

Maester Wolkan still looked after her daily, but the man had said he could do little more than treated the wounds themselves. He regularly applied odd poultices to the bruises and cuts. On one occasion, Jon had entered to find him treating two deep stab wounds on her right side. How she had survived that attack he could never be sure. But she did, he had told himself then. And she’ll survive this too.

He rose from his seat and looked her over once last time. Jon adjusted her furs a bit, then brushed a lock of dark brown hair from her face and placed a soft kiss on her brow. Would that I could stay a bit longer, little sister. Yet he could not. There was something else he had to attend to today.

The halls outside Arya’s chambers seemed brighter today. The torches burned with greater intensity and he could have sworn he saw the sun’s pale rays burst through the storm clouds earlier that day. That was folly, of course. It had been weeks since anyone had felt the sun’s warmth.

Not that he needed it just now. Winterfell’s heated walls kept the keep warm enough, yes, but his
own anxious thoughts burned and stirred his insides. In one instant his hands were cold and clammy, then in another he was seized by some odd sensation, like that feeling of dread before a battle where your heart sinks to your feet as its beating quickens.

He stopped walking where two narrow halls converged. A larger window, rimmed in ice and snow, looked out over a sliver of the central yard toward the gate that led out into the town. The men were still making preparations for a siege, of course, but there were other preparations being made as well.

From his temporary perch by the window, Jon could see it all. Teams of soldiers rolled up barrels of ale and wine from the winter cellars; the last of Wintefell’s stores. Scents of roasting meats wafted up from the kitchens as they had all morning. Fresh logs were being hewn and stacked high to feed the cookfires that would be burning for hours to come. Weddings always took a good deal of work.

_I’m to be married…_ The realization crashed over him again and again. _What would that boy would swore his vows before a Northern weirwood say now? Marrying a queen and riding a dragon and all._ He had gained so much over the past year or so: a crown and kingdom; a lover and companion; siblings he had thought dead; and the truth of his own mother and father.

Some nights, he lay awake long after Daenerys had drifted off to sleep and thought of his father. He tried to imagine Rhaegar Targaryen as he had been in life, but all his mind could conjure were wisps of silvery mist. When those mists parted, he saw Prince Aemon the Dragonknight or else old Maester Aemon on the Wall. Sometimes he even saw the Mad King – a shadow in flame - but never Rhaegar. Lyanna’s likeness stood in the crypts below the keep. He visited her from time to time, just as he did Eddard Stark. But Rhaegar? His sire was something less than a memory.

_And I’m to be a father as well._ Jon had spent many of those same sleepless nights considering names for the babe, or else imagining teaching his young son how to swing a tourney sword. The more he thought about it, the more he hoped for a boy. _And I shall be a true father to him._

No doubt many others would hope for a son as well, once they knew the truth. Daenerys was not a large woman and her condition was becoming more obvious by the day, no matter how thick the furs she wore were. Sometimes they stood in each other’s arms before the warmth of the hearth in their quarters, with his calloused hands feeling the soft well of her womb and her hands running over his deep scars as they so often did.

A great crash interrupted his thoughts and he pulled away from the window, his head snapping to where he had heard the sound. A door, made of some dark northern wood, stood ajar. Tyrion Lannister was pulling uselessly on the iron ringed handle, the wind from outside whipping his dark cloak about and tousling his hair as he struggled. Jon moved to aid the man and easily shut and latched the door.

“A champion of the small folk,” Tyrion turned to him as he adjusted his clothing, hair, and badge of office.

“I helped you close a door,” he said, bemused.

“There have been many a king who would have done far less, Your Grace,” Tyrion grinned as he spoke, “I knew one of them quite well, actually.”

“I’m not a king, not until this evening.”

Tyrion’s mismatched eyes flashed up to the grey sky outside the window. “Evening should be here
by midday, by the looks of it.” He was right. The world seemed trapped in permanent twilight.

“Well, how go the preparations?” he asked the Queen’s Hand.

“For your wedding or the war? I find both to be dreadful affairs.” Jon just stared at him. Tyrion’s smile faltered. “Both progress accordingly, but that’s not why I’ve sought you out.”

“Then why have you sought me out, Lord Tyrion?” Jon asked.

“It’s about this plan…” Tyrion was hesitant to continue. Jon could feel his temper slowly rising. He did not take well to having his battle plans questioned, especially when the recommendations were bound to be far worse than his own instincts. They had discussed this before. Of course, he’ll never agree. “You might consider leaving Daenerys in Winterfell.”

“And what? Have Sansa ride Drogon in her place?” he asked sternly. “No, Tyrion. We need both dragons in the skies above the enemy. We need to bring him here.”

“And what would that accomplish?” Tyrion hissed. “She carries your child and heir, Jon. If you love her – if you love your people – you will protect her.” As if she would agree to that. Daenerys had already expressed her displeasure with Tyrion’s recommendations for battle.

Tyrion was a clever man, there was little doubt about that, but he often tested Jon’s patience. In simpler times they might have grown into greater friends than they were, but these were far from simple times. Even after seeing the dead, he doesn’t understand. No that his protestations mattered much. He could no more stop Jon and Daenerys from doing their duty than he could force a windblown door shut on his own.

“Do you think I don’t know that?” Jon responded.

“If you bring the dead to Winterfell, we won’t be able to stop them,” Tyrion said, sounding exasperated. Perhaps, but what other choice do we have?

“And if we let them march south, they won’t be able to stop them either. I’d rather face a hundred thousand wights here than a million or more in the south. We have the Valyrian steel, we have the dragonglass, we have the dragons,” Jon paused to draw breath and lowered his voice, “and we have the best chance to end this war.”

Tyrion opened his mouth to respond, but seemed to think better of it. “I see,” he muttered, “well, I shall see you this evening then, Your Grace.” He gave up and waddled away.

Jon let out a long sigh and moved back to the window for a bit. Thrice Tyrion had pressed him for alternatives. There are none, he knew.

‘End this war’, I told him, he thought as he heard Tyrion’s footsteps fade away. If only I knew how. The answer was rather simple, really: kill the Night King. He’s protected by an army and a dragon… Jon had even tried to fight him in the battle, but for all his skill with Longclaw, he was no match for the enemy.

That enemy was just now bearing down on White Harbor, the largest city north of the Neck. Sam had brought him the raven scroll from Lord Manderly himself. If his outriders have seen the dead, then we must fly. We have no other choice. Karstark’s people had fled behind White Harbor’s walls, as had the Hornwood’s and whatever remained of the Bolton smallfolk. There were thousands of innocents at risk… tens of thousands.

The message had accelerated preparations, but the plan was still the same. White Harbor was in
danger, so he and Daenerys would ride the two dragons into the wilds and attack the dead. Powerful thought he was, even the Night King could not stand against Drogon and Rhaegal. If Bran’s powers work as he says.

He remembered those flashing eyes during the battle. And the way those ravens circled overhead. And that whispering voice… Perhaps Bran did not remember all that, but Jon did. Moreover, he trusted his younger brother, different though he now was. Together, they could draw the enemy away from Lord Wyman’s city. Together, they could defeat him and save their people.

Jon peered out the window once more. Unsullied marched by in thin formations while Stark sentries passed the time drilling and seeing to the preparations for this evenings’ festivities. He glimpsed Gendry limping across the yard, supported by a crude wooden crutch but determined to make his way around without aid. He’s a fighter. The thought made him smile.

Jorah too had finally woken and begun to recover from his wound. Broken ribs and deep cuts had kept him asleep for over a week – as had ample amounts of Milk of the Poppy. Yet the old knight still needed more time to recover from his battle wounds.

Jon turned from the window and wandered about the keep for good while. And what am I to do? The ceremony had been set for the evening, which left him with plenty of time before he even had to prepare for his own wedding. An anxious energy set him walking about the keep.

The hours limped by like wounded soldiers. He visited the kitchens, but was quickly ushered away by the old women who oversaw the preparations of food. “A kitchen is no place for a king,” she had said.

The walls were equally as busy, and after two full circuits he found himself too cold to continue. Mayhaps I’ve grown soft, he mused as he warmed himself by the great fire in the solar. I used to spend all night keeping watch atop the Wall.

He found other means to distract himself, examining in some detail the Stark tapestries that hung on the walls of the room. He could name almost every scene. Jon wondered what Targaryen tapestries might depict. He knew so little of their history, beyond Aegon the Conqueror and the few famous names of Westerosi history. Daenerys might teach me, he thought. He had not seen her since that morning.

The sun had long set when he once more glanced outside. The sky was black and starless. It’s almost time, he knew. Jon made for Sansa’s chambers, where he would prepare for the wedding while Daenerys readied herself in their quarters. It seemed a bit foolish to separate themselves now after having spent months together, but certain traditions helped it all feel, well, normal.

He reached Sansa’s door, knocked, and entered after hearing some muffled response. Sansa sat on a low cushioned chair, but jumped up at once after realizing whom had come calling. She quickly stashed her needlework under her bed and stood to greet him.

“What was that?” he asked with a grin, nodding at her bed.

“Nothing – needlework. It helps me clear my head,” she explained hastily.

“Might I see it?”

“You want to examine my needlework?” she scoffed. “I thought the cloak I made you might be enough.”

The ferocity of her response startled him. Perhaps this wedding has put her on edge. He knew his
sister had suffered greatly, being wed twice and treated poorly for years. It might have awakened old, unpleasant memories.

“Aye,” he responded softly. “Well, what now?”

“You’re to marry a queen, Jon,” Sansa said, sounding exasperated. “You must look a king.” I was a king.

Apparently, Sansa had thought his previous royal demeanor poor, for she summoned a gaggle of handmaids and other women to properly groom and ready his clothing. The padded armor was taken away and replaced with a fine doublet colored as black as the pools of the godwood. Jon tried to stand as another servant carried off Longclaw and his dagger away, but Sansa shot him a look. He felt half a boy again, being groomed for some feast where he would never be noticed.

He wondered what Robb would have said if he could see him now. He would have laughed. Arya would have, too. He imagined her fighting to break free and arriving at the godswood with bits of straw and snow in her dark brown hair. Such thoughts kept him distracted as the preparations continued.

After what might have been half the winter, he was permitted to stand and examine himself in Sansa’s silvered looking glass. Another knock at the door interrupted his appreciating of the women’s work.

“It’s Davos,” a voice called from beyond the door. “And it’s time.”

Sansa gave him once last smile before she fetched her needlework from underneath the bed and made for the godwood. Jon stepped out of her chambers and met Davos in the corridor.

“Looks like fun,” he grinned heartily as he watched the women hurry away around a corner.

“It wasn’t.”

“Well, this next part should be. Come, she’s already waitin’ for ya.” They silently walked through the halls of the keep, down a winding tower stair, and stopped briefly before walking out into the cold.

Jon left the warmth of the keep and walked across the frozen mud of the yard. The yard itself seemed to freeze as well. Soldiers stopped their activities to watch him pass. Hammer in the forge ceased their clanging. Even the shrieking wind fell silent as he passed.

He tried to ignore them all. Putting all his concentration into each footstep, he forced himself toward the stone arch that led to the godwood. Where I am to be married. His breath caught in his throat as he strode forward. Davos seemed to notice his second’s hesitation and placed his own half-hand on his shoulder.

“I’ve watched ya charge in ta battle against Boltons and a horde of dead men. Don’t tell me now you’re scared shitless of wedding the woman who’s shared your bed,” he whispered. Jon shook his heads to clear his thoughts.

“No,” he whispered back.

“Good,” Davos said, “then go.” He halted his own pace so as to fall behind Jon. He drew closer to the arch. And closer. He could almost see into the godwood now. And just there…

There she stood, framed by the silvery-grey stone of the arch. Daenerys wore a dress of silver that
seemed meld with her silver hair. It was a lighter shade, fringed with white fur with a collar of white to match. Gone were the chains, brooches, and other symbols of finery and royalty. Her hair was styled in a looser braid that flowed down onto the shoulders and back of the dress.

His breath caught in his throat once more. She’s **beautiful**. That was his only thought, and it echoed in his mind as he approached. Daenerys turned at the sound of boots crunching in old snow. She looked at him and, after her own eyes had flicked downward to drink in his appearance, returned to meet his gaze. She smiled.

Jon moved to her side, seeing more of the godswood as he strode forward. A path pressed into the snow wound its way through the grove, guarded on either side by twin rows of lanterns hung from posts planted firmly in the ground.

The crowd gathered just beyond the lights, all the way from the arch to the roots of the heart tree, by which they would be married. Jon had wanted the ceremony to include only his family and the closest of friends, but Tyrion and Sansa had insisted otherwise. The northern lords might have felt slighted if they were barred from the godswood like bastards from a family feast.

His eyes followed the path further to find Samwell Tarly, draped in a great black cloak, fidgeting nervously at the end of the path. Sansa and Bran stood off to his right with Ghost partly visible behind the rolling chair. Tyrion and Maester Wolken stood on Sam’s other side. Stark sentries and Unsullied lined the path at odd intervals, their shields displaying the grey direwolf of House Stark and three-headed dragon of House Targaryen in turn.

His heart fell as he noticed Arya’s absence among his family. She **should be here**, he thought wistfully, but there was little he could do now. **Tomorrow**, he said to himself, **and the next day. However long it takes.**

“Are you ready?” he heard Daenerys asked. He turned to regard those beautiful, violet eyes staring up at him. Her cheeks were windburnt and red, but she did not seem cold. She was happy.

**Am I?** He hesitated, feeling like a fool for a fraction of a second. Somewhere – as deep as the roots of the weirwood burrowed – he was still the Bastard of Winterfell, sworn not to marry or father a child. To be wed in the very godswood where he had spent countless nights crying as a boy was, well... he was not sure there was a word for it. A thousand ‘what ifs’ flashed through his mind and memory. His fingers felt cold.

Then warm again, as Daenerys grasped his hand in hers. She gave him a reassuring squeeze and turned to whisper. “Marry me, Jon Snow.” He smiled softly, looked at her, and nodded. Hearing her say his name always had that effect.

**This is it, then,** he thought to himself as they strode forward into the godswood. A hush fell over the silver wood as the pair stepped into the lanterns’ light. The wind rustled the blood red leaves of the weirwood tree, whispers broken only by the rustle of ravens’ wings and the muffled footfalls of those who had come to seek the blessings of the old gods.

Jon tried to keep his eyes fixed on Sam as they walked. Yet he could not help but glimpse at the assembly of friends, foreigners, and causes of frustration. Lord Glover met his gaze and attempted a smile. Alys Karstark stood huddled in her great grey cloak that hid the green of her dress beneath. She caught his eyes, but quickly turned away as her face turned as red as the leaves above. The young lords Cerwyn and Umber stood next to her, but the pair had eyes only for Daenerys.

His lip curved upward as he looked back at her. This was all ceremony, of course; something Jon had never quite mastered. Daenerys had. Her gait was measured and practiced. Her face betraying
only a hint of the joy her eyes had revealed a moment ago. He mirrored her movements as they approached Sam at the roots of the heart tree.

Other familiar faces greeted him as they drew closer. Edd attempted a grin as he caught his eye. Tormund’s great red beard stood out among the subdued browns, greys, and blacks of the crowd. His old friend smiled greedily and winked. Ser Jaime stood behind him, staring off into the grove as if the barren trees were far more interesting than the wedding. Many of the other faces were hidden in the shadows cast by the dim lantern light, though he knew some Vale knights and other lordlings were in attendance as well.

Jon did not have time to take it all in. He and Daenerys were fast approaching Sam. His heart began to hammer against his chest as they completed their silent journey and stopped before Sam. His throat felt dry and his hands cold and heavy, like good steel left out in the snow. He had felt this way before, just once. Knocking on her door whilst sailing North.

What he had begun there would continue here, just now. For as much as that had been something more than fulfillment of carnal desires, this was more than a simple ceremony. They were to make promises to each other; vows that both would keep as long as they might live. It was a promise, a truth known to only two yet witnessed by all.

I’ve sworn vows before and broken them, a voice not entirely his own whispered. Was that right?

Those had been different vows, to himself and the Wall and sworn brothers who had betrayed him. This – here and now – would be to the woman he loved and the child she carried; to his family and future. His eyes met hers and in them he found the fire he needed to burn away those creeping doubts.

Together, they turned and nodded at Sam.

His friend spoke with a lord’s commanding voice. “Who comes before the old gods this night?” he asked, voice echoing softly through the grove.

“Daenerys, of House Targaryen, who comes here to be wed,” Daenerys said loud enough for all to hear. That she would speak for herself gave some in the crowd pause, but only made Jon smile. She had shorn herself of her titles. Before Jon, she was only Daenerys, if only for a moment.

Sam’s eyes widened as he realized his study of the proper verse and practice might not apply when wedding two stubborn lovers. Jon saw his friend swallow before finding his voice again.

“And… who gives her?” Sam asked.

“She gives herself freely,” Daenerys said. That made him smile. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sansa smirking too.

“And who would wed her?” Sam asked once more. Jon silently thanked his friend for altering the traditional ceremony as he took a half step forward.

“Jon, who is of House Stark. He comes to ask the blessings of the gods,” he said.

“Daenerys,” Sam looked at the queen, “do you take this man.”

She turned and looked at Jon, her eyes bright, full of joy, and rimmed with unshed tears. His heart swelled. “I take this man,” she said, taking care to keep her voice steady and even.

Sam produced a long strip of ornate cloth and held it out. Jon instantly recognized the fine needlework. The cloth alternated between fierce three-headed dragons and proud, grey direwolves.
One of the wolves was a pure white with red eyes. He turned to Sansa for a moment. She was smiling.

“Your hands,” Sam tilted his head as he whispered. *Northern, I told him,* Jon mused. Neither had been expecting this particular detail.

Jon held out his left hand and Daenerys placed her right over it. Sam delicately wrapped the cloth around them, binding them together. He spoke to the crowd as he worked. “In the sight of gods and men I hereby seal these two souls as one, binding them together for eternity.”

Jon leaned forward and kissed his wife.

The quiet order and nobility of the godswood ceremony quickly fell to pieces as husband, wife, and assembled witnesses poured from the grove into the yard and thence to the great hall. Drink was already flowing and many of the men rushed to fill empty tankards with good brown ale. Steaming dishes of various meats had been set out along the tables, along with fresh bread and various lesser plates.

Bound by cloth and duty, Jon and Daenerys thanked the lords and commoners alike who approached them to offer their well-wishes and blessings. It never occurred to him the direness of the situation outside the walls. The war could wait for one night.

Someone bumped into his right shoulder and he turned to see Tormund walking by. “Slick as a baby seal, Snow,” he muttered into his beard as he passed.

The crowd parted some as they walked toward the high table and sat side by side. Sansa joined them a moment later, then Tyrion did as well. Sam guided Bran to a seat and Davos did the same for Gendry. Jon’s heart sank as he thought of Arya, alone in her darkened room. He wished she had been awake to see this.

Women from the kitchens served the choicest dishes to the high table. Jon laughed heartily as he ate, drank, and watched the joyous conversations in the hall… though it proved rather difficult to eat his cut of meat with only one free hand, with Daenerys’ fingers intertwined with his and their hands bound together.

The ale and remaining wine flowed freely through the hall. It was heartening to see his people happy. *A good drink can drive away even the deepest fear,* he knew. What awaited them all on the morrow could wait. *If only for a night.*

After a little while, Daenerys carefully undid the cloth binding and tucked the folded finery away for the time being. It was a fine gesture, but made simple tasks rather difficult.

The crowd grew louder and drunker as the night went on. Bards were brought in from the town – where smaller feasts were taking place – and performed for revelers. A table was cleared away to make room for dancing, but Daenerys seemed inclined to stay put. They were both content to watch.

A serving girl passed by the high table once more, filling Sansa’s cup then Tyrion’s in turn. His sister took a small sip, but his Hand greedily drain the silver goblet and called the girl back for more. When she had sated his thirst, she moved along to fill Jon’s goblet once more. Daenerys’ sat untouched and the girl hesitated for a heartbeat before moving along.

Jon looked at the finely wrought silver cup. *She’s not drinking?* They had shared wine at Dragonstone and on the ships, why would she… *No. Of course not.* His wife carrying their child.
His drink had muddled his thoughts for a moment. The child, though still many moons away from being born, seemed her chief concern in quieter moments. He often caught her examining her bare navel in the looking glass or taking special care to eat what the maester suggested. Apparently, that extended to her own wedding feast as well, for Jon found her silver plate to be full of vegetables, grains, and a few sweets drizzled in honey. His own was piled high with flanks of steaming meat and a winter yam lathered in butter and salt.

Her care only concerned matters of food and drink, however; for Jon knew that they would ride the dragons together to face their foe and save the people of White Harbor. She could be both a mother and a queen.

He looked up to find her already staring at him, smiling softly. He smiled back. They sat there in silence while their wedding guests drank and shouted and cheered. The lower tables seemed as distant as Dorne to Jon. Daenerys’ violet eyes sparkled in the torchlight, revealing a rare happiness and hope… and something else.

There was a hunger for something they were not serving at the feast. She looked away toward the door then back at him. Jon understood. *She wants to be alone. Just the two of us.* It was an appealing thought. He stood. The hall slowly quieted as he stood with one hand raised. Daenerys stood to join him.

There were a few drunken, boisterous shouts hailing the king and a few more calling for a proper bedding. Jon smirked, but otherwise ignored the banter.

“My lords,” he called out, “my friends. It’s not been easy, these past weeks and months. Winter has come… and dark things have come with it.” There were grumblings of agreement from around the room. The mood began the darken. “But we must never forget what we are fighting for. The North, the Free Folk, the Vale… for life itself.” The murmurs grew louder.

He paused to collect his thoughts, and found that the wine was giving him ideas he might not else had had. *It’s hope they need,* a voice told him. “It is for that reason that your queen and I will, on the morrow, ride the dragons into battle against the dead. With my brother’s aid, we will burn thousands of the enemy’s soldiers.”

A cheer went up from those who were too drunk to know what the plan itself entailed. The pair they were just now celebrating would risk themselves and their greatest weapons against the enemy in the field. Still, the good-natured banging of tankards on tables gave rise to a rising tide of cheers from the soberer members of the feast.

“You’ll need your royal rest, Your Grace!” a voice called out from the back of the hall. Laughter echoed off the walls. The calls for a bedding resumed once more.

“Ready your sword, Your Grace!” another man shouted to laughter and jeers. Jon raised a hand once more, but Daenerys moved to speak. He watched her swallow and raise her chin.

“We have asked much of you,” she began, “and we shall have need of much before this war is won… but I promise you, we will not fail.” Her pronunciation was met with good-natured cheers from the low tables. *Perhaps she is unaccounted to these sorts of gatherings, but she is a natural leader.*

With the royal couple’s speech clearly at an end, the men returned to their cups. The clattering sound of the feast rose like black smoke from the tables to where Jon still stood. He looked to Daenerys and reached out to take her hand in his. She smiled once more.
Jon turned to Sansa and spoke in a low, warm voice. “The hall is yours now, as is Winterfell come the morning.” She smiled, nodded, and took another sip of wine. Theirs’ was a well-practiced parting.

Without another word, they turned and walked to the door that would lead them to their chambers. Four Unsullied fell in around them; with two in front and two behind. Ghost rose of his hind haunches and padded away after the entourage. Everyone else remained in the hall, enjoying good food, drink, and company.

They quickly made their way through the darkened halls and back to the familiar oaken door. Jon pushed it open, then slammed his fist into the frame to stop Daenerys from walking into the room. Two dark figures were already there, their backs turned to the doorway. He was about to call for his wolf when one turned.

Oh… he thought, feeling a bit foolish at his reaction. A serving girl and a squire stood lighting fat candles on the tables and windowsills, to better light the room for this special occasion. They had lit the bright fire in the hearth too, and its light revealed a rising crimson color on the young girl’s cheeks as she saw the newly wed king and queen standing just beyond the threshold.

“Oh – my lord – Your Grace – I,” the youth fumbled for her words. The squire turned the sound of speech and began to blush as well, the rosy color rushing up his neck.

“It’s alright,” Daenerys assured the children calmly, “but this will do for now. Our thanks to both of you.”

With hurried mutterings of ‘beg your pardon’ and ‘Your Grace’, the pair swept from the room. The Unsullied took positions on either side of the door and by the windows. Ghost tried to enter, but Jon took a knee and whispered a word to his old friend. The direwolf sat upon the stone floor instead. Then, he closed and latched the door.

At last, they were alone.

He turned to face his wife, but her back was turned to him. Jon watched as Daenerys’ fingers nimbly undid the loose braid she had worn all day, letting her silver hair fall around her shoulders. His heartbeat quickened at the sight. She spun to face him once more.

“Might you…” she said, pulling at the silvery fabric of her dress and shooting him a wicked smile, her eyes shining with that same desire he had seen at the feast. He felt it too.

He closed the distance between them in a single step, pulling her toward him. Then he kissed her. On her lips first, such soft, beautiful lips. His hands wandered over her dress, feeling the soft swells of her breasts and curves of her hips under the material. More, some instinct drove him onward.

Daenerys was already fumbling with the laces of his doublet as he pulled away. With a few practiced motions, he tore away piece after piece of finery, finally pulling away a woolen undershirt to reveal a scarred, muscled torso. He saw her eyes fall once more to his scars. Later.

That familiar, wonderful madness was commanding his thoughts now. He grasped at Daenerys’ dress, with perhaps too much eagerness for he heard a soft rip. “In the back, Jon,” she laughed. He brushed the loose silver locks aside and hastily undid the dress’s laces. Daenerys did the rest herself, and soon the wedding dress was pooled on the floor, forgotten.

With a few more practiced motions, she slipped out of her own smallclothes and let the firelight wash over her body. His breath caught in his throat and his eyes greedily drank in every detail. It
was like seeing her undress for the first time, so many months ago on that ship. Then, as now, they disrobed with the urgency of a fur-clad wilding under a Dornish sun.

“I suppose,” Daenerys let the word hang in their quarters’ warm air, “that you’re my king now.” Not now. He looked at her and saw amusement play across her face. She smirked and drew closer, undoing his breeches’ laces and grasping his manhood. Oh. Jon shrew in a sharp breath then let out a long, low groan of pleasure as she stroked him. “So it would be only fitting that I bend the knee.”

Slowly, tantalizingly so, she sank to her knees, trailing kisses on his scars and chest on the way down. Her fingers grasped his breeches and pulled them down with his underclothes. Daenerys looked up at him with a playful glint in her eyes. Then, she took him in her mouth. Yes. The rest of his thoughts scattered.

He gasped, moaned, and whispered her name as she pleased him. Daenerys knew just where to touch him, just where to use her tongue to make him lose control. He closed his eyes, enjoying the bliss of his love’s attentions.

His knees felt weak. His labored breath came rapidly. “Daenerys,” he managed to say. Violet eyes met his, and he knew at once that he was powerless to stop her.

She quickened the pace. Yes. He was beyond coherent thought now. The pressure was building with every movement. Finally, with a barely muffled cry, he found his release. Daenerys finished him fully with her mouth, then gazed up at him with a passionate, devious look.

His vision was blurry and his speech halted. It took another moment for the waves of pleasure to subside. “I…” he offered a breathless word as Daenerys rose from her position to regard him. She placed a light kiss on his lips before walking over to the table and sipping from a cup of water. She offered him a cup as well.

Jon drank deeply and felt the crisp, cool liquid clear his throat and mind. His breathing felt more even now, and his desire only partially sated.

Without another word he cast the cup aside and took her to the bed. Between the fire and the multitude of candles, the furs were already warm. He gently eased her backwards - ever careful of her womb - and settled on top of her.

Then he was kissing her again, on her lips and neck. He felt her breasts pressed against his chest as her breath quickened. She began to move her hips rhythmically, moaning softly all the while. My turn. He trailed kisses down her neck, on her chest, over her navel and finally settled himself between her legs.

He smiled to himself before placing wet kisses along the insides of her thighs. Daenerys let out a moan halfway between frustration and anticipation as her legs quivered. He teased her for a moment more, kissing just around her womanhood before looking up at her.

Her eyes were closed in breathless anticipation of her husband’s attentions. He loved seeing her like this, not a queen or a dragon rider or a leader with responsibilities and worries; just his lover at her most helpless and most beautiful. She let loose an impatient moan… then gasped as Jon placed a kiss on her sensitive nub.

Jon Snow was not a man of many words, but here his tongue could express itself in other ways. He licked, twirled, and teased his new wife. He wetted a finger with his mouth and slid it inside, pleasing her in new ways.
All the while her moans grew louder and movements more erratic. She called out his name and some others words in a foreign tongue. Her thighs pressed against him from either side as she lost control, yet he continued his attentions.

He slid another finger inside that produced a long, low moan. Daenerys arched her back, inviting him to go deeper. The sounds of her enthrallment stirred something inside him and Jon felt himself growing aroused once more.

He quickened his paced and felt her squirm delightfully. Once small hand wound its way into his loose black curls. The other held the furs firm with a tight grip. “Jon…” Daenerys moaned, her body’s movements completely beyond her control. “Jon!”

The royal chamber was filled with sweet sounding cries and gasped Valyrian words as Jon pleasured his wife. After another moment more, he felt her womanhood tense and thighs shake. She let out another cry of ecstasy as her whole body shook. Jon held her firm and continued his kisses.

Finally, she lay back, breathing quickly. He climbed up from between her legs to lay beside her, his beard slick with her wetness. She sighed sweetly and moved into his strong embrace.

There they lay for a moment, with his hands exploring her body while she enjoyed the aftermath of his Lord’s Kiss. *King’s Kiss, perhaps,* he mused as he ran two fingers through a strand of silver hair. At last, she turned over and regard him with a loving smile. Her cheeks and neck were still flushed with color.

Jon’s body tensed for a heart’s beat as she reached down and grasp his manhood once more. “We still haven’t properly consummated the marriage,” she said with a hazy, smiling look.

His hand found the warmth of her womb. “I’m not sure that matters, Daenerys,” he said happily.

“Oh? So you’d rather not?” she asked, regaining that playful tone. He turned on his elbow and positioned himself over her, just as he had been a few moments before. He saw her swallow and meet his gaze with a look of passionate determination. He could feel his manhood throbbing with renewed desire. Her hand grasped and guided him inside her.

Husband and wife sighed as one as they joined. Jon reveled in the wonderful sensations as he slowly thrust himself inside her and began to move his hips in the way he knew she liked. Daenerys responded in kind, meeting his movements with her own and moaning in pleasure.

It felt so right, him on top and her gasping with every thrust. He loved her like this; writhing in pleasure and whispering his name into the night air. There was nothing like it, that sense of fullness and completion he felt while inside her.

He felt own primal instincts take hold. His thrusts grew as erratic as Daenerys’ breathing had become. She grasped her pillow with both hands, her eyes closed. Then he felt her tense around him and cry out. That drove him over the edge.

They collapsed onto the furs, basking in each other’s’ warmth and the heat of the fire and candles. Daenerys drew herself closer to him while Jon pulled the remaining furs over them. They lay in silence for a few sweet minutes, then he heard her murmur something sleepily.

“What?” he asked, keeping his voice low and quiet.

She strained her neck a bit to look at him properly. “I love you.”

That made him smile and his heart swell. Whatever awaited them on the morrow, tonight had been
perfect. The first perfect night he could remember. He watched her tired, naked form sink into the furs.

“And I love you,” he whispered. Daenerys was already asleep. He laid back and made to follow her.

He awoke to find that Daenerys had barely moved from where she had fallen asleep last night. Cold, grey light shown through the window. The room’s cold air brushed across his face, encouraging him to stay beside his wife instead of venture forth. The fire in the hearth had died some hours previously and all the candles lay sunken and extinguished.

Suddenly, the door creaked open and a dark figure slipped across the side of the room. The girl, Jon recognized the figure and face from last night. The shadow froze and stood up straight as she noticed Jon’s eyes on her.

“Your pardon, m’lord – Your Grace!” she stammered. He smiled at her to calm her nerves.

“What’s your name?”

“Lorra, Your Grace,” she said, red rising in her cheeks like a brilliant, rosy dawn.

“And you’re from Winterfell?” It was a king’s duty to know his people, everyone from the Small Council to the serving girls. Lord Eddard had taught him and Robb as much. No doubt Rhaegar would have thought the same.

“The Wolfswood, Your Grace,” she said, averting her eyes from his bare chest. She began to tend to the hearth, but continued to speak. “My two brothers marched off with your brother to fight the Lannisters. I’ve not seen either in years. My father answered your Lady Sister’s call to arms – he’s quite good with a bow - and when you took back the castle, father found work on the walls and me within them.” She turned and smiled, still blushing.

A fire sprung to life in the hearth. He could feel its warmth from here as the kindling spread the flames to fresh logs. Lorra moved next to the various unspent candles around the room.

“And you like it here, in Winterfell?” he asked.

“Oh, yes, Your Grace,” she said, “and if what the men say is true… about out there… it’s safe here.” Suddenly the room felt a great deal colder. “Do you think we can defeat them?”

The dead, she means, he knew at once. Jon was not sure. Marching into the field had proved as fatal a folly as marching beyond the Wall. Would their dragons make any difference now with this new plan? Would Bran?

Yes. A king’s doubts must remain his own, else his people fall into despair. “Yes,” he said with confidence, sitting up straighter in bed. He saw the girl’s eyes sweep over his scars, but ignored the look. She nodded slowly as she lit two candles on the windowsill. Then her gaze shifted to Daenerys, still sleeping beside him.

“She’s quite beautiful, the queen – our queen,” Lorra said. She is, he thought thinking of last night.

“Aye,” he sighed out. Rather unkinglike, he thought at once.

“Some of the men still don’t trust her,” Lorra admitted, her eyes shifting away in shame. “They say she’s the Mad King’s daughter, that she can’t be trusted.”
“And what do you think?” he asked the girl.

“She’s here, isn’t she? She came to fight for the North.” She did. “And she brought her dragons.” Lorra continued her work, lighting the other unspent candles and making sure the flagon of water was filled properly. Then, she made for the door. “Your pardon, Your Grace,” she gave an uneven curtsy and left.

The girl’s words woke some slumbering dread inside of him. The dead were marching south. He looked to Daenerys, just now stirring from sleep. They had been able to put it all aside for one blissful night. Now we must do our duty. For what good is a king who cannot protect his people?

He rose from the bed and moved toward the hearth. Our greatest weapon, he mused as he watched the flames dance about wildly. Jon wondered whether it would be enough. Would the power that brought him back from the void aid him once more? Or was that the purpose of bringing me back? To fight the dead? He had spent many an idly moment contemplating his own purpose, but these flames held as few answers as his own heart.

“Jon?” Daenerys asked, rubbing the sleep from her eyes and sitting up. He turned to regard his wife. Wife. Just the thought made him smile. Husband, lord, king, and dragon rider… He much preferred these new titles to the ones that had haunted his old life.

“We should get ready,” he said. She nodded. Looking at her, with her bare breasts and untidy silver hair tousled from a restful sleep, Jon wished that she could remain safe behind the walls while he led this sortie. And she would never agree. Together. That was our vow.

They went about their mornings with a certain mundaneness that stood at odds with the dire task ahead. Daenerys dressed in a warm fur riding dress and had Missandei weave her hair into a tight braid. Jon helped her into her armor before dressing himself in his usual padded armor and wool, but left his great fur cloak behind, lest it flap incessantly while flying. Before leaving, he set Longclaw at his hip and tucked his dragonglass dagger in his sword belt.

When king and queen ventured forth into the corridors, they found the keep to be in something of a sorry state. The drunken revelry had continued long after they retired to their chambers. It seems a battle has already been fought. Smashed tankards and cracked casks and barrels littered the lower halls and parts of the yard closest the keep. The evidence of a wedding celebration was only partly covered under a thin layer of crisp white snow.

The pair broke their fast at the high table, watching while old washer women cleaned up bits of animal bone, pewter plate, and a few drunken soldiers from the lower tables. When they had finished the eggs, bread, and stew, they made for the yard.

“Your Grace!” Tyrion greeted them from where he stood near the stables. “And Your Grace!” Jorah stood beside him, leaning on a crutch, along with Sansa, Varys, Ser Davos, Samwell, and Bran in his chair. Winterfell will be in good hands. Jon and Daenerys quickly closed the distance.

Jon glanced into the stables to find two grey horses already saddled and readied to take the two dragon riders to their true mounts.

“I’ve sent ravens to inform Lord Wyman of your impending arrival,” Varys explained, “along with certain assurances to assuage his fears.”

“Are we certain this will even work?” Jorah rasped. A familiar frustration began to rise in his chest. Jorah had not been privy to the council meetings, having been recovering in bed. Yet Jon noticed the glimmer of doubt in the man’s eyes. And concern for his queen.
“Yes,” Bran said simply. Jon looked into his pale blue eyes, searching for some hint of doubt that he himself felt. His brother’s gaze was as cold and implacable as the Wall. Somehow, that strength reassured him.

“Bran can see the enemy. He can see us, and he can help us,” Daenerys said, explaining Bran’s powers as best as any of them could rightly understand. Jorah nodded in acceptance. “And the longer we delay, the greater the risk to White Harbor.”

“Then let’s not delay any longer,” Davos said, whistling toward the stables. Two stable hands led out their horses. King and queen mounted them in a few practiced motions and rode off through the castle gates, through the town and camps, and off into the low hills where Drogon and Rhaegal rested.

The crested a low ridge, dismounted, and continued on foot. Soon enough, two massive shapes came into view. Rhaegal’s wounds had healed quickly – far more quickly than Jon had thought possible for any animal. It’s as if he were a piece of armor and smith simply added more molten steel. Drogon too was healthy, proud, and terrifying.

A flash of white crossed his vision. Ghost came bounding across the snow-covered hills to greet. Jon stopped to greet his old friend. “I’m not sure you’d enjoy this,” he grinned, scratching under the direwolf’s powerful jaw. “Run along and look after Sansa. And Arya. Keep them both safe while I’m away, will you?” Ghost blinked, then turned and sped away toward Winterfell. That made him feel a bit better.

Daenerys called him closer and the ground shook as he lumbered toward them. Panic gripped Jon for a moment. I can’t fly. He had ridden Rhaegal during the battle, yes, but that had been for a moment and only across a river, not across a kingdom.

His wife sensed his hesitation, for she turned and offered him guidance. “It’s no different than riding a horse,” she insisted before explaining all the ways that guiding a dragon through the skies was quite different. He paid close attention to the various pieces of advice she offered while repeating the Valyrian commands she had taught him weeks ago.

“Call to him,” she insisted as she climbed up Drogon’s scaled side and positioned herself between two great spinal spikes. He did, and Rhaegal lumbered over much as Drogon had. Jon removed a glove and placed his sword hand on the dragon’s snout, feeling the roiling heat underneath the hard scales.

At Daenerys urging, he slowly climbed atop his dragon and took special care when settling in on Rhaegal’s back. Lest last night be my last happy one with Daenerys, he mused while shifting in place. Longclaw’s scabbard bounded against his side. Jon firmed his grip on two of the spikes and looked to Daenerys. She was ready. So was he.

“Sövegon,” he breathed out the command, unsure of whether Rhaegal had even heard him. With a suddenness that almost made him lose his grip, Rhaegal reared up and beat his wings. Once. Twice. Three times now. Jon was buffeted with air and peppered with snowflakes. He closed his eyes against the assault.

When he opened them again, he was high above the Stark lands. The Wolfswood, stretched out below him on one side, a fool’s motley of deep green and pure white that went on for miles. Winterfell grew smaller as he rose on Rhaegal’s back. He looked beside him to find Daenerys atop Drogon, looking pleased but determined. He gave her a curt nod.

Together, they flew off into the darkened southern sky.
Chapter End Notes

I've obviously written a fairly grim and gloomy tale so far, so I hope people enjoyed this.

I figured I'd have some fun with the actual wedding and go off-script, since I doubt Daenerys would really give a damn what tradition mandated.

Unfortunately updates might come a bit slower. I have a very niche role at my firm, but when certain types of shit hit the fan, I'm on the team that cleans it up. This seems to be one of those times.

Anyway, leave a comment and let me know what you think!
Horn blasts shattered the morning silence. They sounded distant, muffled by the walls and scattered by the winds, yet there was something alarming about them; alarming enough to force Sansa from her bed.

What is that? She wondered as she hurriedly put on her black dress and wrapped herself in her great fur cloak. Have they seen the dead? Are we under attack? Her heart beat ever more rapidly at the thought. Jon and Daenerys have gone and we are under attack. She reached the door, then turned around to retrieve the small dragonglass dagger she kept by her bedside. Then, she left.

The war horns sounded clearer in the halls, and Sansa could not help but think she had heard those calls before. Cold air blasted the sleep from her eyes and stung her pale cheeks as she strode from the keep into the yard. She liked the cold, uncomfortable though it sometimes was. It reminded her she was home.

Others were emerging into the grey morning from their barracks, towers, and makeshift lodgings. Tyrion and Davos strode toward her from the entrance to the great hall. Both men wore looks of confusion mingled with concern. Tyrion raised an eyebrow as the horns sounded again. Further away now, she could tell.

“On the walls then,” Davos jutted his chin toward the stone steps a few paces away. The trio climbed the steps to the inner battlements, covered in a thin dusting of snow and ice, and looked out over the camps. Or what were camps last night.

The black canvas tents of the Unsullied still stood in orderly rows. She could see the edges of the Dothraki encampment as well, with its clusters of brown hide huts. Yet between them - where there should have been the horse lines, grey tents, and campfires – there stood only patches of frozen mud and old snow. The Knights of the Vale had gone.

The horns blew once more. “There!” Davos pointed to the southern hills with his full fingers. Tyrion peered through a crenel. She heard him let out a soft sigh.

A line of blue, grey, and cream clad soldiers was riding away to the south. Most of the army was already out of sight, their moon and falcon banners disappearing behind the white ridges of the hills.

Fifteen hundred knights, Sansa closed her eyes and scolded herself. We have lost fifteen hundred knights. Jon will be furious. She could not let this stand.

What would Cersei do? The thought sprung unbidden into her mind, almost like an instinct. She hated herself for thinking it, but considered it all the same. Sansa could not deny that she had learned much whilst kept as a hostage in the Red Keep.

“We have to go after them,” she said at once. We have to make them stay.

“And what, drag them back?” Tyrion turned to look at her.

“The Dothraki will catch up with them.”
“The Dothraki will only listen to Daenerys, who is not here,” Tyrion explained.

“Perhaps that’s why they left,” Davos interjected. Sansa looked at him, her eyes demanding an answer. “Well,” Davos shrugged, “they’ be fools to ride off when there were two dragons about.”

“They’re fools to ride off in the middle of a war,” Sansa said. *Fifteen hundred knights...* They had ridden forth from the Bloody Gate to aid her in reclaiming Winterfell. Bronze Yohn Royce and the others had been every bit the noble warriors she had dreamt of as a girl. *And they’ve left.*

*But no, that’s not right.* Lord Baelish had brought them north. They had not wanted to ride into winter nor suffer through the storms. *And with defeat after defeat...*

“Most like they thought themselves fools for staying, my lady,” Davos said.

“Word of the enemy’s movements must have made its way into the camps,” Tyrion said, “if the dead are south of Winterfell, then it stands to reason they might make for the south itself.”

Sansa let out a long, frustrated sigh that made a white fog in the air. “We should do something. We have to do something.” Her mind raced for an answer. *A letter to Lord Robin.* No. She doubted her cousin could even make sense of the words if she wrote them. *A raven to Runestone...? To what? Explain how I sent their sire to die in the snows?* She was loathed to admit it, but she wished Jon were back.

“We should continue to prepare this castle for war,” Tyrion said, gesturing at the outer walls where soldiers had broken away from watching the retreating army to continue their morning work. “There’s nothing to be done about the knights.”

“There might have been, if you all had listened,” she said angrily. “Bran saw them plotting this... this,” she swept an arm over the battlements to highlight the abandoned camp. “You said that wedding might endear them to our cause. Well... Good work.” She stormed off and made for the great hall to break her fast and clear her head.

Of course, it had not been Tyrion’s fault nor had it been Jon’s. *It’s mine. I got Lord Royce killed. I should have seen to that alliance. Was it her own stupidity that had lost her family fifteen hundred knights? Had she learned nothing of the world since riding south those years ago?*

She found a lone seat at the high table, her concerns still consuming her every thought. After a brief wait, a serving girl brought her bread, bacon, and a bit of dried fruit. She nibbled at the hardened brown crust as she ruminated on her failings. *Why does nothing go as planned?*

Then her eyes caught the spot. They often lingered there. *Where he died.* She could still see the blood pooling beneath Petyr Baelish’s fine robes. She could hear his final, pathetic, pleading words. He had betrayed her and her family time and time again. He had set the realm ablaze with his lies and schemes. *Yet he would know what to do just now.*

Baelish would have made the knights stay, she knew. Through trickery or threat or falsehood, he would have succeeded. *I executed the Lord Protector of the Vale. There’s no justice in the world, unless we make it. That’s what he told me. And what have I made? Another mistake? I should have endured his affections and attentions and used his power to protect my family. That’s what Cersei would have done.*

The thought of the queen left a bitter taste in her mouth. Her time with Cersei had been miserable, yes, but in the Red Keep she had been far safer than with Baelish or with the Boltons. She could not bear this hall or seat any longer. Sansa left the high table and made for the yard once more.
Winterfell was full of ghosts; shadows of cruel memories. She looked up at the main keep as she walked across the yard. There, that small window, was the room where Ramsay had tormented her for months. Who occupied it now she did not know. She did not care. She would have burned the tower to the ground it they did not have need of it.

And there were the kennels where she had left him to die. Mauled by his own dogs. Perhaps the world did have some justice in it after all. She had ordered his remains carried away and thrown into the river – just as had been done with her mother’s and brother’s bodies. She would not suffer his memory to find peace in her home.

Yet home had reminders of happier times, too. The room next to her chambers was where she and Jeyne Poole had spent countless summer days gossiping under the stern eye of Septa Mordane and her own lady mother. She did not like to think what had happened to her friend.

The godswood remained unchanged. Jon and Daenerys had wed there just a few nights past. She recalled with a soft smile the look on her brother’s face when Sam had presented the embroidered cloth for the handfasting. She had seldom seen him so happy.

And Daenerys... well... Sansa had never felt particularly close to the queen, though they had talked at length and dined together on occasion. Perhaps that would all change with time. She’s as much his family as I am. That she had insisted Jon not go to Dragonstone at all was another foolish decision, yet she would say the same today. Starks did not do well in the south. Though perhaps Targaryens do.

She continued her stroll across the castle yard. Under the low stone archway to her left, stairs sunk into the earth and led to the crypts that held her family. Father used to take me and Arya down there, she remembered as she passed the entrance. And introduce us to those Starks we never got to meet.

Sansa could recall the distant sadness in Lord Eddard Stark’s voice as he spoke of Brandon, Rickard, and Lyanna. Especially Lyanna. Now she knew why. And now he rests beside his siblings. She had not understood it all then, but she did now.

Even the happy memories were painful. Robb and Rickon were gone. Her youngest brother’s bones rested beneath Winterfell, but Robb’s body had been mutilated and lost at the Twins along with her mother’s. She thought about them nearly every night.

And Bran is frail and Arya... she did not want to think about Arya. Her only sister had not moved in weeks. Try as she might, Sansa could only cling to hope for so long. It seemed so cruel, to think them all dead and then have them all returned to her... only to lose them all again.

Only Jon truly remained as he was, walking about the keep with dark eyes, dark clothes, and dark moods. Perhaps not, though. Jon was not a bastard, but Prince Rhaegar’s son. A Targaryen prince. A king now. Whatever powers looked over the world had cruel senses of humor, for when she was younger she had scorned Jon as a bastard yet embraced Joffrey as her prince.

The shame of how she had treated him still clung to her, but Jon never seemed to mind. He always laughed at it all. His infrequent smiles were frequent reminders that he was her family, her blood. She still remembered the joy of feeling his embrace at Castle Black, that feeling of safety that only an old brother could provide.

I must keep my family safe as well. That was an older sister’s duty. That was a lady’s duty. There was little she could do for Jon just now, but Arya needed her help.
She circled around a growing pile of timbers that might – with some guidance – become a trebuchet and made for Arya’s chambers. She often sat at her sister’s bedside in the evening hours, as her own mother had done for her during a bout of summer sickness. Sometimes Gendry would be there as well, resting his leg or being tended to by Maester Wolkan.

The thought of Gendry Waters made her smile as she walked back inside. Arya liked him. That much was obvious. Of course she would fall for a bastard. Arya never wanted to be a lady.

He was a Baratheon bastard, with strong arms and a strong will. They said he used a hammer in battle, much as his father did. He was all that Joffrey should have been. Black hair and a golden heart, she thought. And Joffrey… golden hair and a black heart.

Sansa envied her sister her budding romance, but often wondered whether it would flower. If she wakes. If he survives. If any of us do… Even behind these walls, they were not safe.

She arrived outside Arya’s chambers to find the door already open. Brienne was not standing sentry, but a tall and armored figure was standing over the bed, one mailed hand resting on the upper frame. A great sword was slung across his back. Her eyes followed the blade to its hilt, then to the scarred flesh on the side of the figure’s face. What is he doing here?

Sandor Clegane turned and regarded Sansa with a curious look.

“Hello, ser,” she said awkwardly.

“The Lady of Winterfell,” he said with an odd half smirk. For once, he did not deny the knight’s honorific. His eyes danced between Sansa and Arya, uncertain and struggling to hide some softer emotion. “I’ll leave you alone with your sister, then.”

“Wait.”

She had never liked nor trusted Sandor Clegane, not even after he saved her from rape at the hands of the rioting mob in the capital. He had always been coarse, crude, and rude. He had kept those attributes even after arriving at Winterfell for a second time.

Yet she remembered his eyes that night, when Stannis laid siege and the Blackwater burned. There had been some veiled kindness there, behind the fear and doubt and cruelty. She saw it again just now. Sansa closed the door behind her. Clegane raised an eyebrow.

“She told me that you two traveled together, for a time,” she said, nodding at the bed.

“Aye, that’s true.”

“And you protected her,’ Sansa continued.

“Kept her from getting herself killed, for a time anyway,” he said grimly. “You’re fighters, both of you. Like that brother of yours.”

“Me?” she scoffed. Arya and Jon, yes, but I’ve never fought anyone… or killed anyone…

“Aye,” he grunted, “a fighter and a killer.”

“You’re… kind to say so, but…”

“No?” he laughed. “What happened to Joffrey then?

“That was Lord Baelish.”
He laughed again. “Maybe it was, wish I could’ve been there to see it. But you saw to Littlefinger too, hmm?” Sansa nodded. That she could not deny. “You remember what I told you once? The world is built by killers.”

She thought of Cersei and rumors of the Great Sept. She remembered Jon, covered in muck and blood, savagely beating Ramsay. She remembered Ramsay himself, and all his cruelty… The world is built by killers. Sansa Stark knew that to be true.

“Why are you here?” she asked suddenly and with a cold bite in her tone. Clegane looked unfazed.

“Just looking after her,” he shrugged with a single shoulder.

“No, why are you here. Why did you come to Winterfell?”

“Fell in with Beric’s lot, traveling up north to the Wall,” he explained.

“The Wall,” Sansa said, “you went to take the black?”

He gave another great, grim laugh that might have woken Arya, and for a moment Sansa thought he almost looked happy. “Take the black? Do I look like the type who wants to bugger myself with my own sword for the rest of my days? No.”

“Then why did you go?”

An odd shadow seemed to pass over his face and he averted his eyes. “That’s where we were going… There was a fire – a vision. I don’t know how to explain it.” Sansa followed his gaze to the fire crackling in the hearth.

“You had a vision?” She was reminded at once of Bran by the weirwood.

“Aye, in the flames. A mountain. That same one near where we almost got ourselves killed.” She had heard that particular tale, stupid as it was. Only Jon would deign to charge headlong into a horde of dead men and an icy wasteland. “Whatever it is Beric and Thoros worshipped-”

“The Red God, you mean?” she asked, remembering the tales of how Stannis burned victims alive to honor his deity. They had spread like wildfire in the days leading up to his attack on the capital. “You believe in all that?”

Whatever gods there were, Sansa did not bother with them. Nor did she pray. Prayers had not saved her in King’s Landing, in the Vale, or in the North.

“Maybe it’s a god,” he said indifferently, “maybe it’s just a bunch of magic fucking fire. Whatever it is, I saw it bring back Beric after I cut him down. They say it brought back your brother too.”

That’s true. Though it had been the Red Woman who did it, or so they said. Jon never talked about that and Sansa did not press him. If it was true…. well. Dying. She did not like to think about it.

“Whatever it is,” Clegane continued gruffly, “I hope it’s on our side.” With that, he looked to Arya one last time, nodded at Sansa, and then swept from the room.

Sansa found her usual chair and sat. Minutes passed in silence as she watched Arya’s chest softly rise and fall in a slow, steady rhythm. Nothing had changed in days, weeks even. Nothing would, unless they found some other way to cure her. No one even knows what’s wrong, apart from whatever happened in that battle.
She whittled away the time watching the fire slowly consume the pine logs. The heat that washed over her face felt good; almost comforting really. She thought about what Sandor Clegane had said. "I hope it’s on our side." He’s right. The Knights of the Vale have left. We need whatever help we can get.

Yet where would that come from? No southern army had come to aid them, Cersei had made sure of that. Nor did they have the gold or ships to bring men from Essos to fight. We are on our own.

After another long while, Sansa stood and left Arya’s chambers to tend to other business around the keep. It was already growing dark outside.

Darkness brought fear with it. Persistent darkness meant persistent fear; and persistent fear was rather tiresome. Sansa tried to keep herself busy. When she was not walking about the walls or watching over her sister, she visited the crypts or the godswood, where Bran and Sam sat watching over Jon’s and Daenerys’ journey southward.

She took her meals in the great hall, inviting northern lords to dine with her whilst trying to distract them from the fact that their king, queen, and fifteen hundred heavy horse were away. Their conversations were tiresome, too.

Even in the midst of a war, her bannermen could not help but bring up Jon’s royal wedding and her being unwed. Some offered sons and grandsons as suitors. Others offered themselves. She politely refused them all. No doubt many thought her beautiful, but the prospect of ruling Winterfell and the Dreadfort were just as attractive.

And yet, despite her protestations, the men made efforts to escort her across the yard or to her chambers, or else find ways to spend time with her. Tyrion was right after all; a wedding did provide ample distraction for the northerners: me.

On the second afternoon after Jon and Daenerys’ departure, Sansa found warm refuge in the lord’s solar. She had entered to find Gilly sitting by the fire, reading an old book to her son while he played with some crudely made toy: a wooden sword with a roughly made cross guard. Sansa bade her continue and sank into a plush chair while Gilly continued to narrate the history of Ser Duncan the Tall.

Sansa smiled as she watched Little Sam laugh and twirl and play. She liked children, annoying though they sometimes were, but had sworn off having her own years ago. Children had always been something of a threat to her ever since Joffrey took her father’s head; they were something a man might have forced upon her. It’s different now. I could have a son and name him Robb or Eddard, or a little girl named Catelyn.

Sansa watched the sky darken once more from her spot in the solar. It faded from a subdued steel to a cast-iron to a deep, foreboding black. Most of the men and women complained about how early the nights fell this winter. Sansa could not remember the last one – which had ended when she was just a little girl – but she secretly enjoyed the darkness. It felt honest, one of the few truly honest things she had even known.

Suddenly, she heard trumpets blaring in the distance, muffled though they were by the windows and walls. She looked at Gilly, just now tending to the fire.

“What was that?”

“What?” she looked up from her spot by the hearth, iron poker in hand.
“Those trumpets!” Sansa said. Little Sam tilted his head curiously.

“Oh…” she raised his eyebrows as they sounded once more.

They’ve returned, she thought at once as she made for the door, then the tower door that would lead her to the inner walls. At least, the true knight have come back. Not all is lost. Hope swelled in her chest.

Yet as the thick oaken door slammed shut behind her and the evening winds whipped her hair and heavy fur cloak about her face, she realized she was wrong. The sounds carried upon the wind were odd and foreign, like the buzzing of a massive swarm of insects. Her heart fell and she let out a long sigh. The Unsullied, she knew, at last recognizing the trumpet blasts echoing across the hills.

She looked out over the camps to the south, scanning the fading white hills and orderly rows of black tents for signs of drilling formations. There were none.

Instead, she saw a thin red line winding its way down a northern facing ridge. At first it seemed a blood red scar on white fur, like Ghost’s wounds from the battle. But no… Hundreds of tiny torches cast small shadows against the snow. Firelight glinted off sharp, black iron spear tips. Soldiers, she knew, and heading for ours gates.

As Sansa peered into the darkness, she saw spearmen garbed in robes of crimson, scarlet, and warm gold. Had the Lannisters sent aid at last? No. She saw no proud, golden lion banners fluttering in the wind. And Cersei would never do that. That was as certain as the sunset.

The odd buzzing trumpets sounded again, the Winterfell’s sentries answered with a cacophony of horn blasts. The clashing calls filled the evening air, back and forth as the crimson clad army approached. Stark soldiers rushed to man the inner and outer walls, readying their spears and nocking arrows on great yew longbows. She saw the inner gates slam shut.

Dothraki outriders and black clad Unsullied spearmen rushed to intercept the line of soldiers. Yet they melted away as quickly as they had approached, allowing the newcomers access to the winter town and keep beyond.

The queen’s soldiers trust them, Sansa realized. We should too. “Open those gates!” she called to the sentries gathering in the yard. After some incoherent shouting, she heard the creaks and moans of Winterfell’s outer and inner gates being opened to the soldiers.

The crimson army snaked its way toward the walls like some great, red viper. Sansa blinked her eyes rapidly as they came into clearer view. The torches and braziers seemed to burn brighter as the even ranks passed through the town, thence the outer gate. Some flames burned so fiercely that she could clearly see the pale, copper, and ebony skin of the soldiers. Certainly not Lannisters.

She hurried down the steps and swept into the center of the yard, long black cloak trailing behind her. Others joined here. Tyrion waddled out from the entrance to the great hall with Varys, Davos, and Missandei in tow. Tormund and Sandor Clegane emerged from around the base of a squat drum tower. Brienne, Jaime, and Podrick rounded in from the other side of the yard with at least two dozen Stark guardsmen behind them.

The rhythmic pounding of a thousand even footfalls echoed from the beyond the gatehouse. Ranks of spearmen poured through the inner gates and into the yard. The garrison watched with an odd sort of wonder as they passed through and filled Winterfell’s empty spaces, drawing up their lines along dirtied snowbanks and old, grey walls.
Sansa focused on the group closest to her. Their robes were a dozen hues of an inferno and their spears were forged so as to resembled a dancing flame. Dirks and short swords hung at their sides. Some held burning torches in their hands, but all bore marks clearly upon their faces.

_Tattoos?_ She knew the lords of Essos often marked their slaves, but never had she seen so many in person. Some of the spearmen were as black as the night sky while others might have been Unsullied or Dothraki. Her guards had no doubt noticed this particular detail as well, for they muttered under their breaths at the newcomers.

Then, a single mounted figure passed through the gate and entered the yard. She sat upon a stallion as pure and white as fresh snow and wore long, flowing crimson robes. _Or dried blood_, Sansa bit her lip for a moment to stymie the thought. Her hair – the same shade of red as her robes – was done up in an odd sort of riding bun. Her piercing blue eyes briefly scanned the yard and settled on Sansa.

_Melisandre_, Sansa knew. The Red Woman had been with them at camp when they sought to rally the North and drive out the Boltons. It had been she who had well… brought Jon _back_. Then, she had left. Jon had never said why.

_And now she’s come back to Winterfell, with hundreds of soldiers!_ It was more than Sansa could have hoped for. She started to walk forward and greet her guests, but a commotion interrupted her advance.

“You!” Davos shouted and stormed forward. She heard the rasp of cold steel as the man drew his sword and pointed it at Melisandre. Fifty foreign soldiers lowered their spears and advanced on the old man. The Stark sentries responded in kind. The yard grew tense. Sansa could see Davos shaking where he stood, though whether it was in anger or fear she could not say. The Red Woman, however, seemed unfazed.

“Stop!” Tyrion shouted, waving his hands wildly as he moved forward. Missandei followed him. Varys remained still and silent. “Stop,” Tyrion said again, “and put away that blade, ser. The Red Priests and their followers are friends of our queen.”

The uneven ranks of Stark soldiers slowly raised their spearpoints and withdrew. The crimson-clad spearmen did the same. Finally, Davos sheathed his steel and turned on Tyrion.

“Friends?” he spat. “Her?”

“They helped us keep the peace in Meereen,” Missandei said.

“And it was our lady here who told Daenerys to summon Jon Snow in the first place,” Tyrion said. “We would not be here if not for her guidance.” He turned to the woman still mounted on her horse. “You are most welcome here, Lady Melisandre.”

“King Jon,” Davos insisted, “and no, she isn’t. His Grace swore that he’d see her hang if she ever returned to the North.” _Hang?_

Sansa found her voice and walked forward to Tyrion’s side. “What are you talking about? Hang for what?”

“Murder,” Davos spat, “the murder of the Princess Shireen of House Baratheon… a girl not much younger than your own sister Arya.”

Tyrion’s eyes widened and he looked from Melisandre to Davos and back again. Missandei stood silent.
“And the murder of King Renly Baratheon,” Brienne said, stepping forward to join the growing crowd of friends and advisors. “Isn’t that so, Ser Davos?”

“Aye,” the man adverted his gaze for a moment. What is going on?

“Is that true?” Sansa finally asked, looking to both Melisandre and others for answers.

“She burned her alive,” Davos said. “And she would have burned Gendry there too if I’d not broken him free.”

“I have made many mistakes,” she said at last, slowly dismounting from her horse and joining her accusers on the frozen earth of the yard. “But I have not come seeking forgiveness, that is only the Lord’s to give.”

“Then why have you come?” Sansa asked coolly while moving to stand between the woman and Davos. Jon left Winterfell to me. I must lead.

“I have come to aid you in the fight against the enemy,” Melisandre said, spreading her arms to gesture at the ranks of soldiers. An odd red glint caught Sansa’s eye. A ruby. The large gemstone she had seen only a few times before was set into an ornate golden necklace… only this time it gave off a faint, rippling glow like torchlight through glass. “I have brought the thousand spears of the Fiery Hand.”

“As if they had a choice in the matter,” Varys announced from behind her. Another foe. She has as many friends here as I did in King’s Landing. The eunuch walked to Sansa’s side. She could smell the pungent perform wafting toward her. “Slave soldiers, my Lady Stark, bought as children and pressed into service. You’ll note their tattooed faces, marks of their station.”

I already have. She still did not trust the spymaster. And it seems I cannot trust this Red Woman either. She quickly looked around for guidance, and just as quickly realized she was alone. Home was beginning to feel like King’s Landing. Missandei wore a rare scowl and even Tyrion looked at a loss. Davos’ face was a red as the woman’s robes.

“Once, perhaps, my lord spider,” Melisandre said, “but no more. Kinvarra freed each man some months ago, just as she did every slave in Volantis.”

“Every slave?” Missandei asked incredulously. “How can that be?”

“Your queen lit her fires in many a heart, my friend,” Melisandre said, “and this winter has fallen heavy on the world, as have its snows. Across the sea, food grows scarce. Even slaves would rather risk their masters’ wrath than watch their children starve. Volantis burns.”

A slave rebellion. She had heard whispers of Daenerys’ exploits in Slavers’ Bay both here and in the capital. And it’s spreading.

“If Volantis burns as you say, how is it you made your way to Essos and back again so quickly?” Tyrion asked. The creak of old wood interrupted her response and Sansa looked up to see Gilly, Little Sam in her arms, emerge from the tower door onto the walls. Melisandre looked up too. Her eyes lingered on the straw-haired toddler.

“The winter seas are troubled and Westeros’ shores crawl with the ships of your kraken king, it is true, but Lord of Light blesses his most devout followers with fair winds,” she said, her eyes meeting Sansa’s once more.

“Sacrifices,” Davos said with a bite in his tone, nodding at Sansa. “That’s how she gets those
favorable winds, my lady.”

“We’ll have none of that here,” Tyrion said.

“None of your vile magic,” Davos agreed.

“My dear onion knight…” Melisandre sighed as if she were speaking to an unruly child, “it was my magic that brought Jon Snow back from beyond, or don’t you remember?” His eyes widened and his jaw grew slack for a heart’s beat. Sansa listened, curious. “No war has ever been won without sacrifice.” She nodded at Missandei, who averted her gaze in turn.

“Yes, but we’re not harming children here. Or burning princesses,” Tyrion insisted, his tone firm.

“Of course,” Melisandre inclined her head. “But then, you have already welcomed one who would hurt a child, haven’t you?” She looked at Tyrion and then to his brother. Jaime’s eyes widened. What is she talking about?

“You!” The estranged silence was interrupted once more with an angry shout. Gendry had left the keep and was limping across the yard. His will to move on his injured leg impressed Sansa. He’s rather strong.

“What now?” Tyrion asked with a mix of curiosity and dread.

Tormund moved to intercept him as he charged forward like an injured bull. “She took my blood! She tried to burn me!”

“So then you’ve tried to kill one of our men and admit to burning a girl alive,” Sansa stepped forward and address Melisandre. “You call yourself our ally, but I’ve only heard the words of adversaries here.”

“Then send me away, Lady Stark, and call up your other allies.” She knows I can’t, but I can’t relent now.

Perhaps I will, I see no reason to permit your continued presence within my walls.”

“What sort of fool turns away a free army?” Clegane rasped behind her. She ignored him.

Sansa looked at Davos – Jon’s trusted advisor and friend – and then Tyrion, Gendry, and even Jaime in turn. They all looked lost, eyes dancing between Melisandre, her spearmen, and each other. What would Jon do?

The Red Woman turned to regard her with a certain finality in her eyes. The piercing look cut right to Sansa’s heart like a dagger plucked from a brazier. The ruby set in her collar glowed like a hot coal. Sansa could not tear her gaze away.

Melisandre’s red lips parted… and she spoke softly, as if addressing an anxious lover. “Let me stay, my lady, and these soldiers are yours to command.” She motioned to the ranks of crimson-clad spearmen. “Let me stay, and I shall do all in my power to aid you in your fight against our one true enemy.” She paused to draw breath and the ruby glowed even brighter than before. “Let me
stay, Sansa Stark, and I shall save your sister.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy Tuesday! Don't have a lot to say here, but have been excited for this introduction for a while now.

Next chapter we'll return to Jon and Daenerys and see what's going on...
Daenerys VIII

Chapter Notes

And we are back! I appreciate everyone's patience. I also appreciate those of you who were more vocal in your impatience. You were polite, tactful, and a source of inspiration as I worked to complete this one.

It's not my favorite chapter. I've been slammed at work and I think my style has suffered because of it. You may find errors or odd word choices below. Forgive me!

Anyway, you didn't come here for author's notes, so...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She set Drogon down in a flat clearing just outside the gates of the city. It would not do to land anywhere within the walls. Daenerys doubted Drogon could even fit in even a larger training yard. Besides, the sight of a black shadow flying over the city would terrify its people. There was no need to incite a panic, for they all had enough to be fearful of just now.

White Harbor looked different from her last visit. The battlements bristled with spears, spitfires, and scorpions. Tattered aquamarine banners whipped about in the winter wind. The first few ranks of slate grey roofs were visible, but beyond that the cold sea mists off the Bite had shrouded the New Castle and Wolf’s Dean in white.

That odd white fog, swirling like some storm, had harried their flight from Winterfell. Not from the seas, though, Daenerys knew. It was the storm that heralded the Night King’s advance – or else the storm he created and drove before his terrible army. She turned to look off toward the north, half expecting to see those low clouds making their advance. Instead, she saw a far more pleasant sight.

The earth shuddered as Rhaegal landed beside her. Jon shifted uneasily on his dragon’s back. The sight made her smile. They had been a day and night flying south, through wind and snow, ice and darkness. Though the route wound its way along the frozen White Knife, they had often veered away from the eastern shore to avoid the enemy or else check on abandoned holdfasts and hamlets, the smallfolk having fled behind the walls of some keep or town.

Jon’s flying had improved drastically in only a day. Of course, she thought, it’s in his blood. Rhaegal was of a far more even temperament than Drogon and had taken to his new rider rather well. And, of course, he as good as saved him during the battle. They trust each other. That was good, for Jon needed to be able to guide his dragon’s movements if it came to battle.

Her husband clumsily climbed down from Rhaegal’s side and paced toward her. Husband, she thought. It was a beautiful word. The sights and sounds of her wedding night – far more pleasant than her first – echoed in the recesses of her mind. Beneath the heart tree, at the table, in our chambers. It had all be so perfect; a single moment of stillness in this storm that had engulfed her since she had landed on the shores of Dragonstone.

His grey eyes met hers but were drawn away at once by the groan of old wood. The northern gates of the city were being opened and a group of armed and armored men strode forth to meet them.
She recognized Ser Riles Amber, the captain of the city guards, leading the group. The older man had abandoned his fine enameled steel for warmer leather, wool, and fur. He held a torch in one hand and a jagged black dagger in the other. On his face, he wore a look of shock and concern, which he quickly hid.

Why? She knew the answer at once. White Harbor had called for aid. He had been expecting proper reinforcements. The Unsullied or perhaps other northern levies. They had only brought two dragons.

“Your Grace,” he called out, nodding to the king and queen in turn. “I’ve come to escort you both to the keep. Lord Manderly sends his apologies that he could not greet you in person.” Daenerys was not surprised. Even Drogon would have trouble bearing the Lord of White Harbor’s weight, let alone a horse.

She saw Jon fumble for a name out of the corner of her vision, so she stepped forward to address the men. “Ser Riles,” she began, “you have our thanks for your hospitality.”

“It’s us who should be thanking you, Your Grace. These are dark times indeed.” Then he whistled sharply and two stable hands emerged from beyond the gate, leading two sturdy looking mounts. “Best to ride to the keep, if you would,” he bowed and motioned to the horses.

Jon and Daenerys swiftly mounted their steeds and set off with the soldiers at their sides. As she passed under the raised portcullis, awful scents assaulted her from every side. The city stank of sickness, of rot, and of death. A cart rattled on a side street’s uneven stones, its back filled with linen-wrapped corpses. Foul water pooled on the side of the main thoroughfare down which they rode. No doubt some of the refuse had sat in the streets for days, for it was frozen over from the cold.

Further along, she saw dejected groups of men, women, and children sitting under the overhands of roofs or else huddled together against the cold mists that crept in from land and sea alike. A babe was crying. Daenerys turned her head at the sound and saw its mother. Just a girl… with a pale face and hollow eyes, slowly rocking the bundle of soiled cloth back and forth.

Jon looked at her, concern writ plain on his face. Ser Riles had noticed it too, for he began to explain. “Refugees from the northern lands,” he said, “we’ve not enough room to house them all nor the food to feed so many.”

Her heart caught in her throat as the babe cried again. These are my people. Yet even as she thought it, her mind drifted to the child now growing in her womb.

“Stop,” she commanded the soldiers. With a loose precision, the clanking of steel settled into silence as the soldiers drew up their ranks and halted. Daenerys shifted in the saddle and deftly dismounted, her boots landing in a half-frozen puddle of filthy water. She walked over to the young mother. The girl averted her eyes.

Daenerys knelt and placed a hand on her elbow. Slowly, the young mother looked up. Her child did, too. It had stopped crying for a moment.

“We beg your pardon, my lady,” a young man who must have been her father shuffled forward and wrapped his family in his skinny arms. “My daughter’s hungry and food’s not been easy to come by.”

She looked into the mother’s eyes and recognized a quiet, pleading desperation. Then the child cooed and giggled, her tiny hand closing around a stray lock of silver hair. Such innocence and
wonder forced a ragged breath from her lungs, but the queen held her emotions in check. *I must be their strength.*

“Hello, little one,” she said softly, smiling back at the babe. The mother began to slowly rock her back and forth. “Does she have a name?”

“I’ve…” the girl hesitated, “I’ve not yet named her, my lady… in case, well…” she fought back tears. Her husband held them tighter.

*We’ve not come to save this city only to have children starve in the streets.* She turned to Jon and the others. “Have you nothing to give them?” she demanded of the captain and his men. He shifted awkwardly.

“It’s as I said, Your Grace,” Ser Riles began to explain, “the refugees from the Karstark and Hornwood lands, fleeing the dead. There are too many.”

“They shall have our chambers then, with proper food and bedding and whatever else you’ve prepared for us,” she proclaimed at once. “You shall see them there.”

“Your chambers… in the keep?” the captain seemed shocked at the decision.

“Yes,” she insisted, “we’ve only come to speak with your lord. We’ll not have need of them.”

He looked at once to his men, then to Jon. Her husband remained still and silent, though she thought she saw the ghost of a smile upon his face.

At once, the soldiers hurried about, helping the destitute family up. They joined the slow column as it wound its way through more crowded streets. Daenerys’ heart sank as she saw just how many suffered. There was only one way to help them all: defeat the dead.

Mercifully, they arrived at the gates of the New Castle and dismounted in the yard. Even here, makeshift barracks had been set up to house any northern man who could hold a spear. Daenerys watched two sentries usher the young family away through a tower door. She hoped warm food and a hot fire would give them the strength they needed to survive.

Jon and Daenerys were guided through large oak doors into the Merman’s Court, a long white hall that ended with the Lord of White Harbor himself slumped upon his high seat, his wool-clad rolls threatening to spill over the high sides of the finely crafted armrests.

“My lord,” Wyman Manderly called out from his seat, “and Your Grace. I welcome you once more to my city and hall.”

“Yours is the first keep aside from Winterfell that we’ve visited since our wedding,” Daenerys said. Their host’s eyes widened slightly and his pupils flitted between her and Jon’s eyes.

“Wedding? Well…” he paused, “of course! You must accept my congratulations, then. It is good to have pleasant tidings in such dark times. Dark times indeed. Those were dark words I sent to Winterfell some days passed, and my scouts bring me still darker news every day. These dead men – one hundred thousand they say – make for my city. I had hoped you’d bring more men to defend it…”

His half-accusation hung in the air between them.

“The dead are too numerous to meet in the field,” Jon began to explain.
“So I’d heard…” Lord Manderly muttered, “then what do you propose? I’ve fewer than four thousand men to hold my walls, and half of them are too weak to don proper armor or hold a spear. If it comes to battle or a siege, White Harbor wouldn’t last a single night, even as long as they are now.”

“There shall be no battle here, my lord,” Daenerys said. His full face turned to regard her.

“No?”

“No. It is our intention to draw the dead away from your city,” she said.

“I see…” he mused, stroking his great white whiskers. “How?”

“We rode here on two dragons,” Jon said, “we’ll fly them to attack the enemy and draw him away from your walls. He’ll pursue the greater threat.”

Wyman Manderly’s eyes narrowed curiously at the mention of her dragons. “Rode, you say? Both of you?”

Jon and Daenerys exchanged a knowing look. She stepped forward once more. “Yes,” she said with a certain finality that seemed to jostle their host’s thoughts.

“Of course, of course,” he said, waving his hand side to side as if to brush away the matter. *But he hasn’t*. Daenerys could see it in his eyes. “And you believe these one hundred thousand corpses will follow you…?”

“To Winterfell, aye,” Jon finished his thought.

“Where our armies will face them on the walls. The castle is already being prepared for siege,” Daenerys added. *And if we succeed in this plan? What next?*

Their host was of the same mind, for when he next spoke his town betrayed a certain skepticism. “You’ll forgive me my ignorance of our foe, but Winterfell’s walls are not much stronger than mine own. If this plan of yours goes awry, what then?”

“Winterfell,” Jon said as he took a half step forward, “is the best suited to battle the dead. We have the North’s and queen’s armies, we have the dragonglass, and we have the dragons. On the walls, the dead’s numbers will count for nothing, as it was when Mance Rayder marched on the Wall.”

Wyman Manderly looked unconvinced, but even so he nodded slowly and spoke. “You have my thanks, then, both of you. There are not many rulers who would so willing throw themselves into harm’s way for their people,” he said. “Though, I suppose your father could be counted among that small number,” he smiled sadly at Jon.

“Your people – our people – still remain in harm’s way even within your walls, my lord,” Daenerys said, thinking of that gaunt girl and her child.

To his credit, Lord Wyman dipped his head in shame. “I know it,” he muttered just loud enough for her to hear. “It’s as I said. Tens of thousands of smallfolk have flooded my city like waves off a summer squall. We stopped sending food north to your keep when the roads grew to wild, but still I’ve not enough to feed them nor the roofs to put them under. Even the ships moored in the Bite are full.”

“Any roof will do,” she said simply, remembering flashes of her own childhood after Viserys had sold their mother’s crown for bread. *We slept in sewers and alleys, his arm around me holding me*
close. It was a lifetime ago, but still she knew the comfort a simple shelter could bring. “Find them homes. Get them off the streets. These are my people as they are yours.”

“Very well,” Lord Wyman said, though he still looked uncertain. “Then I shall see to it. Silver to Essos in exchange for grain, perhaps. Though we may need to empty some of the ships. You have my word, and my hospitality as long as you had need of it, thought I suppose that won’t be long at all.”

“No,” Jon said, “though a warm meal would be welcome. As would the latest reports from your scouts.”

Lord Wyman nodded again, then unraveled his chin and gave a shout. “Amber! Boy! Come here!” From around a darkened corner a well-built boy with short-cropped blonde hair stepped forth. He had familiar grey eyes. “My Captain’s own son, and my squire,” Lord Wyman gestured at the youth, his arm’s girth jiggling under the fine fabric. “Fetch us food and your father.”

The squire nodded wordlessly and hurried away. With great effort, their host brought himself to his feet and beckoned them down a narrow hall and into his solar. It was far larger than Winterfell’s and Daenerys’ eyes noticed the large map of the North painted upon the far wall.

They all took seats around a large, crackling fire in the solar’s hearth. Lord Wyman’s squire returned with his father and flagon of ale. Neither she nor Jon partook of the drink. "We need our wits about us. Not that she had partaken of any drink since Winterfell’s maester had revealed that one wonderful truth.

Over a hearty meal of winter crab, bread, and some odd, white fish Daenerys did not recognize, the king and queen discussed the reports with the lord and his captain. Daenerys learned where the dead had been seen last – some forty miles north of the city as the raven flies– and what landmarks along the river bank might provide guidance through the chill mists.

More than once, Daenerys caught the young squire looking her way. The lad blushed and he averted his gaze. A squire, but just a boy really. No more a warrior than that girl was a woman. She thought of the hundreds of people in the streets and the thousands across the North. And millions in the south and across the sea. How many children won’t live to see the spring if we fail?

Lord Wyman gave a muffled huff and struggled to straighten his back. “I’d rather not ask it, but it must be asked,” he began, and Daenerys knew he must share her concerns. “If you should fail in this task…” He left the rest unsaid.

“Flee,” Jon said simply. “Fill every vessel you can and flee across the water. Elsewise, break the river ice and head south and west. The dead do not swim.”

“Even with half the queen’s fleet, I’ve not the ships to ferry so many to safety,” he sighed, “but the river, yes. Ser Riles shall see to it at once.” He nodded at the grizzled captain. “Take your boy as well.”

“Aye, my lord,” the man said, beckoning to his son and marching out of the chambers.

They sat in silence for another moment. Daenerys looked between Lord Wyman and Jon. Neither had much else to say. I suppose it’s almost time, then. She stood. Jon joined her.

“We have what we need,” her husband said, steely determination shining in his eyes. “Every moment we delay only brings the enemy a league closer.”

The Lord of White Harbor struggled to his feet once more. “So be it,” he said, “my men will see
you back to the city gates. May the old gods and the new watch over you both.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Daenerys said. He gave her as low a bow as he could manage.

“Thank you, Your Grace. I hope when we next meet again it will be under better circumstances. Spring in White Harbor is ever so beautiful.”

She gave him a soft smile and he returned the gesture, though fear still shone plain in his eyes. She looked to Jon and he nodded. Without another word, they swept from the solar.

The ride back through the narrow, filthy streets was just as unpleasant as the ride to the keep had been. The mist was thicker and colder though, and the chill had driven many of the refugees indoors or else out of sight. A light snow was beginning to fall. Ice crystals danced about in the air. The beginnings of a storm... His storm.

Drogon uncoiled his long neck as the great gates creaked open. Rhaegal did likewise. Both dragons examined their approaching riders with eyes of molten gold.

Jon turned to the sentries that had escorted them out. “Close and seal that gate behind you,” he ordered. “Stone, wood, whatever you can find. Do not open it again.”

“Aye,” one men responded for the group, his voice quivering.

They turned to their tasks as Daenerys turned to Jon. He gave a sort of false smile that failed to hide his own trepidation.

“Jon,” she said, her voice adopting that commanding tone she had first discovered among the riders of Drogo’s khalasar. No, that’s not right. She reached out and took his hand in hers. “Jon,” she said more softly, as a wife addresses a husband.

“Hmm?” He raised an eyebrow. She looked into those dark eyes. Northern eyes, but he is of my family and my blood. The Blood of the Dragon, the same blood that runs through our child’s veins. She had seen that blood boil over in the worst circumstances. That could not happen now. It might get him killed.

“Don’t….” her words failed her for a moment. “Don’t do anything stupid,” she finished flatly. Don’t be a hero.

“I try not to,” he said, smiling uncertainly.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know what you meant.”

She took his hand and pressed it against the fabric of her riding dress, right where that soft swell was beginning to show. The gesture achieved its intended affect. “Then you’ll know why it’s important.” An odd expression came over his face; tender yet stern and determined. Fatherly. Or what she imagined a father’s face might look like.

After a moment, he looked away toward the northern sky. “We should fly close,” he said, “and low to the ground. Bran said he could help us, but we may only get once chance to catch the dead off guard.” She nodded. “It should be quick. Attack then fly north. He’ll follow. I know it.” She nodded again and squeezed his hand.

Then, they parted and climbed up the sides of their dragons. Daenerys took care while settling in
amongst Drogon’s spikes. She stroked the hard, black scales, remembering when he had fit in the palm of her hand or on her shoulder.

At a whispered command, Drogon spread his powerful wings and lifted himself into the air. Rhaegal did likewise. Together, the two dragons and their riders rose into the growing storm and flew off into the northern sky.

It was growing dark. The evening air was cold. It stung her eyes and reddened her cheeks, but Drogon’s inner warmth drove away the worst of it. Higher up, it might have been unbearable, but they needed to stay within sight of the river if they were to find the dead. In some small way, she was thankful for that.

Minutes turned to hours, or so it seemed to Daenerys. Everything was grey and cold. Another storm had descended upon the lands north of the city. Swirling clouds concealed the lands below her and the sky above.

The only sounds were the steady beat of the dragons’ wings. Like a heartbeat… She had never noticed that before. The rhythm lulled her into a sort of trance. She closed her eyes and lost herself in her memories.

She saw the young mother and her babe. She saw the countless others huddled under soiled furs and woolen blankets. The grey streets of White Harbor turned brown, as did the skins of those downtrodden. Meereen, she knew. Though she had broken the slaver’s armies and taken their ships, doubts gnawed at her. Did I abandon my children in the east? Those who called me mother? How do they fair in this horrid winter?

She felt snowflakes brush against her. The storm was worsening. When she opened her eyes again, her heart skipped a beat. Shadows danced in the swirling snow. Yet here it was only a broken tower, and there an abandoned village. There was still no sight of their foe.

Where are they? She knew both Drogon and Rhaegal could cover the supposed forty miles with ease, but in these conditions, they might have flown forty miles too far. She looked to Jon for reassurances. He and Rhaegal flew close by, slightly below and ahead of her. He did not look back. Perhaps we passed them…

Even as the thought occurred to her, she felt an odd presence press on her. The back of her neck tingled. It felt as if someone was watching her. The sensation made her shiver.

Then, she could not stop shivering. Her lungs burned with a breath of icy cold air. Her fingers – clinging tightly to Drogon’s spikes – felt stiff and dead. The winds howled about her. And there, just there. She could hear that terrible, rumbling thunder she remembered from the battle. They’re close.

Suddenly, the swirling storm parted and the mists thinned just enough to reveal thousands of shadows hundreds of feet beneath them. “Jon!” she called out, straining her voice, willing herself to be heard amidst the wind and thunder and steady beat of wings. He looked back, eyes grey and grim, and nodded. He had seen them, too.

Daenerys inhaled deeply and held her breath as she dug her heel into Drogon’s side. Her dragon knew the commands. Sometimes, it seemed as if he knew her thoughts. At the slightest urging, he banked to the right and dipped into the thickening mists. Rhaegal followed.

Flashes of burning blue began to show through the storm. Clouds and shadows shifted here and there. Daenerys whipped her head around the scan the sky, but she saw no sign of her fallen dragon
or its new master. It was different than the battle or that disaster beyond the Wall.

Below, the shadows had turned into men – thousands upon thousands of them. Daenerys saw massive giants amongst their ranks and beasts large and small. All their eyes burned blue against the darkness, like a field of winter roses catching the sun’s final pale rays. Between two broken shadowcats rode a single pale rider upon a dead horse. The White Walker did not look up, neither did his thralls. They don’t know we’re here.

She guided Drogon lower still, almost to a height where his flames could reach the corpses. Jon followed suite. She bit her lip and held on tight. Surely now they’ve seen. He will be here soon, with Viserion.

And as she peered over Drogon’s side and looked down once more, ruined heads began to turn upwards toward the two dragons descending from the clouds. Daenerys peered into the thousands of soulless eyes below. Some had been dead for years – centuries even. Others, she knew, had fallen after the Wall had. Some among them might even be my own Unsullied. And Grey Worm… The thought filled her with a sudden, burning desire for vengeance.

Yet as Drogon swept over the endless ranks of the dead, they did not call out in those awful, guttural shrieks. Nor did she hear the swift beat of broken rings or the terrible sound of Viserion’s screeches. Something was different.

Then, she felt that odd presence behind her once more. Looking below, she saw it too. Like the first star appearing in the long-forgotten evening sky, a pair of eyes flashed white. Then a second. Whole groups of eyes flickered like some cold fire. White, then blue, then white again. Just like Jon said it they had during the battle.

“Daenerys!” she heard him shout from her left. She looked over and found his pointing ahead with one outstretched arm. There, some distance ahead of them, sat three White Walkers mounted on their undead steeds. They too seemed unaware of the threat lurking above their army. Around them, thousands more wights wandered aimlessly or else froze altogether, their eyes shifting between the two cold hues.

She saw Jon pressed himself into Rhaegal’s back. She did the same. Dracarys, she whispered into the bitter wind. We shall burn them all.

“Dracarys!” she shouted above the whirling storm. The wind carried Jon’s booming command to her ears. As one, the black and green dragons loosed jets of fire fifty feet in length upon the ranks of corpses below. The force of the impact blasted the bodies apart, casting aside bits of flaming, rotten flesh and hide like embers from a cracked log.

The heat from Drogon’s breath washed over her, driving out the unnatural chill. It felt good. Daenerys Targaryen was always at home on dragonback.

A great cry went up from the wights as the army turned as one to acknowledge the threat. Quickly, she thought as she nudged Drogon with her heel and directed him toward the White Walkers. They turned to face her – but too late. Without the command, her great black dragon opened his maw and loosed another stream of golden fire upon the enemy.

She heard a great shattering sound as the fire consumed the riders. Around them, hundreds of bodies fell limp and lifeless to the floor, their eyes shining neither blue nor white.

To her left, Rhaegal had banked away and cut a gruesome, crimson arc across the field. Jon clung to his back. He’s lower than he should be, she thought, but pushed the notion away as Drogon
roared his fury. *He rides a dragon. He is a dragon.*

Acrid stenches assaulted her as the black smoke rose up off the battlefield. The cries of the dead had sounded once more, but they seemed so sweet just now. *Justice is a strange song,* she mused as she urged Drogon to turn toward another group of defenseless dead.

The dragons loosed their deadly fire at will, and soon Daenerys’ vision was obscured by walls of thick, black smoke that melded with the worsening storm. Below, lines of crimson and gold flame crossed the snow at odd angles. From above, it looked like some of the First Men’s runes writ in flame upon the field.

They might have flown off to the north and west just then, drawing the Night King away from the city to pursue the clear threat to his host. Yet Jon and Rhaegal continued their assault.

*We can do it here,* she thought, triumph swelling in her breast. *We can end it. Together.* It was getting hard to see, but she could still make out Rhaegal’s shape diving through the smoke and storm; his green scales illuminated by each burst of fire. He looked as strong as ever.

Then Drogon lurched and turned, screeching terribly as he writhed in flight and regain his wing hold. Daenerys looked down through the rising smoke and saw thousands of blue eyes burning brighter than ever. *And there...* She recognized the glint of fire on that spear of jagged ice... and she recognized its wielder.

“Jon!” she shouted for her husband. Rhaegal was lost in the clouds once more. He had not seen. “J-”

He shouts were cut off as Drogon dove low. A glimmering, crystalline spear sailed just over her head. *Where is he?* She looked around hurriedly, twisting her neck and back from side to side as she scanned the sky for signs of Jon.

Her dragon’s wings beat a panicked rhythm as he lifted himself away from the thing that had slain his brother. Up and up they flew, away from the thick smoke and into the swirling clouds and icy winds. Another spear passed by, but more distant this time. Even their enemy had his limits.

Yet where was Jon? Daenerys leaned into Drogon, her heart hammering against her chest and the dragon’s ridged spine. They had to go. *Now.* But she would not leave him behind. She could not.

As she was about to dive into the cloudbank once more, Rhaegal rose to meet her; Jon on his back. The grey storm clouds slide off his wings like melted snow off a slate roof. *And his wings...* Daenerys gasped, cold air stinging her lungs. The leathery membrane on his right wing was torn; ruined. Even now, he struggled to keep himself in the air.

“We need to go,” she shouted to Jon. He shook his head, eyes shining with anger. Even so, he looked shaken.

“We need to draw him away! To the north!” he responded, straining his voice to be heard above the wind. “That was the plan!”

*The plan.* Daenerys swallowed hard. *Those people in the city... that mother and her babe, and thousands of others.* Her dragons were her children, yes, but what was the life of one child against ten thousand? And, as queen, were they not all her children? In need of her protection? *Yes.* She met Jon’s gaze and nodded.

“Go for the walkers!” he shouted, “the dragon fire kills them. Just one, then fly northward. He’ll follow!” She nodded and shifted on Drogon’s back and adjusted her hold on his spinal spikes. This
would be a swift and sudden dive. They could not give him any time to react or attack.

With one final look at Jon, Daenerys leaned into her dragon’s back and whispered the command in the old Valyrian tongue. Whether Drogon heard her she was not sure, but he understood her intention nonetheless.

Her dragon’s great black wings folded at either side as he dipped forward and began his dive. Rhaegal followed suit. Smoke and snow flew past her and they rushed downward into battle once more. She tightened her vicelike grip on his spikes and pressed her thighs tightly against his warm scales, holding on.

The army of the dead reappeared below the cloud bank, ten thousand points of blue in a sea of swirling grey. Her eyes scanned the field for the Night King, but against the burning lines of dragon fire and the countless corpses she could not find him.

Daenerys braced herself as Drogon’s opened his wings and caught an icy gust. He surged forward over the endless legions of dead men, roaring his anger and spitting fire at his foes. Rhaegal and Jon appeared across the field a moment later. She watched with bitter satisfaction as the smaller dragon’s fire set two giants alight.

Then, she saw him again, back turned and focused on Jon. The Night King’s black and foreign armor marked him easily enough now, as did the great ice scythe on his back. She kept her eyes fixed on his position as she guided Drogon toward him. No more, she thought, vengeance’s sweet satisfaction almost within her reach. He’s distracted. Focused on Jon. Now!

“Dracarys!” she shouted, though perhaps she did not need to. Drogon roared and, diving once more, unleashed a column of crimson and gold flame on the Night King’s guard. The heat was overwhelming. Daenerys shut her eyes against the assault of ash, soot, and smoke. She felt Drogon rise once more away from the battle and turned to see the proof of her triumph.

There was none. As the smoke faded away, the Night King rose from his knee, spear in hand. His cold, blue eyes met Daenerys’ own. Then, he threw the spear.

Horrified, she watched it fly toward them. “Drogon!” she called out with her speech and her thoughts, urging her dragon away. Yet he was too big and far too slow to avoid it now. The ice spear cut right through the hardened scales and hot flesh of his right wing. Boiling blood spurted forth and fell across the field, the snow and ice melting where the dragon’s blood touched it.

Drogon let out a pitiful cry. Daenerys felt his body shudder. She kept her vice-like grip. We need to land, she knew at once. We need to get away. Though her dragon fought through his wound, she knew it was too much and too late. Rhaegal loosed another column of flame as he flew to her side to protect his brother and mother. His wing was in poor shape and he leaned heavily to one side to keep himself in the air.

Drogon struggled to fly away from the enemy. Daenerys turned where she sat and saw the Night King standing in the distance. Even from here, she could see his burning gaze meeting her own. He stared at her for a moment, another spear in hand, and then… he turned and walked away toward the south with the rest of his army. Jon and Daenerys flew away toward the north.

It hasn’t worked, she knew, a desperate panic taking hold. Drogon shifted awkwardly beneath her, struggling to keep himself aloft with an injured wing and wild winds. After a moment more, she set him down at the bottom of a long, sloping hill. Rhaegal landed beside her. Jon slid down the dragon’s side and rushed to her.
“Are you hurt?” he rasped. She shook her head. He inhaled deeply, eyes shining with relief for the space of a heartbeat. “We need to go back, Daenerys,” he said at once, turning away and making for Rhaegal. She reached out and grabbed his upper arm. She could feel him shaking.

“Jon,” she sighed into the evening air, “we can’t.”

“We must,” he insisted, a steely glint in his eye. “He makes for White Harbor even now, and you heard what Lord Manderly said. They don’t have the men, the ships, or the time. We have to draw them away.”

“Look at Rhaegal,” she swung her armed around and pointed at the green dragon, just now nursing his injured wing. “Look at Drogon!” His blood was still dripping from his wounds and steaming as it melted the snow below. “If we go back there, both our dragons might die. We might die.” Those spears. It only took one to kill Viserion. I cannot lose my dragons… and I cannot lose him.

Jon averted his eyes. She could see his heavy breaths misting in the air. “And the people of White Harbor will die. We gave Lord Wyman our word. Our protection. There are a hundred thousand people behind those walls! You want to abandoned them to the dead?”

Her anger rose hot in her chest, but she held it in check. “No,” she said, “I don’t. We need to think of something else. There has to be some other way. We can fly back to the city and help defend the walls. We can see the people to safety.” The words tasted false.

“Two wounded dragons won’t hold the walls,” Jon said.

“Then we can try something else to draw him away.”

Jon sighed and averted his eyes. “It’s the people he’s after. More meat for his army. We can’t defend White Harbor with two dragons,” he said grimly. “If the Night King takes the city, he’ll claim another hundred thousand soldiers for his army. Even Winterfell will not stand against so many.”

“Then what do we do?” she asked.

Yet, looking into her husband’s eyes, Daenerys found that she already knew the awful answer.

Chapter End Notes

It’s been a bit of a writer’s block, so to overcome that I’ve been writing or drafting scenes that I’ve envisioned for a while now. One is awesome, set to the tune of "Fate is Fluid" from the Man in the High Castle soundtrack. Good stuff.

This chapter is half of a greater whole. Going to stay away from detailed comments/notes until that one is out. Ideally, hoping to have the it done by the end of the month.

As always, leave a comment below. I enjoy hearing questions and criticisms (and, ya know, complements).
“You can’t mean it,” he heard her voice break as she spoke. “Jon, we can’t.” We must, he knew. It pained him to hear the hurt in her voice; to see the pain in her eyes. “All those people. Lord Wyman… that girl… her child?” Each mention felt like another knife to his gut. “We can’t.”

“We must,” he said aloud, balling his fists in anger. Why? He asked silently. Why me? Why us? Why now? Was this why I was brought back? To burn innocents? It was not right.

Yet he knew it was the only way. A few thousand might escape on the ships – if the seas were calm – but even then, they would not be safe. I cannot drive him away, and I cannot allow him to claim so many. If White Harbor fell, the North was surely doomed. His choice had already been made for him.

Jon turned to regard his wife. For all her strength and power, this moment has almost broken her. Silent tears welled in her eyes. She only cries in front of me, he realized. Jon had seen her tears twice before: once after Viserion’s death beyond the Wall and once more after the maester had told her she was with child. Our child. A child who won’t live to see the spring if the Night King claims the hundred thousand people behind those walls.

“We must have burned thousands of the dead earlier,” Daenerys responded, a bitter bite in her voice. “We can try again. Fly higher, or along the edges of the army. There must be something else we can do.”

“What else can we do?” he asked.

“Bran… their eyes,” she desperately fumbled for an answer, “there has to be something.” There’s not. Whatever Bran had done had helped them avoid notice for a time, but no more. Even if he was watching now, even Bran could not stop an army in its tracks.

His desperation and fear congealed into a cold anger. “Look at Drogon! Look at Rhaegal!” He raised an arm to gesture at the darkened shapes to their left. Both dragons were nursing their wounds: Rhaegal his torn wing and Drogon the bloody cut he suffered from a thrown spear. “This isn’t a battle we can win, Daenerys, not here.”

“What sort of rulers are we if we aren’t willing to risk our lives for those who do the same for us?” she asked, biting her lip as she awaited his response in trepidation. When Jon offered no immediate response, she continued. “You once told me that if I burned cities and castles, I would be no better than those who came before me. No better than my father. Your blood, same as mine. How does this make us better? How can we name ourselves king and queen after this?”

“This isn’t about kingship. This isn’t about ruling, Daenerys.” Her eyes shone with some fierce yet unknowable emotion. “This is about survival.” It was a terrible thing they had to do. Sometimes strength is terrible. It was strength of will they needed now, just as Jon had when he defied his brothers and allowed the wildlings into the North.

“I can’t…” she muttered into the wind, shaking her head. “I won’t.” She sounded more defiant now, angry even. Her eyes shone like cold flame in the grey gloom. “I flew north when you called for aid beyond the Wall, even though I knew the risks. I lost my dragon to save you. Perhaps we
cannot save the city, but we can save its people. They have ships. Others can flee west across the river. They just need time, Jon.”

He let out the breath he had been holding in. *It could be Hardhome all over again.* Yet he could see in her eyes that her mind was set. *Perhaps she’s right,* he thought. He looked into her eyes.

*Those eyes.* Sometimes he thought he might lose himself in them – even as they were now, rimmed with tears and reddened by the cold. He thought of her, of the child she had protected earlier, and of the family he hoped they might one day raise together. Then, he nodded.

“We’ll have to fly west of the river to avoid the dead. I’ll not chance another flight against those spears.”

Her face broke into an uncertain smile, beautiful but marred by the unshed tears in her eyes and the bitter reality of their duty. She looked up at the darkening sky. “Nor will I. Fly close to me, then.”

He did, guiding Rhaegal into Drogon’s wake as the two wounded dragon’s eased their way southward along the eastern bank of the river. The opposing bank was cloaked in a chill, white mist. *And what the mist cloaks…* Jon hoped White Harbor’s defenses would be enough.

Yet his doubts gnawed at him and numbed him to the wind’s icy bite. Onward he flew, trapped on the dragon’s back and within his own thoughts.

He drew in a breath of cold air, hoping the sting might distract him some. *Salt?* He smelled the sea and looked southward. Towers rose up in the distance, grey stone against a grey sky, only distinguishable in the gloom by the hundreds of torches burning. Ahead, Drogon banked to the left and began his descent.

They set down their mounts outside the gates just as they had done before. Only a few hours difference had somehow diminished the city. Jon noticed how a thick, fresh layer of snow covered the ground. Sheets of grey ice clung to the city walls, reflecting the light of the torches burning atop the ramparts. Thousands of them lined the walls, presenting a forbidding line of fire that seemed to almost hold back the storm winds blowing in from the north.

Cloaked riders hurriedly approached from the west, their horses’ hooves beating an unsteady rhythm into the frozen earth. Their cloaks billows behind them. Swords clattered at their sides. Rhaegal and Drogon drew up beside Daenerys and Jon as the horsemen closed in.

“You’re back,” the lead rider called out, pulling back his hood to reveal the grey, weathered face of Ser Riles. Fear shone plain in his eyes. Both men knew what Jon’s return meant for White Harbor.

“Have you sealed the gate?” Jon asked him. *This is no time to mince words.* The man nodded, looking to the walls and the soldiers manning them. “Seal the others. Set lines of pitch outside the walls and ready the city for siege.”

“Your Grace, the dead, are they—”

“Making for the city,” he said simply. The words hung between them as if they had been frozen there.

“We need to get your people to safety,” Daenerys stepped forth to break the silence. “As many families as can fit on your ships, and as many ships as you have.”

The Captain of the Guards was at a loss for words, the immediacy of the task and desperation having caught him unawares. The wind howled furiously, stirring up bits of ice and snow that
assaulted the riders of horse and dragon alike. The gust brought Ser Riles to his senses.

“Yes…” he muttered, then drew himself up fully. “Yes,” he said again, more vigorously. “You,” he turned to another cloaked man, “make for the keep and tell Lord Wyman the news, we shall need his garrison on the walls. You, find the harbormaster and sound the alarm.” They stood there motionless for a moment. “Now!” he shouted, and they remounted their horses and spurred them off toward the other gates.

“We should break the river ice as well,” Jon said.

Ser Riles grunted approving. “Yes, deny them a cross and concentrate our forces on the western walls. I’ve already set men to the task within the city, but I fear they are too few.”

Jon glanced at Daenerys, who caught his eye and nodded quickly. “Daenerys will fly northward for several leagues, breaking the ice as she goes.” The Captain dipped his head in thanks before drawing in a sharp breath of frigid air and smiling grimly.

“Cold,” he said wistfully, “bitter cold. We Northerners fight well in it.”

Jon offered him an insincere smile, feeling his resolve melt away at the man’s confidence. This is not a fight we can win. Not here. Not with a few thousand farmers and two wounded dragons. Yet he could not let his thoughts become words, lest those words inspire a panic that doomed the city before the dead arrived.

“We do. And we fight better still behind strong Northern walls,” he responded, forcing some bravado into his voice.

“You should set that beast behind the walls too,” Ser Riles said, nodding to where Rhaegal lay in the snow. “There’s a market square just beside that sept there,” he pointed off toward the eastern part of the city. “You make knock over some fishmonger’s stall, but I daresay they’ll move quick enough.”

With another nod, Jon turned back toward the dragons. Daenerys was stroking Drogon’s snout, whispering something he could not hear. He went to her.

Perhaps it was the crunch of snow under boot that alerted him. Perhaps she simply felt him coming, but Daenerys turned and regarded him with a look somewhere between loving and utterly lost.

“We won’t win this,” he said softly. Then again, Jon doubted his earlier determination. Burning the city to deny the enemy a victory was easier said than done, especially after looking into the eyes of the men sought to defend it.

“We might,” she responded in a rather subdued manner. “It’s time we need. Time to fill those ships and get them away from here. We can save thousands, Jon.” Her eyes shone with a peculiar determination.

There are still thousands more that won’t be able to flee or fight. Thousands that will die. He did not argue the point, not now. Not yet. They would face that decision together, soon enough.

“Go help the men,” she told him. Then, wordlessly, she took his hand and drew him in for a brief kiss. Daenerys turned and scaled Drogon’s side with a practiced ease.

Jon fumbled for something to say. Every maester in the Citadel could not have told him how to bid farewell – if only for an hour – to his dragon riding wife. He heard her whisper a command and
watched as Drogon leapt into the air and flew off toward the river.

As he turned and walked back to Rhaegal, he heard a great crack echo across the frozen plain. The black dragon had loosed a continuous column of dark flame at the frozen river. Great clouds of steam rose from the surface, shimmering in the cold air and melding with the storm clouds.

As Daenerys denied the enemy a crossing, Jon worked to prepare the city for siege. He set Rhaegal down within the walls and directed the Manderly forces as best he could. They had little enough dragonglass – the majority of the supplies from Dragonstone having been sent to equip Winterfell’s armies. Yet they did have oil, torches, and arrows. Fire was equally lethal to the dead.

Teams of men worked to set lines of pitch across the fields as a worsening storm blew in from the north. Jon found himself scanning the horizon for Daenerys, hoping to see Drogon emerge from the gloom.

Near what might have been midday, his attention was drawn from the walls down to the gatehouse, where Lord Wyman Manderly stood garbed in fine leather and mail with a jeweled hilt sword at his side.

“Your Grace,” he said as Jon walked down from the walls and approached him. “I must admit that I am not glad to see you back so soon. My captain informed me of the predicament.”

He knows. One look into the older man’s eyes told Jon everything he needed to know. But we still must speak as lords. As leaders. “The ships are being loaded and sent off as we speak. My people thank you.”

“If all holds well, they’ll be able to turn around soon enough,” Jon lied. Lord Wyman nodded as deeply as his many chins permitted.

“Indeed,” he said. “I sent my eldest daughter on our newest cog. The younger, little Wylla, gods only know where she has run off to. No doubt all this talk of…” He looked around at the men, many of whom seemed to be working slower than before and leaning in to catch a word of conversation. “Well,” he huffed, “best continue the preparations.”

And continue they did. More men emerged from the city – some women too - bearing rusted swords and bent spears. Only one in ten was tipped with dragonglass. Many were thin of face and looked gaunt and weak. These are not soldiers, Jon sighed to himself. But they might be soon. Each farmer and craftsman behind these walls would become another wight should the city fall.

No. He needed to remember Daenerys’ words and his own strength. They had spurred the city to action and called its men to fight. We must fight.

A distant roar drew his gaze skyward. His hand instinctively flew to Longclaw’s hilt as his eyes scanned the sky for Viserion. The storm was worsening and storm clouds swirled overhead as a fierce northern gale met the chill wind off the Bite. Another roar sounded around him, closer now, but he already knew the sound for what it was.

Drogon’s black form split the storm and flew over the walls, Daenerys on his back. Jon breathed a sigh of relief. The feeling did not last long. As Drogon landed in the central thoroughfare – his tail crushing a two-story house in the attempt – Jon saw the fearful glint in his wife’s violet eyes. They must be close.

Soldiers and smallfolk parted as she climbed down the dragon’s side and walked to Jon. Many stood in awe of the dragon; others in awe of the dragon queen. A storm of whispers drowned out
“I saw them,” Daenerys said he met her midstride. “The storm. His storm. No more than a few leagues north.”

He nodded. “Stay close,” he said, beckoning her to follow him to the walls thence up the stairs. They walked together, encouraging the men with soft, strong words and silent gazes that held just as much meaning.

Snow began to fall thick and fast. Heavy flakes landed in Jon’s eyebrows and Daenerys’ intricately braided hair. He brushed some off as they stood side-by-side, glancing off toward the darkening northern horizon. She turned and smiled at him as she reached for his hand. Even here, he thought, even now.

“I saw the ships sailing southward as I landed,” she said softly. “Scores of them. Hundreds, maybe.”

Jon nodded, but did not answer for he was lost in his own thoughts. He felt the doubt building like the snow on his cloak. Thousands escaped, he told himself, but we might have doomed tens of thousands to a fate worse than death. He must not take this city.

Jon watched as the snowfall thickened, creating a wall of white that obscured the northern plains. He watched the ice-choked waters of the White Knife lazily flow southward, thankful that Daenerys’ efforts had denied the enemy a crossing, if only until the rushing water froze over once more.

Then, he heard it. Daenerys did too. Perhaps their ears were attuned to the familiar, threatening sound. A fierce wind carried the sound of rolling thunder toward the city walls. Neither the sound nor the gale abated. Torches danced in the snow and wind as the rumbling grew louder.

Jon’s eyes scanned the darkness for shadows swaying in the darkness or eyes burning like crystalline cold.

“Go to Drogon,” he turned to Daenerys, “and get ready.”

She did not move.

“And you?” she asked, he glare intense and unwavering.

“Rhaegal is resting just beyond that tower there,” he said, pointing to the pointed dome of the sept Ser Riles had identified earlier. “We cannot fly together. Those spears…” Daenerys nodded. “When they’re close, fly close to the river and burn them there. I’ll do the same along the western walls.”

With a fleeting look to where Ser Riles stood encouraging his men, Jon made for Rhaegal’s temporary den. The green dragon regarded him with one eye of molten gold and a puff of warm smoke as he approached. He stroked the dragon’s long, scaled snout and felt the fire within. Then, he clambered up his side, using the spikes as handholds.

With a single command, Rhaegal launched himself into the sky and was immediately pushed off course by the howling winds. He struggled to steady himself. Jon simply clung tighter to the dragon’s back. Across the city, Drogon rose from his low perch to join his brother in the sky.

They flew forth from the city, over the walls and into the storm itself. The threatening thunder was clearer now, and bolder too. Eerie white mist crept along the ground, its wispy tendrils snaking
along over the fresh-fallen snow.

Shadows danced in the mist, just as before. Corpses shambled forth, rank after rank of blue-eyed wights come to claim the city for the dead. Of the White Walkers, Jon could see no sign. *Further back, perhaps*, he thought. His gaze swept back and forth across the battlefield, searching for any sign of the true enemy. Their weapons were as deadly as dragon fire.

The legions of the dead moved toward the city walls with one mind and purpose. Jon could not hear the words and whispers of the garrison, but he could imagine them plain enough: they were the same fearful murmurs his own brothers had uttered when Mance Rayder had marched on the Wall with one hundred thousand Wildlings.

The wights continued their solemn march. No sound emanated from the army, save for the rattle of rusted metal and old bone. Silent minutes passed as the defenders’ awaited their foe.

Then, with a great guttural cry, ten thousand wights stormed forth from the gloom. From Rhaegal’s back, it looked peculiar, like the long lines of black ants that had marched over the bone white roots of Winterfell’s weirwood in the summer of Jon’s youth.

They threw themselves at the foundations of the city walls, breaking on the ancient stones much like the waves of the Bite did in the harbor. The men on the walls rained down flaming arrows, torches, oil, rocks, and whatever else they had that might manage the dead. The defenders’ assault did little to stem the tide of bodies rushing forth from the storm, but then those same bodies had only ruined hands and rusted steel to bear against thick stone walls packed with earth and brick.

The wind howled and buffeted Rhaegal’s wings. The dragon fought to steady himself and banked back toward the city, biding his time as he and his rider watched the siege below.

Other shapes emerged from the swirling shadows: mammoths and giants, their hides thick and frozen, made for the gate. *Now*, Jon thought as he leaned into Rhaegal’s back and shouted his command even as he thought it.

Rhaegal threw himself into the storm wind and dove toward the lumbering wights. Jon could see their massive blue eyes. “*Dracarys!*” he bellowed.

Golden flame shot forth from Rhaegal’s maw, consuming the lead giant in a torrent of fire. The thing was reduced to a pile of ash in mere seconds, but Jon did not notice. He kept his eyes trained on the next foe, then the next, destroying the threat to the city gates.

The fire spread even without Rhaegal’s attacks. The wild northern winds carried embers from corpse to corpse, many of which simply burst into flames. The wooly hides of the mammoths and the skins of the giants both burned with a ferocity only matched by the pitch being poured over the walls.

Across the field, Drogon loosed column after column of deep crimson flame against the waves of wights closest to the river. Lines of fire crossed the snowy field at odd angles, funneling the enemy into tighter groups that made their destruction easier still for the cities’ defenders.

Jon watched Daenerys fly, his chest tightening against his pounding heart. She guided Drogon across the smoking field with a practiced ease, but even from here he could feel her rage.

The black dragon rained fire down on the advancing army again and again. One jet found the lines of pitch buried under the snow. Almost as if the Red God himself had commanded it, a wall of fire raced across the field, cutting the Night King’s army in two.
Jon peered through the snow and smoke, his eyes hunting for any sign of an icy spear or pale rider. There were none. Only an endless onslaught of wights emerging from the icy mist.

*And no dragon either. Where is it?* Jon wondered. Drogon and Rhaegal continued their deadly dance, weaving through the smoke-blackened sky and destroying countless corpses below. The sky was theirs, yet he could not shake the feeling that something was wrong. Fighting this enemy had never been easy, at least not for along.

As if they had heard his thoughts, the wights ceased their press against the walls and shambled backwards through the crimson lines of fire. Their retreat was obscured by the smoke and worsening storm, but he could hear their calls as they fled northward.

Suddenly, the battlefield fell silent. The guttural calls faded into the wind. The wights backed away slowly, shadows melding with the white mists. Blue eyes still burned out of the darkness, but they made no move toward the walls.

A cheer went up from the besieged. White Harbor’s sentries waved their torches about and banged the flats of their swords against their shields. Had they truly stopped the enemy at the walls? *We’ve never fought the dead in our keeps before. Only in an open field. There was Hardhome, yes, but these are proper walls and they’ve no siege weapons.* All the Night King could do was wait, and by the time he devised a means to take the city the Manderly fleet would be far, far away.

Jon shifted on Rhaegal’s back and directed his dragon to land behind the walls. The green’s powerful legs crushed the covering of a small well as he landed in a small square. He breathed a sigh of relief. *At last, a victory. Or at least not a defeat.* He could not a remember an encounter with the dead that had not ended in slaughter and retreat.

*Though we are not without our wounded.* He looked up to where Drogon circled overhead. The larger dragon was struggling to lower himself to the ground against the storm winds. Rhaegal’s wing was in poor condition as well, though he could fly well enough for now.

The wind picked up once more, whipping loose strands of hair about his face. It carried the nervous chatter of the men on the walls and the clamor of steel and stone. Of the dead, he heard nothing. Swirling columns of snow as high as the city’s tower appeared in the distance, racing toward the walls only to break upon them. *Is this his plan? Send the storm against us?*

The storm grew still more vicious. Jon raised his cloak against the icy onslaught, but still felt the cold slice into his armor and furs like steel. Around him, the northern men huddled closer to the braziers, teeth chattering wildly.

Then, a terrible shriek sounded in the distance. The jubilant cheers died away as the men looked first to Rhaegal, then followed Jon’s gaze to Drogon. The shriek sounded again, threatening yet familiar. *No.* His heart hammered in his chest and he looked around wildly. He knew that sound.

“Jon!” he heard Daenerys call to him over the next awful cry. “Jon! The harbor!”

He strained on Rhaegal’s back, twisting himself around to peer southward. Through the swirling storm, he could see flashes of pale blue fire lighting up the sky. It was the dragon…. the dragon attacking the ships fleeing the city.

“Fly, now Rhaegal! Fly!” he kicked his heels into the dragon’s hardened green scales, spurring him upward as he might a reluctant horse. Wounded wings unfolding, Rhaegal leaned forward then launched himself off the wall and into the air, banking sharply away from the besieging army and making for the harbor. Daenerys followed.
White Harbor’s streets flashed by below him. Dark figures looked up in awe. *Still so many*, he thought grimly. *And how many climbed aboard those ships?*

He could not see the grey waters of the Bite nor the ships’ sails, but streaks of blue fire illuminated the storm clouds like lightning strikes. Rhaegal swooped across the outer yard of the New Castle and over more rows of slate grey houses, drawing closer to his fallen brother’s cries. He was close.

The clouds broke over the shoreline. Dragon and rider burst forth from the cloudbank and found themselves high above the icy northern waters. Jon drew in a ragged breath as he saw Viserion hovering over a listing cog, engulfing the ship in blue dragon flame. Burning figures leapt from the stern into the waters below. He could hear their cries of anguish. Around the harbor, ships were splitting off in half a hundred different directions, their captains desperately trying to flee the onslaught from above. One small galley had run around, whilst another’s hull had been raked by an iceberg. He had to stop this.

Jon urged Rhaegal forward, uncertain of how best to attack the enemy’s dragon. Learning to fly was one thing, yes, but doing battle on dragon back was another thing entirely. Above him, Drogon broke through the grey wall of clouds and dove toward Viserion. He could almost feel Daenerys’ fury. He and Rhaegal followed.

Ahead, Viserion swooped low across the choppy waters of the Bite while loosing jets of blue flame at the vulnerable ships. No rider sat upon his back. *He’s still at the gates*, Jon knew. Yet the way the beast flew seemed no different than the battle some weeks earlier. It was almost as if the Night King shared his mind.

Drogon roared in fury as he closed in on the smaller dragon. Rhaegal followed in his wake, the terrible storm winds straining his wounded wing and forcing him to struggle and strive to keep his course. Ahead, Viserion turned and regarded the approaching dragons with one burning blue eyes before setting another ship’s sails alight.

Then, he twisted and sped upwards away from the ships. Neither Drogon nor Rhaegal could turn in kind. The wight dragon rose rapidly and disappeared into the clouds. That grey storm wall seemed to swallow his form. Rhaegal’s wings slowed to a steady beat as dragon and rider looked around for signs of the enemy.

Jon scoured the harbor and bay. Most of the ships were fleeing, but at least a dozen had faced the dragon’s wrath. Small black bodies bobbed up and down in the grey water as shattered wood and flotsam passed them by. Jon sighed heavily, his breath joining the white winter mists. He could not help them now.

Another screech seemed to spilt the sky. Viserion dove back through the swirling cloudbank in the distance. He drew himself up above a cluster of smaller ships and loosed a column of roiling blue flame. The closest vessel seemed to burst apart, its hull splintering like thin kindling in a hearth fire. Jon could hear the screams from where he sat.

He drove his heels inwards to spur Rhaegal forward, but his dragon had already begun his dive. The frigid salt air stung Jon’s face. He kept his eyes open and trained on his foe. Viserion’s fire had consumed another ship; it’s sails burned a ghostly blue against the darkness of the sea and smoke.

Drogon soared overhead, swifter than his brother and more determined. As one, the two living dragons closed on their foe. Viserion ceased his attack on the nearest ship and turned once more to regard his assailants. His torn and ruined wings began to beat furiously against the storm, but it was too late. Drogon slammed into him first, attacking him with tooth and claw. Jon saw whitened
scales fall away into the grey waters below.

Viserion twisted in the black’s grip and flew above his brothers. He breathed a column of blue flame that turned to black smoke as it missed its target. Drogon turned to attack once more, but this time Rhaegal was quicker. Jon held tightly to his dragon’s spikes as he flew upward. He felt Rhaegal’s muscles pulse and flex as he readied himself. His wings extended to either side. The foe was close.

With a great crash that almost shook Jon from his seat, Rhaegal’s maw and talons sank into Viserion’s ruined flesh. He saw his dragon tear a chunk of scaly hide from their foe. Yet no blood spilled from the wight’s neck nor did it relent in its own assault. Viserion’s tail lashed wildly against Rhaegal’s wings and side, almost knocking Jon from his position.

The wight dragon twisted in Rhaegal’s grip and spun away, flying lower and lower toward another group of fleeing ships. Jon did not need to think, nor did Rhaegal. As one, they downward after their foe. Daenerys and Drogon joined the attack. Their roars joined together in a terrifying war song. Viserion responded in kind, screeching his own fury and setting a small river galley afire.

The two dragons descended on him once more. Drogon roared and loosed a jet of crimson flame at one wing whilst Rhaegal unleashed a column of golden fire on the other. The twin columns combined midflight and seemed to melt together, like gold poured over molten steel.

Much of the dragon fire washed over the wight’s scales and wings, yet some set the rotten flesh alight. The scents of burning leather and flesh filled the air. Viserion broke his attack and flew away toward the ice-choked coast of the North. Jon urged Rhaegal to pursue. Their foe dove closer to the white-capped waves of the Bite; his wings singed with black smoke rising from a dozen fresh wounds. Both living dragons pursued their fallen brother.

This is different, Jon knew. On the river, it had only been Daenerys and Drogon. But here? Two dragons and two dragon riders? They could slay the Night King’s beast then turn to his army. Perhaps they could save the city. Perhaps they could claim a victory.

Screams echoed across the water. The ships, he thought instantly. Yet the ships – those that had survived the dragon’s assault - were fleeing south, battered by the storm winds and waves. Jon looked back toward the city. Thick smoke rose in two score columns. Buildings were burning. And there... He could not mistake the sight: thousands of burning blue eyes shone through the wintry gloom. The dead had broken through the city walls.

His head turned between fleeing Viserion and the city. They could not abandon the city to the Night King, nor could they permit his dragon to return to the ships.

“Daenerys!” he called into the howling wind. Perhaps she heard him, perhaps she just knew, but she turned and fly closer. He jerked his head toward the city. More buildings were burning. The screams were growing louder. Her eyes widened in a rare terror. They danced between the fleeing dragon and White Harbor, uncertain.

The two dragons struggled to keep level as their riders took in the terrible scene. “We have to go back!” Daenerys shouted.

We have to burn it. He knew it would come to this. Bile rose in his throat. “Go!” he shouted back, his eyes scanning the clouds for Viserion. Every moment they wasted, thousands more would be turned. Yet every moment put still more distance between the fleet and their foe.

Daenerys met his gaze, her own eyes shining with a fiery anger. She shouted something to him,
some ending in ‘you’, but he could not hear it. Then, she spurred Drogon off toward the North. He followed.

They passed over blacked bits of ice, singed flotsam, and ruined hulls of ships that slowly sank beneath the icy, white-capped waves. They passed over the abandoned harbor walls, then over the slate grey roofs and narrows streets. The screams grew louder.

Jon could see the press of bodies ahead. The wights surged forward through square and alley, hacking down the helpless smallfolk as they went. He looked toward the gate they had defend sometime earlier, just found only a smoking pile of rubble over which strode a pale, familiar figure.

Anger filled him. His hand tightened around Rhaegal’s great spike. *Burn them,* he thought savagely. *Dracarys.*

It was as if Rhaegal heard him shout the command aloud, for he opened his maw and breathed down a jet of fire onto a wave of advancing wights. Nearby, Drogon did the same. The narrow streets made it easy to fall upon the enemy and burn his soldiers in one fell swoop.

Yet everywhere the dead advanced. The people of city could not stand against so many. No matter how many jets of flame the two dragons loosed against their foe, he advanced. Wights scurried across rooftops, or else through small side alleys.

The dragon fire began to consume the houses and shops, sending walls of black smoke into the sky. It made it even hard to see.

“Jon!” Daenerys shouted as she brought Drogon to bear in front of him. “The castle!” she said, pointing with one arm across the city to where the New Castle loomed in the distance, torches burning and banners fluttering in the wild wind. He nodded and, at once, they set off.

Both dragons set lines of crimson fire across the streets as they flew; walls to stop the dead’s advance. As they neared the keep, he commanded Rhaegal to stop. The streets were thick with bodies, but their eyes were not burning with that awful blue. He heard gasps as they soared overhead. A woman screamed. *Meat for his army,* Jon thought grimly.

Ahead, the gates of the keep were barred and shut. Smallfolk banged their fists against the ancient wood. Men screamed for help, for mercy. Women and children cried desperate tears as they huddled against the walls. “Please! Let us in! You’ve got to let us in!” The soldiers on the wall looked horrorstruck, yet not one moved to aid the people they had sworn to protect.

Jon saw a slight opening in the castle yard and guided Rhaegal downward while Daenerys circled overhead. He slid from the dragon’s side as he landed, legs stiff as they collided with the frozen earth.

“Ah,” a gruff voice called out above the chaos. Jon looked up to see Lord Wyman tubing toward him, glinting steel in his sword hand. His face was marred with blood and soot. Half a dozen men-at-arms trailed behind him, their armor dented and cloaks stained. Fear shone in their eyes. “I fear it’s come to this, Your Grace,” he said, his great white mustache singed and blackened from battle. “I’ll not ask you to linger long.”

“We can still-”

The Lord of White Harbor raised a mailed fist. “No, I’ll not risk the North for my city. Take your queen and your dragons, fly back to Winterfell, and fight.”

Jon opened his mouth to speak, but instead only nodded. His eye tracked Daenerys’ patrol in the
“I ask this of you though,” Lord Manderly said, turning his great girth to reveal a small woman. “My daughter Wylla.” The girl, a lithe youth with blonde hair, stepped forward and bowed low as Jon inclined his head. Tears welled in her eyes. “See that she makes…” his voice faltered, “make her a good match, Your Grace. And grant her her rightful inheritance after this is done.”

“Father, please…” the girl wept, her voice breaking.

“You must go,” he said, reinvigorating his tone with lordly authority. “Now.”

Jon reached to his hip and drew the long dragonglass dagger he had kept by his side through many a battle. He turned its wrapped hilt toward Lord Wyman and proffered the weapon. “Dragonglass,” he said simply. “It will kill them quicker than fire.”

“That’s good,” Lord Wyman said, “for I intend to kill many. Now, Wylla, on the dragon, quickly now.” He ushered them toward Rhaegal, who uncoiled his neck in the cramped yard to regard the terrified child with one fiery eye.

“Up his side,” Jon said, “use the spikes as handholds – that’s it.” He guided her onto Rhaegal’s back, hoping the dragon would not shrug them off as he did to Jon once. Manderly’s daughter settled in, clinging desperately to one of Rhaegal’s great spikes.

“Wait!” a broken voice called out from across the yard. A gaunt young woman was running toward him, a soiled bundle of cloth in her arms. “Please, my babe… please take her.” Jon recognized her as the mother whom Daenerys had stopped to help some time earlier.

He drew a deep breath, sighed, and spoke. “Aye,” he leaned forward to take the bundle from the mother’s shaking arms. Suddenly, she seemed hesitant.

Cold fingers closed around his heart. It must be this way. Daenerys acted first, guiding Drogon downward and bathing the people and wights alike in column of flame. The screaming ceased for a moment. The women further back on Rhaegal gasped in shock. The babe began to cry.

Elsewhere, the city was being overrun. White Walkers moved among the dead, slaying soldiers and raising bodies as their thralls. Houses burned. Blood froze in the street gutters. The river was a streak of ice between two ruined halves of the city. Only the New Castle stood defiant, if only for a time.

It was over.

He urged Rhaegal up into the sky, away from the fighting. He would keep the Manderly daughters safe. He would keep the North safe. He would keep Daenerys safe…. and he would keep his word.
The two dragons flew onward through the storm. It seemed thinner the further north they flew. After what felt like forever, they set down beside each other on a small, snow-covered hillock. Both dragons required respite.

Jon scampered down Rhaegal’s side as Daenerys gracefully descended from Drogon’s. She ran to him and embraced him, holding him close. Unshed tears glistened in her eyes.

They turned as one and looked southward. Together, they watched the smoke rise from the ruined outline of the city. Jon felt his chest tighten. *All those people... our people.* They had failed them all.

Chapter End Notes

Well. Obviously this timeline has not been ideal. I’m going to re-examine my approach to writing and see if I can devise a more productive scheme in order to return to a more reliable and regular update schedule. All things considered, I would like to see this story wrapped up by Thanksgiving. We do have something of a hard deadline with actual Season 8 coming back in a year, at which point "Home" will become largely irrelevant.

That said, I'm putting a self-imposed deadline of 4/20 for Chapter 34. It's already outline and the beginning is written, but that should help return things to normalcy.

In other news, baseball is back! I’ve also written a short story which I think is both pretty damn good and might set up a longer story, sort of like how the prologue in A Game of Thrones might serve as a stand-alone piece.

This White Harbor series of chapters was based on the Purge of Stratholme from Warcraft III, which basically pits strategic efficiency against making a moral choice. I strayed from the core idea of scene because "love is the death of duty", and the idea here was that Jon actually knows he needs to just destroy White Harbor, but ends up going with Daenerys' idea because he loves her.

Anyway, hope that was an engaging read if not an overly enjoyable one. 34 is a bit of a digression, but one I think you'll all enjoy as I really like this character.
Cersei I

Chapter Notes

Nibbling on sponge cake, watching the sun bake,
All of those tourists covered with oil,
Strumming my six string, on my front porch swing,
Smell those shrimp, they’re beginning to boil.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She tore the scroll in two.

“An independent kingdom of the Reach and River, is it?” Cersei asked the near empty chamber. Only Qyburn, Ser Gregor, and two young cupbearers stood by in attendance. One of them scuttled forward to retrieved the ruined bits of letter from the floor. He was a stout young lad, Cornel Meadows of Grassfield Keep; a second son of Lord Meadows. And a useful hostage.

“It seems so, Your Grace,” Qyburn answered her. Her Hand wore his badge of office over his usual rough spun robe. He seemed unaffected by the cold outside. “House Hightower has refused our demands for months. Like many others, they see themselves as the rightful heirs to Highgarden.”

“The rightful heir to Highgarden shall be whomever I choose,” she spat. I am the queen. I’ll tear their precious tower down stone by stone if I must. That’s what father would have done.

“Indeed,” Qyburn nodded, “yet it might prove prudent to make an ally of another claimant. House Florent, perhaps? Perhaps. She was of half a mind to have the Tyrell keep follow its family to ruin. It has caused her enough trouble already.

The destruction of Olenna Tyrell and her miserable brood had paved the way for her reign, but it had not come without its problems. Half a dozen lesser houses in the Reach now pressed their own demands on each other and the crown. While the royal forces had secured the Stormlands, and the eastern borders of the Riverlands and the edges of the Reach, she did not yet have the numbers or allies to fight half a hundred houses in the midst of winter.

Their only allies in the Reach were the Tarlys – or had been, until that silver haired bitch had burned Lord Randyll and his son. That bit of theatre had not won Daenerys any southern allies, of course, but she had flown off to die in the North with Eddard Stark’s bastard before she could face any true consequences.

It falls to me to rule. The remaining lords had as little interest in bending the knee to Cersei as the Tarlys had to the Targaryen girl. They were fighting for prestige, for lands, and for food.

Food was ever so important now. Not for the royal household, obviously; the Red Keep’s cellars were well stocked for years to come. But this winter had fallen hard upon her Seven Kingdoms. The farms and fields of the Riverlands had been ravaged by the War of the Five Kings, the Reach was weak and divided, and the fertile valleys of the Vale seemed more distant than ever, their stores of grain as inaccessible as the towers of the Eyrie.

“No,” she said finally, “no more useless alliances. We must turn Lord Strickland loose upon the
Reach. Let us see how well these Hightowers fight against forty war elephants.”

“Hmm…” Qyburn made a curious sound. *I've no time for your games just now.*

“What?” she demanded an answer of her Hand.

“Perhaps it might do to send Lord Euron around Dorne… and keep our own men closer at hand,” he said.

“Why?”

Qyburn cleared his throat. “I fear the unfortunate… destruction of the Sept of Baelor has sent the more devout members of the Faith to Oldtown, where Lord Hightower has welcomed them into the Starry Sept with open arms.”

“Sparrows?” she hissed.

“Perhaps,” her hand raised his thin eyebrows. “And yet, there are septons among them who inflame the hearts of the smallfolk, or else drive swords into the hands of many a southern knight. Many look to the gods in time of war and winter. It might prove more prudent to harry them at sea, keep them occupied while we gather our levies from the Stormlands.”

Of course, Lord Strickland’s swift conquest of her late husband’s lands had proven most fruitful. Dozens of greater and lesser houses had offered hostages and hosts in exchange for their continued existence. Her two new royal cupbearers were testaments to that.

“No,” she said simply. “My forces will not *harry* anyone. Send Euron Greyjoy to sack the city. Oldtown has long been the Ironborn’s dearest prize. We shall permit him to keep a handsome share of the plunder, so long as he tears the Starry Sept down stone by stone.” *Let this fresh-forged king be tempered by the sea. Let him see what makes a true ruler.*

“Very well, Your Grace,” Qyburn gave a low bow.

“Lord Strickland will march down the Roseroad toward the city as well. These rebels will be hard pressed to defend an assault on two fronts. We shall keep our own Westermen here in the city and close at hand.”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

“What else have you brought?” she asked.

“An interest payment to the Iron Bank, letters from foreign contacts – though nothing of import. It would seem the ravens are fewer in winter.”

“Has there been news from the North?” Cersei asked. *Surely something of the girl, or the bastard… or Jaime.*

The memory of him fleeing the keep like a coward embittered her thoughts. Was he a traitor? No, not Jaime. *Only a fool. Charging against his foe without a single rational thought in his head. He never listens.* That was how he got captured by Robb Stark. That was how he had lost half the Lannister forces to the Dothraki. Jaime was a fool, but she could make him see. *when he returns.*

“Only rumors, I’m afraid,” Qyburn said. *So the men I sent North have failed. Imbeciles. Surely, I would have heard of that bitch’s death by now.* She would have sent Ser Gregor himself if she did not have need of him here. “And of course, this,” Qyburn said, voice just above a whisper, as he
produced a small glass vial from his robes. He set it gently on the table.

Cersei snatched it at once without a word of thanks. “Very well,” she said, “see that Lord Euron receives his orders and inquire as the whereabouts of Lord Strickland. I expect to hear of their advances soon. That is all.”

Qyburn bowed low and swept from the room. Her two cupbearers made to do the same. “No,” she said. Both children froze. She could see the girl – Brenna Fell of Felwood – quaking in fear. “Walk with me, the both of you.” They scurried to her side and remained a half-pace behind her as she made her way out of the chamber and into the small courtyard in which she had order that great map painted.

The colors had faded in the months since it had been finished. The greens of the Reach, blues of the seas, and golden-brown of the western hills looked paler now, colder. Fitting, she thought with a half glance up at the grey sky.

Cersei looked down and found herself standing atop the spires of the Red Keep. In a single step, she moved across the Crownlands to the border of the Reach. She could plainly see defiant Oldtown ahead and Dorne to her left.

The Martells were gone, yet the dozen other Dornish houses from Starfall to Sunspear despised House Lannister as much as dear old Doran had. And their armies are untouched. Tens of thousands of Dornish spears sat unbloodied in the Boneway and Prince’s Pass. Ready to strike like a viper in the grass.

“Cornel,” she turned to the boy. His back stiffened at being addressed directly. “You’re of the Reach.”

“I-I am, Your Grace,” he stammered, awkwardly holding one overlarge arm with the other. His brown eyes flitted from the girl to the queen.

“And if a great Dornish host were to slither forth from the marches and attack your home, what would you do?” she asked.

“Fight,” he said, a dash of pride steadying his shaking voice. “Drive them off.”

“Yes…” Cersei mused. “The men of the Reach do not much care for the Dornish, do they?”

“No, Your Grace,” Cornel said, his own eyes falling to the map at his feet. No doubt searching for home. She found Grassfield Keep as he did, only a small black dot on a vast swath of green. Most of the keeps and holdfasts had been marked so. Yet each mark holds hundreds of men-at-arms that won’t bend the knee. The Reach, like Dorne, was unspent. It might eat away at her armies before they faced whichever threat emerged from the North.

Her gaze traveled off to her right now, up the thin line of the Kingsroad, through the marshes, moors, and hills of the North to Winterfell. Is that where Jaime is now? Or is he lying dead in a field or forest along the way…. or marching silently with those glowing blue eyes. She could still remember that corpse’s stare.

“The Dornish and Reachmen fought for centuries,” Brenna said. The girl’s eyes shone brightly for a moment as they looked to Cersei for approval. Of course, the have, she thought before correcting herself. Just a girl, as sweet and innocent as a child in winter can be, if a little dimwitted. Not like Myrcella…

“That’s quite true,” she said, striding forth across the map, stopping on the Hightower and grinding
her royal heel into it’s bright harbor light. *I need only provoke on side or the other.* If she could set her two southern enemies against each other, well… Cersei smirked.

No doubt Lord Strickland would prove his worth once more; as would Euron Greyjoy and his Iron Fleet. But against the strength of Dorne and the Reach, her forces were equally matched. *They must be weakened.*

The was nothing else to be done for it now. Qyburn would send his ravens and then ravens would return some time later bearing news of her armies’ conquests. Without another thought, she dismissed the boy. The girl made to leave as well, but Cersei stopped her with a curt command.

“Walk with me,” she said.

“Of—of course, Your Grace,” Brenna stammered, curtsying low and rushing to her side.

They strode forth from the inner holdfast and out onto the walls. The sea breeze was warmer than the city’s winter air, yet it still set a chill in her bones. The sky was a seamless wall of grey; the sea an equally imposing greyish-blue. A handful of ships dawdled on the horizon, but no more than that. Winter seas were treacherous.

They walked onward, Brenna scurrying ahead and Ser Gregor pacing behind, his every footstep marked with an iron ringing. Soon enough, they were peering over the city itself. Snow-covered roofs hid muck-lined streets. No doubt another hundred bodies were being carted away today. The city simply did not have the food. *They should be in the fields where they belong,* she thought bitterly. Every man must know his place.

Cersei glanced out over the walls where glinting black iron caught her eyes. The walls were bristling with spitfires, scorpions, and new makes of the great ballistae which Qyburn had so cleverly designed. Perhaps one weapon could not harm a dragon, no… but twenty? *Let us see the Targaryen bitch try to take the city now.* Whatever was left of her foreign army would break against the capital’s walls. Cersei knew it.

“It’s—it’s quite beautiful, Your Grace,” Brenna lunged for a topic to discuss.

“It is,” Cersei said. “Our capital city. Quite the achievement, don’t you think?”

“Oh yes, Your Grace,” the girl smiled up at her.

Cersei’s gaze swept over the ruins of the Sept of Baelor. She had not decided what to do with the newly cleared land; not yet, anyway. *Let it stand as a reminder to my enemies. I do not need swords and spears to win my battles, let alone dragons.*

Yet as she thought of her triumph, she remembered Jaime’s return from his campaign in the Riverlands. *And that look. He might had marked himself a queenslayer with those eyes.* Whatever his reservations, he had forgotten them, if only for a time. *And then he rode north.*

“Leave me,” Cersei said without looking at her charge. The quick scurry of feet signaled young Brenna’s retreat.

She could not say how long she spent looking over her city and its marvelously crafted defenses. *Father would be proud,* she told herself as her eyes swept over ballista after ballista. The Alchemists’ Guild had been set to producing more wildfire as well. Tyrion’s trick with the laden cog might prove useful once more, elsewise she might simply have the men sling barrels of the substance over the wall and onto the bitch’s savages.
Soon enough, the chill air bit through her furs and dyed wools. Cersei retreated indoors and spent her time looking over the affairs of state. There was little enough to do save wait for word from the Iron Fleet or Lord Strickland’s army. Time itself seemed to freeze over in winter.

All too often, she found her thoughts straying to Jaime. Where is he? And why did he leave? Surely, it was his foolish sense of honor – that thing he had been striving to regain since he shoved his blade through Aerys Targaryen’s back all those years ago. And now he’s gone to join his daughter. Is that it? Does he love her? She tried to force the matter from her mind, but it always found a way to creep back into her thoughts like the cold into the Red Keep.

The next few days blended together with an all too common dullness. The Red Keep was a summer castle, built for warm sea breezes and hot days. This winter was bitter cold. The gardens were frozen over and dying; the sparring grounds sparsely used. There was little enough to do in order to keep busy and Cersei found herself watching the skies for signs of ravens that might bring news of Euron’s movements or Lord Strickland’s victories.

Qyburn visited her from time to time, inspecting the health of the child growing inside her and ensuring she had everything she needed. I birthed three healthy children, she often reminded herself. This one shall be no different.

Her thoughts turned to Myrcella as they so often did sometimes. Joffrey had been cruel and Tommen young and weak, but Myrcella – her daughter? She was sweet and innocent… and she was taken from me. She felt that familiar, cold fury course through her veins. Perhaps it’s time for another visit.

She summoned Ser Gregor and made her way down from the royal apartments and into the bowels of the Red Keep. The torches flickered dimly as she passed, casting dark shadows on the wall. Soon enough, they had reached the lowest landing of the Black Cells.

The stench was almost overwhelming, but she knew better by now. Cersei pressed a rosewater-soaked cloth to her nose as she strode into the dungeon. A single guard stood at the cell’s entrance, the torches’ fire glinting off his crimson colored steel armor. Without a word, he moved to unlock the cell and open the door, allowing her entrance.

A broken body sat chained and slumped in one corner. Rats scurried away as she strode into the cell. The girl had died some months earlier, succumbing to the same poison that had taken Myrcella’s life. But death was only beginning. The rot seemed worse in the dungeons. She was nothing more than a sunken skeleton now, garbed in rotten, soiled robes and decaying flesh.

Across the cell sat Ellaria Sand, that Dornish bastard who had taken her daughter from her. Her eyes were empty, her visage distracted and distraught. A soiled gag kept her from speaking. This is justice, Cersei smirked inwardly.

“I know you hate me,” she said aloud. Ellaria did not look up. “And I know this is a great burden to bear. Though, you brought it upon yourself, of course.” Their eyes met again and Cersei saw a flash of anger in the otherwise broken gaze. Yes… you’re still in there, aren’t you. “I must apologize for the poor food of late. Trade with much of the Reach is cut off and this winter has been hard. Then again, it’s only supper for one down here.” She gave her foe a false smile.

Ellaria’s chains rattled and she snarled into her gag. Her eyes shone with pure hatred.

“It must have been hard, I would imagine, not being able to properly say goodbye.” Ellaria lunged forward, but her chains stopped her assault. “But then, you did spend your final hours together. You had the chance to look into those beautiful brown eyes – your daughter’s eyes. You robbed me
of that.”

Cersei strode toward the door and reached out a hand through the bars to the guard. “Your dagger,” she said. The man gingerly drew a sharp dirk from his hip and handed it to his queen hilt first.

Ellaria’s eyes widened. Oh no, not yet. “It’s strange really,” she said, turning the dagger over in her hand, “when we last spoke, your allies had abandoned our war to fight some foe in the North. So much has happened since then, so much…” Ellaria did not look away. “I don’t imagine any ravens make their way into the black cells, but I’ve read plenty of reports.” She gave another mocking smile. “It was only last night that Euron Greyjoy sacked Sunspear – broke through the walls and slaughtered your countrymen. I’m told the Greenblood turned red… That’s not all of course. I sent a Faceless Man north to rid the realm of your precious Targaryen queen. She’s dead, as are your hopes of ever leaving this place.”

Ellaria’s eyes widened and she slumped against the wall. Cersei bent slightly and placed the dagger at her own feet – just out of reach of her prisoner. She nudged it with her toe so that the point of the blade faced Ellaria.

“A gift,” she said, rising back to her full height and looking over the scene with another smirk.

Without looking back, Cersei swept from the cell and the dungeons themselves. A guard opened another door and she found herself blinking against the pale winter sunlight. Crisp sea air filled her lungs.

The sun hung low in the sky, just above the western battlement and the plains and hills beyond. A raven passed overhead. Later than I thought, Cersei noted with bemusement. Her evening meal would be ready soon. She strode back into the warmth of the keep and made her way to the dining chamber.

She sat at her usual highbacked, cushioned chair at the head of a long table filled with various dishes. The cooks had prepared fish from the bay alongside oysters and mussels. While the produce of Dorne and the Reach was temporarily lost to the capital, ships had been sent to Lys to procure citrus, pears, and other fine fruits. Just out of arms reach sat a steaming loaf of soft, warm baked bread.

Quite a bit of food, Cersei smirked as she nodded to another young ward, who promptly sprung forward from the shadowy corner to begin serving his queen. The clatter of dishes upon the stone floor signaled his inexperience, but it made no matter for there was plenty of food for one.

Ser Gregor did not eat at all. Curious, for a man of his stature. No doubt Qyburn could offer an explanation if she cared to hear it. She did not. There was a certain fullness in the silent solitude that accompanied her evening meals.

That silence did not last long. A raven’s harsh call echoed through the halls of the royal apartments. The quark stirred Cersei from her thoughts. Annoyed she looked around as if expecting to see the bird swoop into the room.

It called out again, louder this time. Or no… Not louder at all. There must have been two birds, calling back and forth. Can Qyburn not keep his ravens under control? Perhaps she would have to find the man another apprentice, or else assign a ward or two to aid him in his work.

The birds continued to call out, seeming somewhat distant in one moment then just outside the shuttered windows in the next. It went on for quite a while before she finally set down her silver and looked up at the boy.
“Go fetch me Qyburn,” she said. *Can the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms not dine in peace for one evening?* The boy ran from the room as he hastened to obey her royal command. His footsteps faded into the night… and were drowned out by the calls of still more ravens. *Half a dozen at least,* she sneered at the thought and listened to the cacophony in the courtyard outside.

After another few moments of the racket, she could stand it no longer. Her main dish had gone cold and the boy had not returned. Cersei stood and stormed from the room, Ser Gregor pacing ominously a half step behind her. She swept across the painted courtyard. The ravens scattered at the sight of the massive knight.

The walk to her Hand’s quarters was not long, but ever step inconvenienced her. A draught plucked at her fur-lined dress with frozen fingers. The nights were cold, even in the brazier lined halls of the Red Keep… and Cersei had no one to warm her bed.

Qyburn’s quarters came into sight around a shadowed corner, but Cersei had heard the harsh chorus of raven calls from far further away. They echoed through the halls now. *Has he turned his chambers into a rookery?*

Ser Gregor advanced to the door and pushed it open. Light flooded the dim hallway. Inside, Cersei saw the boy she had ordered forth scurrying about the room, untying scrolls from ravens’ legs and leaving them unfurled on the table. There had to be fifty or more great black birds flappy around the room, calling to each other in oddly panicked voices. *Don’t be foolish.*

Yet she caught Qyburn’s gaze as the older man looked up from a freshly made map of her Seven Kingdoms. He had been looming over the center of the painted vellum, but now regarded his queen with an oddly harried expression.

“Your Grace,” he said, moving around the table whilst bowing in stride. Ravens scattered as he approached.

“What is this?” Cersei asked.

“Your Grace, I…” Qyburn held up two fists and unfurled his fingers. He held three thin scrolls in each. Cersei’s gaze swept from the man to the table. At least two score more scrolls had been piled together.

*Something has happened to Lord Strickland or the fleet,* she thought at once. *But no. A single bird would have sufficed for news of a defeat. Who would send fifty? Jaime?* Her heartbeat quickened.

Qyburn plucked one scroll from among many. Cersei noted the broken wax had been sealed with the lion of Lannister.

“News from the Twins,” Qyburn said.

“Have they found who killed the Freys?”

“No, Your Grace. The garrison sends reports from the North…” *The Targaryen girl. Is she marching south already? Perhaps Jaime is with them.* “Other ravens have flown from Seagard, Oldstones, and every holdfast north of the Green Fork.”

“Recall our armies,” she said, adopting the mantle of command. “We shall muster the might of our forces at Harrenhal. The Targaryens crumbled once on the Trident, I see no reason they should not again.”

“Not the girl, Your Grace.”
“No? What then?”

“The dead, Your Grace,” Qyburn said quietly, as if he hoped letting the words fade away would make them untrue.

“The dead?” she asked, looking around the room to where the boy stood frozen and the ravens flapped about in a panic. *That thing from the Dragonpit. Tyrion’s insistence… Surely not.*

“They’ve crossed the Neck.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, that's a bit better than three weeks.

A bit of a digression, but I wanted to open up the war a bit and show what was going on in the wider world and reveal some of the immediate consequences of the Night King acquiring some fresh bodies.... Also Cersei is one of my favorite characters in the books and show (full disclosure: I once took a character personality quiz and got Cersei. Yes, I was also a Slytherin).

Next up, we'll be back in Winterfell with Mel and co. I'm sure many of you will be please with the chapters content.

Until next time...
The walls and halls of Winterfell were awash with fiery oranges, molten golds, and reds as deep as the leaves of the weirwood tree. Torches burned brightly against the darkness – brighter than she remembered any fire being - and illuminated the colored robes and armor of the eastern soldiers.

Sansa was not quite sure what to think. On one hand, it lifted her spirit to see something other than the cold greys and white so common to these halls. After so many days of darkness and gloom, a bit of color was welcome. On the other hand, the last hall filled with scarlet and gold was a place she was well rid of.

She was thankful for the men wearing those colors, though. And their spears. It did not matter what the Red Woman had done, did it? She had brought so many to fight alongside the North. Why else would she have marched through the snows? And if she could wake Arya, well... She sacrificed one girl and she shall save another.

Sansa strode through the halls of her family’s keep on the way to the solar. Councilors and friends were gathering once more to discuss the affairs of the North, but she knew well enough there would be only one topic. And I have already made up my mind.

The door at the end of the hall was already open and she strode in and took her seat at the long table’s head without a glance upward. There was a shuffling of feet and a scraping of wood on stone as the others sat as well.

Sansa looked up to find Ser Davos, Missandei, Tyrion, Jaime, Tormund, Sandor Clegane, and Varys seated around the table. Gendry sat in the far corner, his leg propped up on a low stool. Jorah sat beside him. Brienne remained standing.

“I take it the Red Woman is not joining us?” she asked the room at large, already knowing the answer.

“It appears not,” Tyrion answered, raising an eyebrow and pressing his lips together.

“And what of Jon and Daenerys, have we any news?” Jorah sat up at the mention of his queen.

“None, I fear,” Varys said, “your brother claimed to see them flying south toward the city, but there were few visions after that.”

She felt the beginning of fear begin to congeal deep in her gut. They shouldn’t have gone, she thought. They should have stayed here. Sansa struggled to refocus her attention on the tasks at hand.
“I see. Have our men watch the skies closely. Have we found proper lodging for the eastern men?”

No one answered. Varys looked at Tyrion, who then looked at the wall opposite Sansa. Ser Davos avoided her gaze as well.

“No,” Jaime said, sounding both bored and amused, “none of your council seemed to think the slave soldiers would be staying long.”

“Well, as Jon has put you in charge of preparing the keep for war, I shall ask you to find them suitable lodgings,” Sansa replied. She thought she saw the faintest hint of a smirk on his face as he nodded, rose, and left the room. Almost glad to do so, Sansa thought as she watched him leave.

“My lady, I cannot recommend the foreigners’ presence within these walls,” Brienne said. And here we are.

“We discussed this at length in the yard,” Sansa replied.

“And we must discuss it again,” Davos said. “That woman is evil.” The accusation hung in the air.

Tyrion coughed.

“Yet she brought Jon back… or so you say.”

“Yes, but-”

“And she’s brought a thousand soldiers to Winterfell, men we sorely need after the knights of the Vale abandoned their oaths.”

“She burnt a little girl alive, a girl I loved like a daughter,” Davos replied. Sansa looked around the room, her eyes meeting Missandei’s for a moment. “We’ve all lost people we loved, Ser.” A father, mother, and two brothers among them. If this woman has saved one sibling and can save my only sister, I cannot send her away.

The room seemed to hear her silent thoughts. “Whatever your old grudges were or your misgivings are, now is not the time. Winter is here. The Lady Melisandre and her soldiers will stay.”

That seemed to settle the matter, for though there were many skeptical looks, there were no more verbal protestations from the table. After a moment, an amused looking Tyrion twisted his back and sat up a bit straighter in his chair before speaking. “While we’re playing host to fewer soldiers than before, we still need to see to our stores.” He looked at Sansa. “I realize the dangers involved but sending hunters back into the Wolfswood could help feed hundreds.”

“Last the hunters who downed a Wolfswood buck were mauled by its risen corpse,” Davos said, his eyes narrowing.

“Unfortunate, yes, but if we’re to feed our men properly we need to land’s resources. The castles stores of grain can only last so long,” Tyrion replied.

“He’s right,” Sansa said.

“Though, I suppose if any men die of starvation we can always have this Red Priestess bring them back,” Tyrion quipped. Sansa smirked, but tried not to give the man any further satisfaction.

“I trust you’ll see to it then, Lord Tyrion.” He nodded. “Then if that’s all?” No one else spoke.

Her mind turned at once to her siblings as she left the solar. Having no word of Jon felt odd, but not
uncommon. For years, he had been up at the Wall and riding beyond it with his black brothers. *And he has two dragons and Daenerys. He’ll be fine.*

*But Arya?* Well, she had thought her sister dead for years. Then, suddenly, she was not. Yet having her lie there with the specter of death hanging over her did not feel right. Jon had been the silent and stubborn one, while Arya had been full of life and mischief. It was not right. *And I am the eldest Stark now and the Lady of Winterfell. It does not matter what this priestess has done, only what she still might do.*

“My lady!” a voice called out from behind her. She heard the dull thuds of heavy footsteps against the stones and, thinking it might be Brienne, turned to greet her visitor. Gendry was walking toward her, struggling to keep a steady pace with his wounded leg still bound up.

“Gendry?” she raised an eyebrow. “What is it?”

*“Her. The Red Woman.”*

Sansa pressed her lips together to avoid letting her frustrated thoughts become harsh words. Slowly, she let out a long breath and calmed herself. “We just discussed the matter.”

“We discussed some of the matter,” he corrected her.

“And what have I missed?”

“Her. Her magic. What she’s done. She would have burned me alive for my blood,” he said, holding his arms wide as if to show how much of him would have been consumed by the flames.

“But she didn’t,” Sansa responded, an eyebrow still raised.

“She took my blood. Stripped me – beg your pardon but stripped me naked and put leeches on me.”

*Leeches?* The claim seemed so odd, so outrageous, that Sansa had to ask what happened next. “And?”

“Then she and Stannis pulled them off and tossed them into the fire,” he said. *This is absurd.*

“Why would she do that?”

“Blood,” he said grimly, “my blood. King’s blood.”

“Because of your father,” Sansa completed his thought, though she could scarcely see where this conversation was leading.

“Aye, because of him. As she and Stannis tossed those leeches on the brazier, the old king called out names. Balon Greyjoy, Joffrey Baratheon, and…” he looked away for a moment. “Robb, your brother Robb.”

Sansa stood dumbstruck for a moment. *Joffrey and a Greyjoy and Robb? Why would Stannis bother with them?* Yet she already knew the answer. Each king had wanted all the others dead.

“Usurpers, he called them. Rebel kings out to steal his rightful throne. Three leeches and three dead kings,” Gendry said, his sharp blue eyes meeting hers in a moment of clarity.

“Joffrey was murdered at his wedding. I was there. I saw him choke. My brother…” *and mother,* “my brother was murder by the Freys and Boltons at the Twins,” she said, forcing a note of confidence into her voice.
“Maybe they had help,” Gendry suggested.

“You think Melisandre murdered my brother?”

“I… I don’t know,” he admitted, “but what she planned to do. What she’s done. You must send her away.”

“She can save Arya.” Gendry’s visage noticeably narrowed. “I know that you, well – that she and you…. that you care for her,” she tried to deliver the phrase tactfully. “Melisandre can save her, just as she saved Jon. You may not like her, but you cannot deny we need her and her men.” Doubt filled her as she offered Gendry those assurances. *I have no idea what she wants.*

The bastard boy only nodded. She saw fear and understanding flash behind his eyes. “You should be there, though, when she does it. I know Arya will want to see you.” That made him smile, though the gesture seemed insincere to Sansa.

With a curt nod, Gendry left her alone and she returned to her chambers to eat a meal in peace. A few minutes turned into a few hours of reading, thinking, and a bit of needlework. Sometimes, picking up the old craft made her feel foolish – like she was trying to connect with the innocent little girl whose work had been so highly praise by her mother and Septa Mordane. Focusing on her simple craft carried her thoughts to happier places.

Too soon, the fire burned to hot for her comfort and her own furs to warm. The flames reminded her of Gendry’s words. The wind howled outside her window, but to Sansa it seemed a welcoming call: the North beckoning it’s daughter come and dance. She rose from her seat and left her room behind.

Sansa made for her favorite spot in the castle, that covered wooden causeway overlooking the yard. The rounded towers of the keep shielded her from the worst of the wind’s bite. Yet she liked the bite and the cold; the way the afternoon air stung her lungs made her feel alive. *More than alive, really.* The cold tempered her thoughts and cooled her rare passions. Better still, the winds often drove all others indoors, leaving her alone in silent solitude and with her thoughts. It was what she needed just now.

A lone, hooded figure at the opposite end of the causeway had robbed her of that. She did not need to call out to discover who it was. There was only one man in the North with a gilded hand.

“Ser Jaime,” she said, the wind carrying her words away. He turned and pulled back his hood. She thought she saw the ghost of a smile on his face.

“Lady Stark, I hope I’m not interrupting? There are so few places to be alone with the castle so full.” *I know it.*

“No, but I would’ve thought you’d prefer a warm fire instead of this wind,” she looked out over the yard as she spoke. The men of the Fiery Hand were moving in huddles masses of red toward the stone arch of the godswood. Above the walls, the wild red canopy of the weirwood thrashed about in the gale.

“I’ve gotten used to it,” he said. This time, the smile revealed itself for certain. “It was never this cold at the Rock, even in the dead of winter, but the winds were just as fierce.”

“It’s said the walls of Storm’s End were built to withstand even the worst winds,” Sansa said, though she silently scolded herself for continuing the conversation. *Am I a child to spout such obvious stories?* It was polite conversation, a nicety observed at court. She hated it.
“It is,” Jaime said simply. His green eyes seemed to be searching for something. Whatever it was, they did not find it. “Well,” he said, pulling up his hood and turning away from the yard, “I suppose I must beg my leave, my lady.”

Sansa’s mind raced like the wind around the walls. Her mention of Storm’s End made her think of the Baratheon boy and his words. And his blood. And the Red Woman, her magic…. and Robb. There was no question as to whether Sansa would permit her to stay in the walls – she needed her. But can I trust her? Why has she come?

The sight of Jaime Lannister turning away woke something within her. He came to fight. He abandoned his sister and his armies and all the comforts of the capital to ride against death.


“Melisandre of Asshai,” Jaime said, “I’ve heard the stories.”

“Davos and the others won’t stop telling them.”

“As many stories as he has fingers, I suppose,” he said. Sansa suppressed a smile.

“And you believe them? I mean, about Renly and Stannis and all the rest? That she can perform magic?”

“Perhaps?” he shrugged. “One of your brother’s claims to have risen from death and the other gazes across the countryside with the aid of ravens. We’re fighting bodies and legends from stories older than the walls of Storm’s End. What’s a bit of fire atop all that?”

Sansa remembered Sandor Clegane’s thoughts on the magic of the Red God’s followers as she looked over the Lannister man. I hope it’s on our side. That’s what he said. He looked almost amused. “Davos claimed she sacrificed a girl – a princess. She doesn’t deny it. Who would harm a child?” Joffrey, she answered her own question. And Ramsay.

The light in Jaime’s eyes faded. He looked away. “But she’s here, isn’t she? She’s come to help.”

“Has she?” Sansa asked.

“That’s not for me to decide, my lady. But she sailed to Volantis and back, bringing men to fight for you. Perhaps she’s realized her folly. People change.” With that final, odd note he gave a shallow bow and walked away down the causeway, the sound of his footsteps against the wood carried away by the winds.

Sansa turned to look over the yard once more. The bone white branches of the weirdwood swayed in the harsh winds. If they had not been howling so fiercely, she might have heard the soft rustle of blood red leaves.

People change… She could hear Jaime’s parting words clear enough for they echoed in her mind. The man who had just left was not the same golden-haired knight who had ridden through that gate so many years ago. Bran has changed, of course. And Arya. Only Jon remained his old, brooding self, though his stern visage was broken by those rare moments of happiness when he stood by Daenerys or shared a jest with his family.

Have I changed? Sansa already knew the answer was yes, but she wanted more than that. She wanted someone to tell her that yes, she had grown wiser and, yes, she could help her family fight off disaster and death. Jon has his Targaryen blood and his crown, Bran has his ravens and trees, Arya has her faces and daggers. What do I have?
The absence of an answer ate away at her for so long that she could not bear the loneliness of the causeway. The winter air had regained its bite. With a final glance at the leaves of the heart tree, she climbed down the wooden steps and made her way across the yard to the godswood to where she knew she would find the only other member of House Stark alive and well.

The sky had already faded into a deepening gray as she passed under the arch and into the grove. Yet it was far lighter amongst the trees. A dozen fires, evenly spaced around the edges of the godswood, held back the night’s shadows with their dancing flames. Each fire was attended by two foreign soldiers, though none fed the flames with extra wood. Indeed, they did not move at all.

Sansa’s eyes left the sentries and settled on her brother’s familiar form flanked by Samwell Tarly and the Stark’s heart tree. Nearby, Gilly guided her son’s movements as he made wide, looping circles around one of the fires. Sam greeted her with a smile. Bran remained motionless.

“How is he?” she asked. Bran had been looking beyond Winterfell’s walls for days now – ever since Jon left for White Harbor. She had panicked when he had taken ill some weeks earlier, but now she knew his frailness was the cost of his power.

Sam raised his eyebrows. “Oh, well, he hasn’t really changed. Not since a few days ago.”

“And Jon? Daenerys? Has he seen them?”

“I’m not-”

“Jon Snow lives,” an unfamiliar voice announced behind her. The words seemed to carry through the godswood. All around her, the men of the Fiery Hand shifted to face the grove’s entrance. Sansa felt an odd, nervous tingling at the base of her neck. “I have seen it.”

She turned to see Melisandre gliding across the forest earth. The ruby at her throat pulsed as though it held a fire within.

“You have visions too?” she asked.

“Of a sort,” Melisandre replied. A storm of confusion swirled within Sansa. Robb and Gendry’s blood and that little girl… but Joffrey too. No, this was foolish. It had been betrayal and war that had torn her family apart, not magic. Steel had stripped her of her parents, not this foreigner’s flames. And she says she can save my sister.

“Are you ready?” the Red Woman asked, as if she could hear Sansa’s thoughts.

“For?”

“For me to save your sister.”

“Now?” Sansa’s heart skipped a beat. Maester’s cures take time to prepare. Surely whatever she’s planning would require some preparation?

Melisandre raised her arms and looked skyward. “Dusk approaches – that time when shadows dance in the sky.” How can she tell? Sansa thought, giving the grey slate sky a glance. “It is during the night that our fires must burn brighter… and during the night that my magic shall be strongest.”

“I see,” Sansa said, glancing around at the fires that ringed the heart tree. The soldiers had not moved. “Is that why you built these fires here?”

Melisandre strode past her and walked toward the weirwood, placing her palm against its white
trunk. She drew in a long breath. “This is a place of power,” she said, nodding at Bran’s still form. “This tree has seen much.” *It’s a carved face.* “And its roots have been watered with the blood of a thousand sacrifices. Can you feel them, Sansa Stark?”

“I… What does this have to do with my sister?” she asked. Melisandre smiled, then turned and walked along one of the low branches of the tree, trailing her hand along the bark as the branch thinned. At the very end, she snapped off a thin twig and examined it in her hands.

“Curious,” Melisandre ignored her question, “that something so small could be of so much importance.” Her eyes flashed to where Gilly now held her son. Then she strode to the nearest fire and thrust the branch into the flames. It was as if one of Daenerys’ dragons had come alive in the godswood. Jets of amber flames shot into the air before fading away in a cloud of red embers.

Sansa had never seen anything of the sort. Her odd mannerisms, her confident demeanor, it reminded her of someone else. *I was a fool to trust Baelish. I won’t be made to look a fool again.* Sansa gathered her confidence.

“I’m ready,” she said, answering the woman’s first question.

Melisandre looked unfazed. “Good. Then come.”

They left the godswood without another word spoken. Sansa bid Sam stay with a look. *Arya needs my help, but Bran needs his.*

They crossed the darkening yard and entered the tower where Arya’s chambers were. How Melisandre knew where her sister slept, Sansa did not ask. She only followed.

When they reached the right landing, Sansa saw three figures standing outside the chamber doors. Brienne towered over Gendry and Davos, but all three adopted defensive postures as Melisandre approached.

“What’s she doin’ here?” Davos asked.

“She’s here to fulfill her promise,” Sansa responded. Brienne looked from her to the old knight. Gendry had eyes only for Melisandre.

“It is good you are here,” Melisandre said before walking past the trio and into the room. They all followed.

It smelled of smoke, yet Melisandre inhaled deeply as if she were stepping out of the keep after a long winter. She stepped forward and pulled at the grey bed hangings and brushed her fingers against the furs and woolen blankets. She passed to the table set in the corner and ran her fingers through the flickering tallow candles.

Gendry and Davos moved to stand at the foot of the bed, their eyes never leaving Melisandre. Brienne moved to stand in the opposite corner. Arya lay still and unawares of her many visitors.

“How long?” Melisandre asked, her gaze now fixed on the hearth.

“What do you mean?” Sansa asked, looking to Gendry then around room.

“How long has she been like this?”

“Ya mean ya don’t know?” Davos asked. His eyes shone with the fury that had been lit the moment the Red Woman had ridden through Winterfell’s inner gate.
“I saw only that she slept,” the Red Woman explained. “It was during the battle?”

“Yes,” Sansa said, adding, “and we’ve tried proper care... and dragonglass.”

“Herbs and poultices and obsidian will do little to cure her.”

“But you can wake her?” Sansa took a half-step forward as she spoke.

“Of course,” Melisandre said, “But it will require a sacrifice.”

Upon hearing the word, Gendry jumped up and nearly fell in his haste to throw himself between the woman and Arya. Davos ran to his side, his hand resting on his dagger’s hilt. The dull thud of a boot on wood signaled Brienne’s approach as well. Sansa remained steadfast.

“What do you mean? What sacrifice?” she asked.

“The Lord of Light has many concerns and many battles to fight in a winter so dark. We must beg his attention with an offering. It need not be great for one so small,” Melisandre said.

“I’ll not have anyone else harmed. You said you could save her,” Sansa said, growing frustrated.

“And so I shall, my lady. No one need be harmed... I only require a drop of king’s blood.” She turned slowly, the ruby at her throat glowing, and regarded Gendry with a curious gaze. Realization dawned in Sansa’s thoughts as is dawned on Gendry’s face. King’s blood! Those leeches... and Robb and Joffrey... Was it true?

“No,” Davos said at once, revealing an inch of steel that glinted in the firelight. Another hand roughly shoved the blade back into its sheath. Davos looked to Gendry as he stood up straighter, but the lad only had eyes for the still girl in the bed beside him.

“My blood?” he asked the Red Woman. “It’s my blood you need to save her?” Melisandre nodded. An awkward stillness filled the chamber for a moment. Sansa met each occupant’s gaze in turn before settling on Gendry’s face. He looked resolute but tense, like a soldier before battle. “Then take it.”

Melisandre silently drew a black dagger from the folds of her crimson robes. It looked like dragonglass, but somehow different. Smoother, thought Sansa, and not jagged. Light did not glimmer nor dance off its edge as it might with common steel. It seemed to be a blade wrapped in shadow.

“Your arm,” Melisandre nodded at Gendry, who cautiously moved forward whilst rolling up the left sleeve of his jerkin. Davos moved to intercede, but a look from the bastard boy held in back. The Red Woman muttered something inaudible as she grasped Gendry’s muscled arm and, setting the tip of the dagger against his skin, drew the blade across his forearm in a slow, sweeping arch. Gendry hissed and gritted his teeth, but he did not pull away.

Melisandre turned his arm and let the blood droplets pool on the flat of her dagger for a moment before turning toward the fire. She held the dagger over the flames and spoke in some foreign tongue Sansa could not recognize. She flicked the daggers point downward into the fire as she continued to mutter.

With a rushing sound like wind through a narrow corridor, the fire went out. Darkness enveloped the room. But no... I can still feel its heat. She blinked rapidly and tried to gain her night eyes. The fire before her was stronger than ever, but its flames were black at pitch; blacker than the darkest, moonless winter night.
Then they burned brighter than a summer sun. Tongues of brilliant scarlet and gold flame licked at the walls of ceiling of the chamber. Brienne stepped forward. Gendry jumped back.

Melisandre leaned over the hearth and drew in another breath. Fiery tendrils seemed to meld with her deep red hair and robes. Her ruby glowed as brightly as the charcoals in the hearth’s heart.

As she backed away, the fire settled back into its familiar, soft amber glow and crackled merrily as if cheering the witch’s magic like some court jester’s trick. Sansa’s breath caught in her throat. *This is magic,* she knew. *True magic.*

Melisandre moved wordlessly to Arya’s bedside and pulled back the furs. Her eyes widened at the mark on the sleeping girl’s side, but she continued her work, muttering in some odd tongue. *What is she doing…?* Sansa stepped forward and around the bed to get a better look.

The Red Woman had bent lower over Arya. For a moment, Sansa was reminded of her own lady mother bidding her daughters a good and restful night. Melisandre leaned down and pressed her red lips to Arya’s pale, cold ones. Sansa thought she saw a flash of color pass between the two, but after a lingering moment Melisandre drew herself up to her full height.

A moment passed under dead silence. Even the fire seemed subdued, as if the witch had drunk in its energy. Then, for the first time in weeks, Arya drew in a rattling breath. To Sansa, it sounded like someone emerging from the depths of a frigid lake. She watched her sister intently, her heart hammering against her chest.

With a start, Arya shot up from her still position. Her unkempt brown hair fell in a messy curtain around her face. Her grey eyes, sunken and fatigued, reflected the dim firelight… and shone with terror.

**Chapter End Notes**

Well hot damn! I first posted this thing on September 4th and here we are 8 months later. I for one never thought we’d get this far. Much credit and many thanks goes to everyone who has read this, left a kudos, criticism, or encouraging comment. It's safe to say that without the community here, I would've said "fuck it" and go on to something else. Thanks for sticking with me through all the slow updates and whatnot. I’ll be going on vacation to guzzle beers and watch baseball at the end of the month, but I’m planning on getting another 2-3 chapters out before then.
The wood was darkening. Pale light shone through the barren trees at slanted angles – the last light of that short day. Flakes of snow fell toward the ground here and there, harbingers of a storm to come.

The she-wolf did not mind them. It was winter here, but of a lesser sort. The cold did not bite her furs nor the darkness limit her vision. She ran through the forest with the rest of her pack, blacks and greys and whites all far smaller than she. They moved as a family – hunting what little there was to hunt in these barren woods.

As they ran, one among them stopped, raising his head to a bitter northern wind. He turned. The others did too. The signal was understood by all without a sound shared between them: there was flesh to be had… and near.

He bolted. The she-wolf followed, catching the scent and overtaking her smaller brother. Swiftly she ran through the thin, barren trees and over ice-slick stones and deep forest furrows packed with old snow. Northward she ran, toward the promise of a meal for her family.

Other scents mingled amongst the flesh. That of the forest itself, dying and withering, was chief among them, but she could smell the others, the birds high above them, the far-off fires of men, and the great river.

It was there she ran, the scent growing strong as the tree line thinned. Yet the scent changed too. It was flesh, yes, but it was strange - like the snow itself was living – and rotting. It did not matter. They had to eat.

At last, she burst through the branches guarding the riverbank, snapping some and shaking the snow from others as she leapt forth. The sound of rushing water and cracking ice filled the area. The powerful waters in the middle had not yet frozen, but the shores were choked with ice.

The she-wolf looked around scanning the shoreline for a sign of her prey. There was nothing. Across the waters, the tops of the trees stuck out from a dense, cold fog like underbrush from a layer fresh-fallen snow. She could smell something over there, too… something she did not want to hunt.

Her brothers and sisters joined her on the shoreline, looking around for their prey. A few raised their snouts, noses twitching eagerly in the hopes of being the first to find the meal.

The scent was near, upstream but close. Two of the younger wolves ran towards it, bounding along the mighty river’s side. She followed, as did the rest of the pack.

The air grew colder as they ran. The mists that covered the opposite bank crept across the waters. Odds sounds echoed from within the white fog. She could hear the heavy footfalls that sounded like man’s, but also not.

Soon enough, they found the source of the scent. A buck lay dying on the riverbank, half submerged in cracked ice; its life’s blood leeching into the frozen river. Its side had been torn opened by some other beast. The sight and scents made her mouth water.
It was barely breathing. Yet as the boldest of her back approached the creature, he jumped back. The surface erupted in a plume of white water and shards of ice. A man stormed forth from the icy water, eyes burning like man’s fire.

The she-wolf leapt at her foe, barring her teeth for only a moment before sinking them into the man’s neck. With practiced ease, she tore a chunk of flesh away and retreated to watch him die.

Only he did not. The man continued forward, clawing at the closest of her pack and snarling in rage. The wolves attacked as one, ripping away bits of cloth and flesh as they overpowered their enemy. The assault only stopped when the man had been torn limb from limb, but even then his body moved as if alive.

The she-wolf moved toward the broken body, sniffing the torn, wriggling arms. The whole thing smelled of death. Cold death.

A sound from the far bank made her look up. Lights burned through the mist like men’s torches through their own smoke. There were many – far more than she had in her pack. The smallest wolf, a pup born late in autumn, whimpered in fear.

The men shambled toward the shoreline, snarling and growling like wolves. The she-wolf snarled back, but slowly backed away to the trees. Her pack followed. They would have to hunt somewhere else. She kept her eyes on the far bank as she retreated through the barren branches into the forest…

Then suddenly she was looking across the river at the retreating wolves. It no longer felt cold. It really did not feel like anything at all. The world was oddly blue – with flecks of white and grey amidst the gloom. She would smell the wolves. No. She could feel them. Their heat. Their blood. Their life. It all drew her forward like a hunter’s hunger.

Memories not her own filled her. Villages burning. Children screaming. Blood flowing… then freezing. The men of these lands were many. Soon this river would freeze and they would cross again – just as they had the others.

She paced downward to the riverbank and felt the ice crack underfoot. Not yet. Yet she peered over into the clear grey waters of the river and saw a carved, jagged, and pale face set in with two burning blue eyes looking back at her.

Arya screamed… and awoke with a start. Her chest was burning. Her brow was covered in sweat. She blinked away half-remembered dreams and visions. She had been somewhere else… within something else. Yet she could not recall where she had been.

She looked around. Dark forms surrounded her – she could hear their slow, hesitant breaths. She blinked her eyes rapidly, trying to adjust to the dim firelight. Slowly, the forms took shape.

Sansa stood off to her left, a look of relief clear on her face. Behind her, Brienne stood with her hand at her sword’s pommel and Davos at her side looking grim. Arya shook her head back and forth, trying to clear her vision. Her untidy hair – far longer than she remembered – brushed at her shoulders. Her chest burned as she labored to draw in each breath. How did I get here?

“She’s awake,” Sansa sounded awed. She rushed forward and threw her arms around Arya, who almost fell backwards from the force of her sister’s sudden affection. They stayed like that for a moment, sisters locked in a warm embrace. Then Sansa steadied herself and pulled away, allowing Arya to turn to the other side of the bed.
Gendry leaned against the furthest post, grasping one arm in the other; a thin line of blood trickling from the hidden wound down his forearm to his free hand. Despite the blood, he wore a look of utmost relief—almost a smile.

Arya’s cheeks began to burn as well as she remembered their last moment alone before the battle—before leaving Winterfell. Yet the warm flush spread to a burning rage as she at last recognized the figure standing by the room’s hearth.

“You!” she shouted. Gendry’s eyes widened and Brienne took a step forward from the shadowy corner.

The Red Witch stood just a few feet away. The fire’s glint in her eyes matched the soft glow of the ruby around her neck. Just the sight of her filled Arya with anger. Without truly thinking, she lunged for the table at the side of her bed where she always kept Needle.

She stumbled. Weaker than she remembered, Arya fell sideways and almost tumbled off the bed. Worse—Needle wasn’t there.

_The dagger_, she thought as she scrambled to the other side of the bed and grasped the cold dragonglass hilt of the Valyrian steel dagger. It would do. She lunged back across the bed, scrambling toward the Red Witch. Her arms felt weak and her legs burned in protest as she struggled forward. The Red Witch stepped forward to meet her, seemingly unfazed by the display.

Then two strong hands grasped both Arya’s wrists as she writhed in a useless protest.

“Stop!” Gendry said through gritted teeth. His efforts were soon aided by Davos and Brienne. Arya could have fought them off, but she found she did not have the strength.

“Arya! Stop,” Sansa called out from the other side of the bed. Arya did not heed her sister’s words, but instead continued to struggle against Gendry’s firm grip. It did little good. She was far too weak.

“You fire burns stronger than ever,” Melisandre spoke at last, sounding almost amused. Her eyes fell to the dagger clutched in Arya’s left hand. Recognition flashed across her face for only a moment before her visage settled back into its familiar smug certainty.

“What are you doing here?” Arya snarled. She had at last stopped struggling against Gendry’s overpowering grip, though she still grasped the dagger in one hand.

“She saved you,” Sansa interjected.

“From what?” she asked. All the while, Melisandre continued to smile knowingly.

“You’ve been in bed for weeks,” Gendry explained, a note of worry mixing in the strain in his voice. “Asleep, ever since the battle.”

_The battle…_ A rush of images filled Arya’s mind: the dragon and the wights and Jon charging into the fray; Gendry and the Hound and so many others battling against the dead; and the Night King… and Needle. The blade had shattered in the fight.

She felt a great stabbing pain in her side as she looked to where her old sword had been within an arm’s reach night after night. The blade, a gift from her brother, had been her constant companion through her travels.

The throbbing continued for far too long. Arya gritted her teeth and pulled away from Gendry. He
let her go. She gingerly pulled up the side of her woolen undershirt and saw a faded blue mark – like a brand upon her skin. Fear filled her.

“What happened?” she whispered to the room.

“You tried to fight him – that-”

“Night King. Great Other. A demon of ice and shadow and cold,” Melisandre interjected. “He leads the great host of the dead.”

“So we’ve heard…” Davos mumbled from the other side of the room.

“So, we lost?” Arya asked.

“The battle, yes,” Sansa stepped forward to speak, “but not the war. Jon and Daenerys flew south to aid White Harbor, where the dead are now.”

South… Other images filled her mind – memories only half her own. Here she was bounding through the woods and there resting in her den. I was with Nymeria. That much she knew. She had been running along the river and then… South… Where the dead are now… or at least some of them.

“I saw them,” she blurted out.


“No,” Arya answered, though she wished she had seen her older brother. She wished he were here now. “The dead,” she finished.

“You had a vision?” Sansa asked. Davos raised an eyebrow. Melisandre’s smile faltered. Gendry simply met her gaze as she looked to him for reassurance.

“I’m not – it wasn’t – I don’t know,” she tried to explain. “It was like a dream, but I saw one of them. I was one of them!”

The room was silent for a moment apart from the crackling of the fire. Arya looked around to each guest in turn, her eyes meeting Melisandre’s for only a moment before returning to Gendry’s comforting gaze.

“He marked you,” Melisandre said. “His power lives within you – or it did before the Lord of Light drove it from you. Perhaps you saw what he sees?” It was a troubling thought and the company reacted accordingly.

“Where did ya see them?” Davos asked, his voice colored with concern. “Do ya know where?”

“South… the Riverlands, I think?”

“How many?” Brienne asked, stepping forth from the shadows to make her considerable presence known once more.

“I don’t know…”

“Bran will,” Sansa said, cutting off the questioning. “In the morning, you need to speak with him. He’ll know what happened.”

“My Lady, I think that-”
“In the morning, ser,” Sansa stopped Ser Davos from completing his protestation. “My sister is awake, but she is not well.”

“Not well? I’m fine! I fought in the battle!” she said firmly, trying to stand up beside the bed and once more grasp the Valyrian dagger. She stumbled. The steel felt unbalanced and heavy. Her knees felt weak; her legs fatigued and empty. Gendry caught her before she fell.

“I told you: rest,” Sansa ordered. “The rest of us should leave her be. Lady Brienne, if you will,” she nodded at her guardian, who opened the door and led the way out. Sansa followed, but stopped before the threshold and turned to Melisandre, who stood just behind her. “And thank you, my lady. Whatever your faults, you have done my House and family a great service. The hospitality of our hearth and hall is yours.” The Red Woman only nodded before she followed Sansa Stark out the door.

Davos met Arya’s eyes for a moment, looked at Gendry, then left the room. Arya lay back against her pillows, too tired to pursue the departing company or even keep herself propped up any longer.

“Well…” Gendry said as he turned away and made to leave. Suddenly, the room seemed darker, the fire dimmer, and the air colder.

“Wait,” Arya said, her voice sounding far stronger than it had a moment ago, yet oddly soft too. Gendry’s visage softened. Arya thought she saw the ghost of a smile pass over his face.

“M’lady?” he said with a half-certain smirk.

She scowled, but quickly gathered her thoughts. Her heart began to flutter in her chest – perhaps even skipping a beat. Here, in her childhood bed and looking at the boy she had traveled with and fought beside – and kissed – Arya felt a little girl and a woman all at once.

She ventured forth with a soft courage. “Would you… stay?”

“Stay?” Gendry raised an eyebrow, but it was only for show. She knew he knew what she meant.

“With me.”

He turned toward the door and, for a moment, Arya thought he might leave her. But he only reached for the door’s iron latch and pulled it shut. Once more, she noticed the bloody red streak on his arm.

“What happened?” she asked, nodding at his exposed wound. Gendry looked down at his arm and shrugged as he walked back to the bed.

“Nothing, just an accident in the forge,” he said, though he did not meet her eyes. At once, she reached for her woolen shirt and tore a long strip of fabric away – holding it out to him. Gendry smiled as he took it and wrapped it around the wound, wincing as he tied it tight and secured it with a rough knot. Then he simply stood there, looking between the bed and the floor beside the hearth.

Arya felt herself grow warm again – and not from the fire. She shuffled sideways and made room on the near side of the bed. “There’s room here,” she said softly. Gendry nodded.

He tried to climb onto the bed but winced as he swung his leg up onto the furs. He gritted his teeth and withdrew for a moment.

“Your leg?” Arya asked, noticing far heavier bandages wrapped around his muscled leg.
“Just another wound from the battle – nothing like yours, though.”

And Arya remembered why she had been struck – rushing to Gendry’s aid after he had been bested by the Night King. “Does it hurt?”

“Not as much as it did.”

Gendry climbed up once more, carefully this time, and settled in beside her. It was still early enough in the night and she was far from tired. Perhaps they might talk of the battle and the war… or else of her parting gift to him before they marched off to the river.

Yet within a few silent moments, Gendry was fast asleep. She smiled to herself and moved closer to him, pulling the furs up to cover them both and rest her head on his chest and, slowly, drifted off to sleep while listening to the crackling of the dying fire.

Her dreams were filled with terrible images: burning city streets; screaming women and children; blue-eyed corpses and fierce winter storms. She was not sure whether they were truly nightmares or memories. In and out of them she drifted, in one moment lying awake looking at the fire’s smoldering embers and in the next cast back into shadow and flame.

Were it not for the shrieking northern winds, Arya might not have awoken at all. No light streamed through the windows as it had during the summer mornings of her childhood. Through the window, she could see the black night sky had turned a dark grey, then slowly to a polished steel. The sun could not be seen, nor had it been for weeks.

Arya missed its warmth for her room was rather cold. Gendry had gone some hours earlier – no doubt to return to his work in the forge. They were at war, after all. I wish he had stayed, she thought.

She laid abed for quite a while, listening to the wind and the faint sounds of activity from the yard. Twice she tried to rise from her bed, but the pain in her side was far too great and she failed to move more than a few paces.

So she lay abed. A servant had lit a new fire in the hearth. She watched as the flames consumed each log, turning each to ash.

The flames – lively and free – seemed to mock her. Worse, they reminded her of last night, when the Red Woman had done something to her. No one had said what it had been. The Red Woman… The thought filled her with a hot burning anger. She had stolen Gendry away, had broken apart the only family she had known after the Lannisters took her father’s head. And now she’s here.

Jon will deal with her, she told herself. He will know what to do. But Jon was leagues away…

The door opening wide interrupted her thoughts. She thought it might be a servant come with fresh logs, but looked up to see Gendry holding two pewter plates laden with food, wispy clouds of steam rose off the hot fare.

He wore a satisfied grin on his face. “I, well, I thought you might be hungry after not eating for a few weeks.”

And she was hungry – ravenously so. She had not realized it until she inhaled the scents of bacon and bread wafting toward her. Arya might have leapt from the bed if her injuries had not prevented her from doing just that.

Instead, Gendry walked toward her and handed her a plate. At once, she ignored all courtesy in
favor of devouring the meal with both hands. Gendry laughed — and when she had wolfed down the hunk of bread he split off half his own portion and handed to her. She ate that too.

“It’s not much, with the rationing and winter and all, but it’s—”

“It’s good!” she forced the words through a full mouth.

Gendry smiled and gave her a moment to eat. “When you’re ready, your sister asked for you to meet her in the godswood.”

Sansa... What could she possibly need right now? No. Arya held her annoyance in check. She had been abed for week and had certainly missed much. Indeed, had Sansa not said Jon flew to White Harbor?

“Fine,” she responded. Gendry only nodded.

“So,” he ventured forth after Arya had swallowed another mouthful, “what do you remember from before?”

“I’m not really sure,” she mumbled the lie into her bread. “Just bits from the battle.”

“Oh...” he said, looking away. “I heard you mumbling in your sleep last night — and not those names either.”

“I always do that,” Arya insisted.

“No, you don’t.”

“And how would you know that?” she scowled, though only partly serious.

“I stayed in here, with you, for weeks,” Gendry said, “you know — when you were sleeping.”

Arya felt a flush begin to creep up her neck. He stayed here? It was an odd thought and an odd feeling, but necessarily a bad one. In fact, just sitting here alone with him and only two hot meals and warm fire to keep them company was rather nice.

“Oh.” Now it was her turn to look away. The silence did not last long. She felt a rough, calloused hand grab hers and hold it tight. She gave it a quick squeeze and looked into his deep blue eyes.

He cleared his throat. “We, uh, we should go. Your sister will be waiting.”

Slowly, they readied themselves. Arya made no attempt to hide herself as she dressed, but Gendry played the nobleman and turned away to give her space.

When she was ready, Gendry helped her down the tower stairs and across the yard. She helped him too, steadying his pace and supporting him. They made their way to the godswood together.

Sansa, Samwell, and Bran were already standing by the heart tree. He stayed here? It was an odd thought and an odd feeling, but necessarily a bad one. In fact, just sitting here alone with him and only two hot meals and warm fire to keep them company was rather nice.

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Sansa, Samwell, and Bran were already standing by the heart tree. Just the sight of the old weirwood filled Arya with strength. She could not recall how many times she had run around the yards only to find her father oiling his greatsword beneath the great red canopy, the same bloodred now as it had been in summers past.

Sansa and Sam turned as they approached. For the first time, Arya noticed the foreign soldiers lining the grove. There were only a few of them, but they stood as resolute as the weirwood itself, their robes colored the same blood red mixed in with fierce crimson, soft amber, and glowing golds and oranges. Each man held a spear tipped with a black iron point. They did not move as the pair
approached.

“Arya,” Bran called out, though his chair was turned away. “You’re awake.”

“Yea…” she responded after a silent moment. *He’s not the same. His voice… his eyes. My brother has gone somewhere else.*

Gendry and Arya closed the rest of the distance in a few struggling strides. Sansa stepped back to make room for them. Sam gave a half-hearted jump backwards to further observe the courtesy. They stood in silence for a moment, listening to the wind above the grove the restless rustling of the leaves.

“We need to know what you’ve, well… what you’ve seen,” Sam ventured forth into the topic at hand. “Your brother’s visions let us know where the Night King is, but if you’ve seen the dead in the Riverlands…” his thought melded with the silence of the wood.

“They were just dreams,” Arya countered, though she knew it to be a lie.

“They weren’t,” Bran said. “He touched you. He marked you.” As he spoke, his white and withered hand pulled back the fur cloak and revealed a faded blue mark upon his arm. “He did the same to me.”

Arya rounded the group and stood facing Bran, her eyes drinking in the evidence of their shared curse. “What does it mean?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he admitted.

“Well, when I touched a blade of dragonglass to it, you, well, you shouted,” Sam offered. Silence fell over the group once more.

“You said you were in one of them. What exactly did you see?” Sansa inquired.

“I was…” Arya paused to think. Gendry gave her a curious look. “I was with Nymeria,” she admitted. Sansa looked surprised. “And then I wasn’t. I was in one of them… beside a river. I knew where I was, but it all felt… different.”

“Maybe it’s true then,” Sansa said. “The dead have crossed the Neck. We thought they were only at White Harbor, perhaps not even so close as that. If they reach the capital…” She turned to Bran. “Can you see them?”

“I can try,” he responded wearily.

At a look, Sam wheeled Bran’s chair within reach of the weirwood. He reached out and touched the bark, his skin the same shade of pale white as the trunk itself. Arya watched in queer fascination as his body slumped and his eyes rolled back into his head. Then a searing pain cut into her side. She screamed.

All she could feel was white hot agony slowly subsiding with each heartbeat. Gendry held her tight as she writhed. Bran, too, had shouted. The mark on his arm looked brighter than before.

“What was that?” Sansa demanded. “What happened? What did you see?”

“Nothing,” Bran panted. “I saw nothing.” He clutched at his arm much as Gendry had his wound the previous night. “Not the dead. Not the Night King. Nothing.”
Sansa sighed. “We need to know what’s happening. Can you try again? Can we find Gilly?”

“No.”

The firmness of Sam’s response created another uncomfortable silence in the grove. Overhead, the leaves rustled in the breeze. “She’s resting,” he said at last. “As is the child.”

For a moment, Sansa looked as though she might burst with anger. Then, she swallowed her pride and responded with a lady’s courtesy. “Very well,” she said. “What about White Harbor? And Jon and Daenerys? We need to know where they are too.”

“There’s no need for that,” Bran said.

“Why?”

“They’re already here.”

Chapter End Notes

So, the gap between updates is only growing. That’s going to change. I’ve implemented a new requirement of 500 words a day or more. Time to get to work. I’m not going to promise a defined timeline but this past week was productive. This summer should be... fruitful.

This chapter was obviously shorter. I think the general trend is going to continue that way outside of battle sequences. Honestly, not every scene is a huge deal. I try to write some smaller moments to give you guys some good character interaction within the smaller moments. I didn't want to unpack all the details on one chapter, nor did I some climactic scene with Mel just yet.

I'm sure I'll get some questions on where the dead are, so I'll say that Cersei's chapter took place a few weeks in the future and our Northern timeline will be catching up soon. As of this chapter, they have some "advance guard" units deployed southward. Hopefully that makes sense - it'll come into play a little more down the road.

That's all I got for now. See you people in the comments and in Chapter 37.
A single horn blast heralded their arrival. Daenerys, covered in grim mix of ash and frost, rode beside Jon on the road that led to Winterfell’s gates. Two dozen Unsullied sentries fell in around them as they went while others went to escort Lady Manderly and the young mother and child who had come with Jon from the city.

*The only survivors,* Daenerys thought bitterly. She silently hoped the remainder of the ships had found safe passage south. Silent hope was all she had for now.

Silence had reigned on the journey back, swift though it was. The fierce winds had forced Drogon and Rhaegal, both wounded, to the ground more than once. Lord Manderly’s daughter and the mother Jon had rescued both sat in shocked silence. The babe cried out from time to time. The sound made Daenerys feel weak.

She had traded knowing glances with Jon every now and then, but neither spoke. Their wounds were still too fresh; their memories too awful. Yet soon they would have to ride under the portcullis and into that familiar yard teeming with northmen… northmen hoping to hear happy news of a city saved and of a victory against the dead. Instead, she would have to describe their failure to save the city and its hundred thousand innocents.

Daenerys choked back the bile rising in her throat, an odd burning sensation that melded with the icy bite of the winter air. *Those screams*… She could not drive them from her mind. Nor could she forget the sight of the masses of panicked smallfolk… nor the shrieking hordes of blue-eyed wights.

She inhaled deeply as the horn blew again. The queen and king were returning – and rulers must be strong. She steeled herself and let all emotion slip from her face like snow from a slanted roof. Daenerys could hide her pain well when needed, even though the pain inside her only grew worse from the neglect.

They rode onward and under the outer walls, over the frozen moat, and through the inner gate. Jon dismounted to one side of the stables. Daenerys guided her mount to his side and joined him on the hard, frozen dirt. She almost stumbled but caught herself. *I’m more exhausted than I realized.* It had been a long time since she had a proper rest.

When she looked up, she saw not the dull greys and browns of the northern forces, but streaks of blood red and radiant amber against the slate grey and snow white of the castle. At first she thought the castle on fire, but then soon came to recognize – as if from a dream – the soldiers of the Fiery Hand.

She looked at the tattooed faces in the ranks, all shades of tan, brown, and black – those more familiar tones from across the Narrow Sea. She remembered their ornate clothing and armor from her own travels as a child. Yet where there were the Red God’s soldiers, there were bound to be priests…

Daenerys scanned the yard once more and found what she was looking for. There, striding toward her from across the castle grounds, was an oddly familiar figure flanked by six crimson-clad guards.
“Welcome, my queen,” Melisandre greeted them in a commanding voice. The ruby around her throat glowed softly like a dying fire’s ember. *Her?* The priestess had come to offer her counsel on Dragonstone, but had sailed for Volantis soon after. *Is this aid from the east? Daario, perhaps? Or do I still have allies in Essos?*

Whatever the reason, she was glad to have aid. Her heart swelled with rekindled hope. She moved to greet the Red Priestess, surprised thought she was by the woman’s presence, but Jon got there first – a hand grasped firmly around his sword’s hilt.

“You,” he said, his voice low and wrathful. At that moment, the door to the hall burst open and Tyrion, Davos, Varys, and the others of the royal retinue stormed into the yard. Jon turned to Davos instead. “What’s she doing here?”

“She’s-”

“Come to aid you in your fight against the dead,” Melisandre proclaimed.

“I swore that I would see you hang if you ever rode north again,” Jon said, taking a step closer. *Hang?* The woman was an ally – a friend!

“What do you mean ‘hang’?” she asked, drawing even with her husband.

“Hang, yer Grace, for the murder of the Princess Shireen of House Baratheon,” Davos said, his accusation dripping with anger. No one uttered a word until Daenerys slowly ventured for with a hesitant question.

“What?”

“King Stannis’ daughter,” Davos explained. “Burnt her alive as a sacrifice.” Jon looked to her and nodded, affirming the accusation.

Daenerys’ throat tightened. Her hand found her slightly swelling womb, but her mind raced back through the years to her first pregnancy with Drogo’s khalsar. The Lhazareen witch… Drogo’s wound… Rhaego’s defiled body… “Blood magic…” she whispered, though the words were loud enough for most to hear.

“Aye,” Davos said.

She looked into the blue eyes of the red priestess as though she were meeting the woman for the first time. Anger swelled in her breast. *Who would kill a child?* Part of her wanted to throw Melisandre to her dragons and part of her wanted to step behind Jon and let her husband have at this witch.

“Perhaps I have misjudged you,” Daenerys said to Melisandre.

“Perhaps,” Melisandre echoed, “but was it not I who counseled you to summon Jon Snow? I saw the threat – just as he did – and now I have come to join this war for the dawn.”

“Yet you would burn a child to-”

“We have all made mistakes,” Tyrion stepped forward to diffuse the growing tension. “Some worse than others, but Lady Melisandre has brought a thousand spears to aid us in our war. We cannot dwell on old grudges. We have learned that much already. Besides, your lady sister has already granted our guests Winterfell’s hospitality. It would be a poor display to hang her now. We’re not Freys here.”
“And why would Sansa do that?” Jon asked.

The answer presented itself in a group emerging from the gloom of the godswood. Sansa leaded the group, followed by Bran in his chair and Samwell pushing it. Finally, limping forward as if still wounded, Gendry walked forth beside…

“Arya?” Jon questioned his own little sister’s appearance. He wore an odd expression, half-smiling and thoroughly confused all at once. That did not stop him from turning away from the Red Witch and quickly closing the distance between himself and the group.

She felt herself smile, though somewhat sadly, as her husband dropped to one knee and embraced his sister. Arya winced as he hugged her but smiled in turn.

Daenerys winced too. The happy sight had awoken some dull ache within her. A family... what might be my family. Yet she had once lost her family – by blood and marriage – and might still lose her new one. And I have failed so many others... Her eyes found the still and silent Red Priestess standing expectantly in the middle of the yard. Melisandre, an eastern sorceress, had opened her oldest wound.

“You did this?” Jon called to Melisandre from where he stood with Arya and Sansa.

“She did,” Sansa told him. “We watched it happen.”

Daenerys saw Jon’s visage sink into thought. His brow furrowed and his eyes traced unseen lines on the ground. She looked between Arya, awake and alike, and Melisandre. She tried to imagine this ‘Shireen’. She must have been near Arya’s age... and died as a sacrifice to fuel some foul magic. What did she do for Arya? Is one girl’s life worth another? She hated herself for the thought, but still lingered in her mind.

“How?” Jon asked.

Melisandre smiled, an altogether unsettling appearance. She looks as though she knows some secret the rest of us do not, Daenerys thought. “You most of all should know the Lord’s power, my king,” she said.

“I asked you how,” Jon said again, far more firmly.

“It is as your royal wife said, then,” Melisandre motioned with an outstretched arm to Daenerys. “Blood magic, some call it, but I-”

“Wife?” Arya asked, her voice cutting through Melisandre’s oddly melodious yet threatening tones. She was asleep for weeks, she had to remind herself. The question still brought a smile to her face as she remembered that fleeting moment of happiness with Jon Snow.

“Aye,” Jon wore an odd half-smile as well. “We were married just a few days past.”

Arya looked to her brother, then to her sister, then finally to Gendry beside her where her gaze lingered for a moment. “I’m happy for you,” she said, though she seemed more bemused than anything else.

Slowly, Daenerys’ own attention was drawn back to Melisandre of Asshai and her guards, scores of whom now stood around the outer edges of the yard. Other northerners and wildlings had gathered around as well. But not men of the Vale. Their absence seemed curious to her. Jon seemed to regain his cool focus as well. Other eyes, however, were focused on her, on Arya, or on the two solemn figures huddled together by the gate.
The crowd’s scattered mutterings grew louder the longer the scene continued. More eyes turned from the reunited Starks to the two destitute newcomers. Their whispered words did not seem cheerful. *A far cry from the wedding feast,* she mused grimly. Across the way, a familiar voice called out.

“While I’m sure we’d all like to enjoy these various… reunions,” Tyrion announced to the assembled group, “it is rather cold. We all might find it preferable retreat indoors. To the solar, perhaps?” he suggested rather forcefully, eyeing his queen with a curious look.

His meaning was plain. *What is it he wants?* She wondered. Her Hand’s suggestions and plans had seldom come to fruition here in Westeros, but Daenerys still trusted him… or at least trusted his abilities.

Slowly, the growing crowd dispersed to make way for the retinue. Tyrion beckoned them back through the hall and up through the keep to the solar.

Daenerys felt a twinge of annoyance at being hurried along like some laggard mule. She was first to enter the solar and first to turn on Tyrion once she had settled herself in her usual seat.

“So,” she let the word hang in the air for a moment, “why have you gathered us here?”

“Your Grace,” he sighed, “you are covered in ash, dust, and frost. You’ve not said a word of what did or did not happen whilst you were away, and you’ve returned with a fair-faced young noble woman and a truly desperate looking young mother and babe. If I could see them, the soldiers and smallfolk standing about had a far better view.”

The others entered the room as they spoke, bringing with them a half dozen whispered conversations. Jon moved to her side at once, but even his constant, comforting presence did little to ease the tightness in her chest. She knew, as he did, that they would have to share the news of their failure with the others.

“We must relive it all.”

“Thousands,” Melisandre said, “I have seen them. Battered, broken ships fleeing south to the Vale.”

*Thousands,* Daenerys thought. *So they did flee. They will be safe.* It was reassuring, yet how had this Red Priestess known? *If she can see as Bran can, what else does she know? What does she want? Why is she here?* Questioned flooded her thoughts.

“Are there?” Tyrion asked the question Daenerys had wanted to.

“Thousands,” Melisandre said, “I have seen them. Battered, broken ships fleeing south to the Vale.”

*The Vale,* Jaime Lannister scoffed from the corner, “well, I suppose they’ll be well protected there.”

“What do you mean?” Jon asked.

“Ah…” Tyrion sighed. Daenerys looked to her husband then around the room. Few dared to meet her eyes, saved Melisandre. Her gaze was piercing, knowing, and unknowable. Her eyes dropped to Daenerys chest – or stomach – before flicking back upward. Her lip turned upward in an odd smirk.
“They fled,” Sansa said, standing up from her own chair to address the issue. “Like cowards, they fled. Fifteen hundred knights broke camp and ran home.”

“They’re gone?” Jon asked, his tone barely masking the dismay he was surely feeling.

“They are,” Tyrion replied grimly. “Yet, we’ve gained a thousand eastern spears.”

“Numbers won’t matter,” Jon said. “White Harbor has fallen.”

The room went silent, saved for the choked sobs of women who had been rescued from the city. It felt as if the very air had been drawn from the chamber, leaving nothing but cold emptiness in its wake.

“And the dead?” Davos asked.

Jon told the rest of the solar what had transpired: how they had tried to lure the dead away; how they had failed... and how they had overrun the city’s defenses. He did not mention how they had set the streets ablaze with dragonfire. Neither needed a reminder of that awful heat and those screams.

The room was silent as Jon finished speaking. Some wore shocked expressions whilst the color drained from others.

“So what now?” Sansa asked, her voice shaking but strong. Her own pale features stood out against the black of her cloak and bold, auburn hair.

“What?” Jon asked.

“She means what’s next,” Arya said, wincing as she stood. “What are we going to do? How are we going to fight?”

The answered eluded all of them. Daenerys’ own thoughts raced ahead for a solution. We have failed in the field and in the skies. We cannot march forth to meet them, but we cannot wait and wither behind these walls.

What if there is no path to victory? What if we have already lost? Her thoughts took a darker turn then, as she imagined wights swarming over Drogon’s wings... over Winterfell’s walls... over her. She looked up to find Melisandre staring at her once more. She turned to Jon, who was himself deep in thought. He did not look up.

He seemed lost in dreadful thought, as did all the others. Perhaps they had come to realize what she had – that there was no easy answer, no way to defeat the dead...

“It’s rest we need now,” she responded at last. “Lady Sansa, might I ask you to escort our guests to suitable quarters?” She motioned to the mother and Lady Manderly. “The rest of us can convene on the morrow to continue the discussion.”

“Brienne will find them rooms,” Jon commanded, straightening his back and adopting a more kingly pose. “I’d like Sansa to stay here for a moment – and Bran and Arya too.”

“Perhaps if we could-”

“No,” Jon cut off Tyrion with a curt thrust. “I’ve something to discuss with my family.”

Cowed and confused, Tyrion turned and exited the chamber. The others followed. She was not sure
what made her do it, but Daenerys took a half-step toward the door as well. A hand gently grabbed her upper arm, holding her back.

“Family,” Jon said, tiredly but far more calmly.

He waited until the echoes of heavy footsteps had faded, giving way to the sounds of a gathering storm outside. The fire crackled merrily – almost mockingly – and cast its light upon the tapestries adorning the walls. Daenerys began to wonder what the artists and bards might make of this war, but thankfully her thoughts were interrupted before they carried her to a darker place.

“So?” Sansa asked. “What is it?”

Jon inhaled slowly and looked to the Stark siblings in turn. Then, he spoke.

“I’m sending you all away,” he explained. “You three, Lady Mormont, Lady Manderly, and some of the others. To Bear Island” he said above the gasps of protest from Sansa and Arya. “You’ll be safe there.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Arya stated flatly.

“Nor am I,” Sansa agreed. Bran examined Jon with a curious gaze, but remained silent.

“This is not a discussion. This is a command,” he fired back.

“One we’re not obeying,” Sansa said. Jon sighed.

“You don’t understand. None of you do. This war-”

“I understand,” Arya interjected. “I was there in the battle. I lost Needle.”

“And we almost lost you,” Jon responded. “You’ll be safe on Bear Island – and able to take a ship if the North should fall.”

Daenerys moved to her husband’s side as he argued with the others, but she listened only with one ear. She had not known his intentions, but she saw the appeal. After saving the last of the Manderly bloodline, Jon was certain to make sure Ned Stark’s children were not subject to the same terrible fate as the thousands of children who had been trapped in White Harbor.

She saw the appeal of fleeing this war herself. *Am I not to be a mother with a child to protect? Did not my own mother flee from Dragonstone when the war was lost?* She wondered what Rhaella would have said now, what counsel she would have offered her only daughter.

*We could fly east, all of us. I could keep our child safe. The Dothraki would welcome their Khaleesi, surely.* Shame overwhelmed her as the notion invaded her thoughts. Had she not brought thousands of bloodriders west to fight? What of them? Or the Unsullied? Or the tens of thousands of others over whom she and Jon might one day truly rule?

“And go where?” Sansa laughed, the derision in her tone drawing Daenerys’ attention back to the bickering. “South? The dead are already there. East? For what? A few more months of fear? No. Winterfell is my home, our home. I’m not going to leave it.”

“So if – what do you mean?” Jon’s question interrupted his own argument.

“South,” Sansa repeated, “Arya saw them.” Her little sister nodded.

“You? You saw them?”
“He marked her,” Bran at last broke his silence. “As he marked me.” He rolled back one sleeve with a withered hand to reveal a faded icy blue mark upon his arm. Arya did the same, pushing her cloak to the side and pulling up her jerkin to reveal a similar scar.

Daenerys drew in a sharp breath as she saw the twin marks. Their significance eluded her, but she could sense the power, the evil, within. It made her feel cold.

“I had dreams,” Arya tried to explain. “Wolf dreams at first, but others too. I saw the dead in the south – the Riverlands.”

“You saw them,” Bran reassured her.

“And have you?” Jon turned to his brother. “You saw them too? In the south?”

“That’s beyond my sight,” Bran said simply.

Jon looked at her, then back to his siblings. It’s worse than we feared, she thought, knowing Jon was thinking the same. If the Night King crosses the Neck and Trident, how many millions will he kill and raise? The war might well be lost.

“I need you to see,” Jon said. “We need to know. Otherwise…” the rest went unsaid. Bran nodded his head in understanding.

“You’re acting like we’ve already lost,” Sansa said. “We still have our armies and your dragons. And we have the Red Woman. She can help us.”

“She burned a child,” Jon said.

“She saved Arya,” Sansa countered. “And she saved you.”

“She has power,” Bran agreed. Arya nodded along too, but her eyes barely hid her own angry doubts.

She does, Daenerys thought. Her own thoughts concerning Melisandre of Asshai were muddled, confused. If Ser Davos’ accusations were true, she was dangerous and willing to sacrifice others to achieve her own ends. But Jon himself said she brought him back… and she saved his sister.

Daenerys was no fool, though. She could accept the priestess’ help without trusting her. Or allowing her near my own growing child.

“You were right to allow her to stay,” Jon admitted, “but watch her closely.”

“So you’re not sending us away?” Arya asked.

“I think that’s one battle I’ve already lost,” Jon said, the hint of a smile gracing his forlorn face. “We’ll talk more later,” he continued. “Daenerys and I need to rest.”

They dispersed at a measured pace, Sansa and Arya accompanying Bran down the hall while Daenerys and Jon made for their chambers. Ghost greeted them as they rounded the corner and appeared at the far end of their own hallway. The great white wolf seemed less calm then before, more harried and frantic in his movements. Perhaps he doesn’t trust this Red Woman either.

A fire was already blazing in the hearth when they entered the room. Its heat washed over Daenerys’ face, but it did not feel warm nor welcoming. She could still feel the dragonfire from the burning city.
Fire had always been hers. *I was reborn in fire. My dragons and I – we are fire.* Fire was how she had hatched her dragons, broken the warlocks’ curse in Qarth, freed her Unsullied in Astapor, and won the Dothraki’s allegiance. It was her weapon against the dead.

*But fire itself is death,* a whispering voice reminded her. It could consume her as it had consumed her family… as it had consumed countless families in the ruined city she had failed to save.

She looked to Jon for reassurance. He was silent and solemn, slowly disrobing and readying himself for rest. She too felt weary, the aches in her thighs from riding and the strain in her voice from shouting commands.

“Jon,” she said softly. He turned, his face half cast in shadow.

“We should rest,” he insisted, though his voice lacked both its commanding insistence and tender undertones.

“We should talk… what we did…” her voice died in the still air.

Jon sighed. “We did what we had to do.” He turned away again, removing his padded jerkin and sword belt. He set Longclaw’s scabbard against the wall and turned to the bed.

“We let thousands die,” she protested, her voice threatening to break. “We burned thousands!” Of women… and children.

“And we saved thousands more,” he said, though there was no fire in his response.

“How do you know that was right?” she asked, hoping he would give her the comfort and wisdom to set her own doubts to rest.

He only sighed again. “I don’t, Daenerys. I don’t. All I know now is that we did what we had to do – and now we need to rest.” He sounded weary – and almost fatherly – as he readied himself for bed. She decided to do the same.

He’s tired, exhausted. I am too. It’s rest I need now.

Daenerys removed her own winter clothing and joined her husband in bed. Soon enough, she heard the slow and steady rhythm of his breaths meld with the crackling of the fire. The wind shrieked outside the walls of the keep. And there were other noises – guttural shrieks and pleading screams and roaring fires…

She danced between waking dreams – some of the battle, some of the dead, some of other horrible memories. She remembered her own vision of family aboard that ship sailing into White Harbor… and wondered whether her own child would live to see the spring.

The restless evening turned into a restless night. At times, she thought Jon was awake but silent beside her, fighting off his own ghosts, but she said nothing. Her mind still rang with the echoes of her people’s death throes.

At last, she knew she could not sleep. Her conscience cried out louder than the midnight winds. Daenerys rose and wrapped herself in a woolen dress. She took Jon’s thick fur cloak for good measure, for the chamber’s fire had died some hours ago.

The castle was silent. Her delicate footfalls echoed off the stone walls, as did the dull steps of the Unsullied guards that followed her at a distance.

Guilt weighed heavy on her shoulders. Every gust of wind that shrieked over the battlements sounded like the terrible screams of doomed women and children. Try as she might, Daenerys...
could not drive the images from her mind: the press of bodies against the gates of the keep; the burning ships; and the pleading for mercy from some unseen and uninterested savior.

*Perhaps Jon was right. Perhaps we should flee.* She fought her own impulses – fought to remain composed and confident. *These are my people and I am their queen. We will fight.*

Yet how were they to win? Her armies had proven ineffectual and her dragons vulnerable. Daenerys had always believed in herself – had always given herself hope – but now even that seemed too far gone. She was lost.

When she had ruled in Meereen, she had often walked about the upper terraces and gardens of the great pyramid. *Perhaps the walks and walls of this castle might bring me some answers, or at least some measure of peace.* Pulling the cloak tightly around herself, Daenerys resolved to venture outside.

The air was bitter cold. It tugged at her cloak and stung her eyes and cheeks, but she did not turn away. It felt better than before, even in her exhausted state. She made her way to the covered walkway that overlooked the central yard and godwood beyond, standing beside a brazier for light and warmth while her own thoughts swirled around in her head.

Suddenly, the wind died. It’s howling stopped so suddenly that Daenerys looked up from her perch and peered down the covered walkway. The braziers to either side of her glowed brighter than before, as did the twin torches on either side of the door that guarded the far end of the way.

“It’s cold,” a voice said. Her heart leapt and her pulse quickened, but she did not jump. She turned slowly, so as to give herself time to regain her composure. Her eyes found the glowing ruby first.

“Melisandre of Asshai,” she breathed out her visitor’s name into the night. The greeting was more frigid than the air itself.

“Might I have a word?” Melisandre asked.

“Perhaps.” *What can she possibly want?*

“It is either yes or no,” Melisandre said without a hint of playfulness in her response. “Decisions must be swift in time of war.”

“Swift decisions are often incorrect ones,” Daenerys began, “as you might have learned when you burnt a little girl alive.”

To her credit, the Red Woman averted her eyes. She looked away into the yard where her fires cast long shadows across the thin layer of white. Daenerys’ eyes caught the red glint of the ruby at her throat. It glowed brighter than any fire. Then, Melisandre turned back to regard the queen with a curious gaze, her blue eyes seeming as cold as her ruby was warm.

“Perhaps,” she said. “And yet, there was power in a king’s blood. Power enough to melt away the snows when King Stannis needed it most… and power to bring back your own king, my queen.”

Daenerys inhaled sharply. She had known Melisandre had brought Jon back after his own sworn brothers had betrayed him. *And now she claims it was because of a child’s blood.* “Blood,” Daenerys said. “I’ve heard it before. You’d claim that child’s blood saved Jon?”

“I know it, for it is as I said. There is power in a king’s blood.”

“Blood magic…” Daenerys muttered. Melisandre raised an eyebrow. “She killed my son with
blood magic."

“Who?”

“A maegi in the east,” Daenerys explained, the thoughts of Stannis Baratheon’s daughter scattering before the memory of her lost son – and the hope of a new, healthy, and living child.

“Your son-”

“By Drogo, the Khal. She stole my child and husband both with her vile sorcery.” She could feel her temper flaring. “And here you stand, asking why I do not trust you, why I look askance. You burned a child. You’ve practiced blood magic too.”

“Magic,” Melisandre said simply.

“What? What do you mean?” Daenerys demanded of her companion.

“Blood is not a type of magic, my queen, blood is the cost… the cost of power.”

It all came back to her in an instant: that awful, dry heat upon the plains; the screams of Drogo’s dying horse and the cries of the khalasar’s women; and the morning after that fateful night…

“Only death may pay for life,” she whispered.

Melisandre nodded. “Blood, not death, pays for life, as it pays for all else. Lords win their lands with the blood of lowborn soldiers, as great masters do with the blood of their slaves. Your own ancestors won mastery over the dragons with blood sacrifice – or so it is believed.”

Her queenly confidence deserted her like a Vale sentry.

“Your heart is full of doubts, my queen,” Melisandre said, taking a step toward her. “So many victories have you won in the south and east. So many hearts. But that shall be for naught if you do not triumph here.”

“And how do you propose we ‘triumph’, then?” she snapped. “Have you fought them? Do you know this enemy?”

“No,” the priestess admitted, “but I know that sacrifices must be made to ensure victory. A soldier, a city, a dragon… a child. That has always been the way of things.”

Daenerys felt her hands clench into tight fists as she backed away. You shall not have my child, witch.

“You speak of an innocent child’s life as if it were nothing,” she said.

“Against the fate of the realm?” Melisandre asked, her ruby glowing brightly, “it is. Death marches both north and south, for you did not have the strength to sacrifice what was necessary to claim a victory.”

She couldn’t have… she can’t have…? How does she know? She and Jon’s decision had been difficult. Perhaps too much so. Perhaps she is right.

When Daenerys did not offer an immediate response, Melisandre spoke again. “Blood, my queen, is the price some must pay if others are to survive. It is the price of death…” her eyes fell to Daenerys’ navel, “and for life.”
“I…” the queen offered a weak retort. She felt as if the priestess were staring through her cloak, her clothes, her very thoughts.

“It does not take the Lord’s fires to see what is clearly in front of me,” Melisandre offered a somewhat reassuring smile. “Yet all else is the same. How many thousands of mothers let blood when giving live to their children? As it was with your dragons, so it will be with your daughter.”

And with that, she turned and strode back across the battlements, leaving Daenerys in the cold.

Chapter End Notes

Was supposed to push this out on Monday, but I ended up chopping it up and re-writing a few scenes. The overall jist is that I think that Daenerys’ growing anticipation of motherhood, fear that this fight isn’t going as planned, and fresh memories of burning half a city to avoid their bodies being turned has her shook. Hopefully that was apparent and not too muddled. Her relationship with Melisandre will develop a bit more.

Sorry for what some might see as a lackluster Jonerys scene, but in the current circumstance I didn't think it was right.

Anyway, have a great Fourth to all my fellow 'muricans and an excellent Wednesday to everyone else.
The Three-Eyed Raven VI

Chapter Notes

I literally wrote all of this in the last 24 hours. Pardon any typos I missed up review. I'll fix 'em later.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The snow had started last night. The Three-Eyed Raven had watched it begin to fall from his seat near the fire in his own dreary quarters. It was not the light and playful summer snows he had known in Bran’s youth. Nor was it the wild, heavy snow of those winter storms that had buried the keep some months ago. It fell silently, relentlessly, deaf to the concerns of the world and those in it. The storm would bury them all in its own time.

Snow had filled his dreams, too. *Always the same one*, he mused as he remembered the world consumed in a brilliant white light – like a ray of morning sun on a sheet of ice. Some of those greendreams – like the waves of the sea crashing over Winterfell - had made their meanings apparent in time. *Perhaps this one will as well.*

The descent of a thousand thousand snowflakes gave the godswood an odd quality, like all the world was swirling around the heart tree; out of his control yet set in perfect order by some greater power.

There were other movements as well. He saw the braziers’ flames flickering along the walls. Men – both foreign and northern – patrolled the battlements, their grey, black, and crimson cloaks fluttering in the wind. That same winter wind rustled the blood red canopy of the grove. A single red leaf joined the small flakes falling downward.

His blue eyes followed it to the ground - then flicked upward. A hooded figure stalking silently toward him, making right for his chair. He recognized her presence and gait, and the dagger glinting at her hip.

Arya pulled back her hood and smiled at him. The Three-Eyed raven tried to smile back. The gesture felt awkward on his cold, stiff skin.

“Do you ever leave this place?” she asked.

“I need to be here,” he responded. *There is still much to do.* He was the North’s eyes – the eyes of all the living. Only he could know where the enemy would strike or what they would do.

“To see,” Arya finished his thought solemnly.

“Yes,” he said.

Silence settled between brother and sister for a time. Arya moved away and made to sit upon one of the thick, low branches of the heart tree. A dusting of snow had begun to cover her fur clad shoulders and messy, dark brown hair. The Three-Eyed Raven could feel the flakes land in his own eyelashes. He blinked them away.

“What do you see, when you see them?” The question was hesitant – like that hushed moment
before a summer storm. Yet, with this first question asked, he knew a deluge would follow.

“The past,” he explained. “And now. Where they are. What they’re doing.”

“Can you see the future too?”

“No.” That was not the whole truth. His green dreams offered veiled glimpses of things to come, but he could not decipher their meanings.

“Oh… Do you know where they are now?” Arya asked.

“No. South, perhaps. After the city fell.” The Three-Eyed Raven could sense that much, even if his sight was obscured at times. As I grow weaker, too. Every foray into the minds of the enemy left him drained, exhausted. His shielding of Jon and Daenerys had left him bedridden for a day or more. “He’s growing stronger.”

The statement seemed to make the girl shrivel up. She pulled her knees into her chest and exhaled a long-held breath. Comfort her, the boy within urged him. That’s what a brother would do, of course, but not him. The truth was the truth.

“He touched you too, marked you,” Arya said, nodding at his arm. He nodded. “He marked me too.”

“I know.” He had sense the coldness within her when she returned from the field. It was gone now, driven and burned away by the Red Priestess’ magic. That woman is powerful, he knew. And she could help.

“What does it mean?” She hid hear feel well enough, but he could still sense it. I don’t know… What was the mark? A bond? A brand? Something more sinister?

“I’m not certain,” was all he could say in response.

“Oh,” she sighed. Her tough exterior showed signs of wear. Yet there were more questions – urges for answers she concealed like hidden daggers.

Comfort her, Bran said again. In a moment of weakness, he allowed his brotherly instincts to take hold. “You’re worried,” he said. She laughed. It was a hollow and humorless sound.

“I’m scared,” she admitted. “We all are. No one knows what to do. Or how to fight. Even dragons can’t win this war. But me? I saw them, just like you. I was one!”

“I’ve been in their minds,” he said. “Many of them.”

“Really?” she asked, curious and terrified all at once. “Do you… do you think I’m becoming like you?”

For the smallest moment, a far brighter future presented itself him. One in which he might have a partner, a friend, to share in his task. And if we triumph? All of time lay before him, open to exploration. He could train Arya as he had been trained.

“No.” He answered her question and his own musings in a single world. That seemed to give her some small measure of comfort.

Their marks were different. She had been struck in the heat of battle. He had been truly marked – and within a vision itself at that. Yet the connection was still there. The otherworldly blue brand
had not faded from his skin nor hers. It had kept her asleep for weeks – almost killing her. It had burned when he had used his sight. They had both scream. And it had broken whatever wards had guarded his mentor’s cave…

Dread cut through him like an icy gust of wind. Wards… No ordinary person could have sense them, blind as they were to the subtle strands of the Children’s magic that lay deep in the foundations of the earth. Even he had trouble sensing them at times. It had been easy in the cave and even at the Wall, where traces of the ancient greenseer’s magic were strong. But he could.

He knew there was magic here, too, buried deep in the earth. It was not as strong nor as obvious as in those other places. Yet he felt it when he touched his hand to the bark of the weirwood. Brandon the Builder has set the first stones of Winterfell as he had the Wall. The keep of House Stark was guarded by more than towers and moats.

Instinctively, the Three-Eyed Raven reached out to the tree – not to see, just to sense. His brittle fingers brushed against the rough bark. He could feel the roots stretch deep into the earth, through the frozen soil and stone and into the warmer places – or what should have been warm. It all felt cold. Barren. Dead.

How had he not noticed before? How had he not remembered? How had he not seen? A rare panic seized him. His hand shook. They were vulnerable. Does he know? I must see where he is. Where they all are.

“What is it?” Arya asked. I need to see, he thought to himself. It would not work with Arya here. It would not work save with one person – well, save two.

“I need Samwell,” he said, trying to force urgency in his voice. The words that came forth into the snowflake filled grove sounded uncertain and weak. Arya stepped toward him and lay a gloved hand on his shoulder.

“You know Bran, I can help too, whatever it is.” He could almost feel the warmth in those words – a sister’s love and concern. But I am not her brother. Not anymore. I am the Three-Eyed Raven.

“No. It’s Sam I need,” he responded. And the child.

“Sam,” Arya repeated. Crestfallen, she resumed her usual cold and unreadable demeanor and strode from the woods. Snow continued to fall silently around him.

He sat alone for a time, thinking of his own role in this war. To see is not enough. I must fight, somehow. He could fight in ways, of course. He had shielded the two dragon riders for a moment. He could cast himself into the near-empty minds of the wights. But I must do more.

Much would be required of the men inside Winterfell, especially if whatever ancient magic might lay in the foundations had been broken. They would need magic of their own – or else some other defense.

He felt an odd sensation at the base of his neck, like a presence watching him. He strained in his chair, trying to turn toward the grove’s only entrance. Then, he saw her.

She strode toward him, her robes the same deep crimson as the weirwood’s leaves. A ruby glowed softly around her neck and her hair was loosely done. It swayed to and fro with the gentle tugs of the wind.

“I’ve wanted to meet you for some time, my lord,” Melisandre of Asshai said.
“I’m not a lord,” the Three-Eyed Raven responded. His gaze met hers – blue on blue – and for a moment he felt a tingling warmth at the base of his neck.

Then, deep in the recesses of his mind, the boy cried out his warning. This woman was not to be trusted nor consulted. Her presence was an ill omen, a threat. No. The Three-Eyed Raven ignored him. He could sense the priestess’ power as surely as he might have felt a fire’s warmth were he seated beside it. Perhaps she can help.

“It is not for us to choose who we are. Blood is blood,” she smiled as she spoke. “Still, titles matter little to the Lord of Light. It is our deeds that matter, and the results of those deeds matter most of all.”

He considered her for a moment. She seemed so confident, so self-assured. It was like a brilliant sunrise after so many defeats and doubts.

“So tell me, Brandon Stark, what is it you have done? What have you seen? You have the gift of sight,” she said, taking another step toward him, “but you do not use it as you should. You look frail, weak. Our enemy is strong. You must be as well.”

“How?”

The question was simple and direct. The Three-Eyed Raven did not know the answer, nor did Bran. His body had withered over these many months. His efforts to combat and delay the dead had cost him much of his strength and focus. He needed an answer.

His apparent desperation had lit a fire behind the woman’s eyes. She smiled and called out in some foreign tongue to her men on the walls. A moment later, two copper-skinned soldiers ran into the grove carrying an oiled, unlit torch. Melisandre took it and dismissed them both. Her eyes followed them for a time, then found him again.

“Tonight those men will dine on old bread and cheese. They will kill and cook any pack animals too weak to carry on – then eat them as well. Such is required to sustain the body, to help it grow strong and powerful.”

“I have eaten all I need,” the Three-Eyed Raven responded. And that is little enough.

“It is not bread or even flesh of which I speak,” she continued. “Our power is different. It demands something different… something more.”

Our power? That’s what she had said. Can she see as we can? Is that why she has come?

“What?” he asked.

Wordlessly, she lit the torch with some unseen flint. Flames erupted into being before his eyes. She then drew a black steel dagger from the folds of her robes. He watched as she delicately pressed the point of the blade to her other hand’s thumb. A trickle of blood began to run from the wound.

Melisandre stared into his eyes as she held her thumb to the flames, unflinching and seemingly immune to the pain it was most assuredly causing her. Then she cast the fire aside and leaned toward him. He did not move away.

She touched her thumb to his lips. He smelled her blood’s coppery scent. He could almost taste it. Yet it was nothing to what he felt. Fire erupted in his veins, surging from his spine to his arms then all the way to his fingers. His thoughts felt clear and sharp. Bran’s own presence retreated to some
deeper place, fleeing the rising fire. He drew in a shocked, ragged breath – fueling the fire within with crisp, cool air.

“Blood,” Melisandre said as she withdrew. By the look on her face, she knew what she had done. “That was but a taste of its true power, of the Lord’s true power.”

Of course… Had not his mentor offered him similar, if cryptic, advice? Had not he yearned for the taste of raw and uncooked flesh – life a wolf on the hunt. Is this the answer? Is that what we truly need to see? The Three-Eyed Raven felt like a child eager to consume more of some sweet. Yet it felt far less innocent than that.

“This will help,” he told her.

“Yes, it will,” she said. “We are servants of the same lord, my friend. We are warriors upon the same battlefield. While others shall fight with sword and spear and bow, we shall do our parts.”

And what is that? He wanted to ask her. His own mentor had failed to mention that much. To see, to know, to tell, all this we have done and shall do. Melisandre sensed his doubt.

“The enemy knows our power. He will try to end it,” she said grimly, looking off into the high branches of the weirwood.


“Him, yes,” she said. “It is blood we need… and it is blood he hunts.”

“What do you know of him?” he asked the priestess.

She frowned. “I was hoping to ask that of you. Legends tell of the Great Other, but you have faced him – and he has marked you.”

And so he told her what he knew. He recounted his visions of the past: of the war between the Children of the Forest and the First Men; of the creation of the Night King; of the birth of his powers and betrayal of his creators. He told her his march on the cave and destruction of the wall and all else he had seen in his visions. The world became silent as he finished speaking. The woman did not seem surprised by his recounting.

“How do we stop him, then?” he asked. The Three-Eyed Raven had not meant to ask so directly. It was a boyish question, but he wanted an answer. The answer.

“Legends speak of another – a hero reborn amidst salt and smoke. A warrior of light who will cast this cold shadow from the world. Azor Ahai, he is said to be called.”

“Azor Ahai,” he repeated the name. “I know of no one by that name.”

“Nor do I,” Melisandre admitted. “Yet, the Lord has shown me what I think to be the truth. Your bastard brother, Jon Snow, does he not lead the fight against the dead?”

“He’s not a bastard,” the Three-Eyed Raven said, “and he’s not my brother.” It was not his truth to tell, not really; but he did not know the meaning of those earliest of visions. Why had his mentor showed him the truth of Jon’s birth if not for this?

She raised an eyebrow. “Forgive me, then. I fear this is one thing I do not understand.”

“He’s not a bastard,” he repeated, “and he’s not my brother. Jon is the son of Rhaegar Targaryen
and Lyanna Stark,” he explained in the same manner he had with Samwell and Jon himself. “His true name is Aegon, and he is trueborn.”

“Rhaegar Targaryen…” Melisandre breathed out the name in a whisper. “And Lyanna Stark?”

He nodded. The priestess’ contorted with a rare display of emotions, then settled into an almost radiant confidence. “A son of ice and fire,” she said. “Then it is true.” The ruby around her throat began to glow brighter than before.

The grove was silent. The snow continued to fall.

Voices broke the silence between the pair. They sounded friendly and familiar, chattering as they cut through the storm on their way to the godswood. Samwell, he thought. He had almost forgotten he had sent for the man and the child. There was still work to be done.

The voices softened, then died entirely as Sam, Gilly and her son, and Arya emerged from the snowy gloom. All eyes found Melisandre. Her eyes found each newcomer’s in turn.

“Hello,” Sam said, the word taking up multiple syllables. “Your sister said you needed us?”

“To see, yes,” he responded. He looked at Little Sam, held by his mother and starring up in wonder as the snow felling all around him. He thought about Melisandre’s words as he watched them. Is it his blood that helps me so? Is it his connection to the others that allows me to see?

Melisandre looked equally curious, but she quickly turned back to him and offered her own form of assistance. For a moment, he considered her offer. It had felt good to feel so strong.

“No,” he refused himself and her.

“We’re fine without you,” Arya agreed in a less than agreeable tone.

“I see,” Melisandre replied. She turned to address him. “Remember my words, Brandon Stark, and I shall remember yours. Together, we shall help drive away this darkness and end this Long Night.” With that, she paced away, her footsteps silent on the fresh fallen snow. He watched her disappear among the trees.

“What did she want?” Arya demanded, her former sisterly affection gone.

“To help,” he replied. Arya gave a grunt of dissatisfaction. Her left hand fiddled with the hilt of her dagger. He watched as it slowly traveled up to where he knew the enemy had marked her. The Three-Eyed Raven had little doubt she was remembering the pain of his previous attempt to see beyond Winterfell’s walls.

“I should go,” she said, turning to address the group. No one stopped her. Samwell took a step closer. Gilly mirrored his movements.

“I know what you’re going to ask of us, of him,” Sam started to speak, “but this must be the last time we do it this way. It hurts him.”

“I need him,” he explained the the pair.

“No,” Gilly said. The force of the refusal stunned Sam. The Three-Eyed Raven looked at the wildling girl. This is the only way.

“Right, well, Gilly agrees with me that-”
“No, I don’t,” she said. “Little Sam is my son. I know it pains him. It hurts me too. But if this,” she motioned to him and to the heart tree, “helps get rid of them, then we must do it.” Sam bit his lip, but offered no further rebuttals.

Wordlessly, the Three-Eyed Raven reached out to the boy with a withered arm. After having tasted the blood, he felt a bit stronger. Just the memory of that sensation had him craving more.

That would all have to wait. It was his task to see and to know. The child’s connection would help him forge his own. Gilly set her son down on his own two feet and, removing his glove, guided his hand towards the Raven’s own. He fought his mother all the way, beginning to cry and wail as the odd, foreign sensations returned.

Then, their hands touched. The world flashed white and the Three-Eyed Raven hurtled through a swirling vortex of thought more ferocious than any winter storm. *Focus.* The familiar voice repeated the familiar word. He turned his many eyes to his task.

And he felt them – the connections. Cold and foreign. Closer than he thought and far afield. There were many. More than before. He reached out to them…

He was there, beside a frozen river. Hundreds of others surrounded him, their thoughts subject to his own. Snow fell in thick, heavy flakes around him. The wind howled in rage. He looked ahead.

A town was burning. Children cried out for their parents and parents for their children. Dogs howled, whimpered, and fell silent. He could smell their blood, sense it. His brothers moved forward among the many others, their weapons drawn and readied. It would not matter. No one had fought them here.

*Focus.* The voice said again. The Three-Eyed Raven withdrew from the other’s mind. *The Riverlands,* he knew at once. *They’re in the Riverlands.*

*They hunt blood.* Melisandre’s words echoed in his thoughts. *The south. The city. Does he make for the capital?* His fear almost severed the connection. He found it again.

He searched with a thousand eyes for the great other, the Night King. His presence was strong and cold, but altogether familiar. *And far from here…* He reached out…

And was surrounded by trees. Tall and dark evergreens covered in ice and snow stood sentry all around him, blocking what little light there was from the sky itself. He was moving forward, his steps light and silent on the snow-covered forest floor. He recognized this place. He had trod this path as a boy, ridden along it on an early journey. *The Wolfswood. They’re in the forest?*

Others walked beside him. Many others. *Far more,* the Three-Eyed Raven realized in a moment of clarity. He reached out to their minds along those tenuous connections. There was a feeling present there, like hunger, but cold and ravenous.

*How many?* He could feel thousands. *No…* Tens of thousands? A hundred thousand? More?

The Three-Eyed Raven never got the chance to count. The enemy’s presence pushed against his own, seeking to drive him out. Daggers of pure ice drove into his thoughts from a thousand angles. He tried to fight them off, pushing back with the memory of that strength he had felt for only a moment. It was not enough.

Pain consumed him. He tried to flee, to fight his way free of the other’s grasp. Summoning strength he did not know he had, the Three-Eyed Raven forced himself from his vision and back into the godswood of Winterfell.
He slumped in his chair and tried to steady himself as he gasped for air. Beside him, the boy was crying. Samwell looked at him, concern writ on his face.

“He’s in the forest – the Wolfswood. They all are,” he told the man.

“They’re supposed to be marching south,” Sam protested.

“They are – some are. But he is still here.”

Sam nodded, exhaled, and tried to keep his voice calm and low. “We need to tell the others to, well, to get ready.” With that, he scooped up the child in his arms and handed him to Gilly. The color had drained from the girl’s face.

“Come now, it’s time to go back inside before this storm buries us,” Sam said as if to keep busy and distract himself. With a heave, he pushed the rolling chair forward and began the slow retreat indoors.

The Three-Eyed Raven remained consumed by his thoughts and the things he had seen. He’s coming here. For me. Fear sapped his strength.

From the corner of his eye he saw a lone figure, garbed in crimson, peering through a gap in the branches and watching the events below. As the snowfall thickened, she disappeared from view. The Three-Eyed Raven felt that odd sensation at the base of his neck once more.

Chapter End Notes

I'm going off the grid for a few days at the end of the week, which is a shame because I've been on something of a tear writing-wise. I maybe be able to get another short chapter out before the end of the week. I'll have a few more like this before the end-game ramps up (and of course we'll revisit Jon and Dany to see what they think of Mel's revelation).

On a broader note, I hope everyone is enjoying the story. I track my stats (a bad habit from a previous job) and have seen a downtick in views and Bookmarks. Unclear whether that's my pace of update, my content and direction, external factors like the glory of warm summer weather, or a combo package. As always, I do appreciate comments - even if they're critical. Past criticisms have definitely improved my story and style.

Speaking of story and style, I thought that this would be a one-and-done. That might not be the case. The last two weeks have given rise to this lingering idea for an AU-style Jon and Dany story in which Jon travels to Essos instead of going to the Wall. It's probably been done before, but I've got a lot of cool ideas dancing around my head - and, as always, I strive to make things different. I may end up posting a prologue or teaser chapter soon, but I'd rather get some input and feedback on the idea here. Fire away.
Chapter Summary

Schemes and plots are the same thing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“We make our stand here,” Jon said, thrusting two gloved fingers into the center of the map stretched across the solar’s table. Silence greeted the announcement – a far cry from the shouted protests that had consumed the last two weeks.

And there had been plenty of shouting. Arguments over whether they should ride forth or send the dragons to burn half the Wolfswood or, as one Northern lord had so ingeniously suggested, send a small group – twenty good men at most – to ambush the Night King. All foolhardy, Tyrion knew, and all doomed to fail. They would fight at Winterfell.

As if we have a choice, Tyrion mused. They had learned of the Night King’s intentions a fortnight past, when the broken Brandon Stark had shared his knowledge of the matter with the rest of the royal retinue. Rangings had been sent into the Wolfswood while the boy kept his tree-eyes and scores of ravens trained on the foe.

“Trenches are being dug here,” Jon swept his hand across the faded vellum map in a sweeping crescent. “And here. Stakes will be sharpened and set in the ground. Pitch will be readied on the walls and fires lit.”

“That won’t cover the camps of the Unsullied or the Dothraki,” Jorah said grimly.

“Nor the outer reaches of the town,” Sansa agreed.

“No, it won’t,” Jon replied. “But we don’t have enough men to defend it all. The walls are our best hope of victory.”

Victory, he almost laughed out loud at the word. Tyrion Lannister did not consider himself a pessimist to be sure, but victory seemed an absurd word to use. Survival, perhaps? Even that seemed too good, for he fully expected to wither away and starve should they break the dead host upon the walls.

If the solar’s other occupants agreed with him, they did so in silence. There was little doubt they all knew what they faced. Some had marched forth to the river to fight the dead. Others had heard the king and queen’s recounting of White Harbor. All knew the meaning of defeat here.

Only Daenerys held firm, her inner fire burning as fiercely as the day Tyrion had met her outside the walls of Meereen. Some knowledge gives her strength or some wisdom offers her comfort. Is it the child? His queen’s condition was beginning to show even through her wools and furs. Perhaps. What is was, Tyrion did not know. And I wish I did, for I would give all the Arbor’s summer stores for it now.

The meeting devolved into minutiae. Jon, Jaime, and Daenerys offered ideas for the defense of the
keep and castle. Clegane interrupted with grim asides. Davos and Sansa discussed provisions and
rationing in a darkened corner of the room. I led the defense of King’s Landing, he thought. Yet,
for once in his life, Tyrion did not feel the need to speak nor offer counsel.

Instead, he stared into the fire, watching it consume the logs as the ceaseless flow of words melded
into the sounds of the winter tempest outside. He watched the tongues of flame dance about, ever
upward, and disappear in a cloud of dying embers. How quick each one passes. Nothing more than
a flash of light.

And the fire stared back. Or at least, something did. He felt a pair of eyes on him – a sensation on
the back of his neck. He turned. Jon was arguing with Jorah and Tormund. Daenerys and Davos
examined the lines and small wooden figures set upon the map with such rigor that Tyrion thought
they expected the small wolf’s head to spring to life and speak sense to the rest of the room.

Then he found the source of his discomfort. There, standing in the shadowbound corner of the
room, stood Melisandre of Asshai. She and her thousand slave spears shall surely help in this fight,
he knew. But there is something more to her presence here.

The Red Priestess regarded him with cold blue eyes and a knowing smirk. It was an oddly familiar
look. Kinvarra wore the same expression when she came to treat in Meereen. But no, it was far
more familiar than that. It was an expression he had looked at for half his life. It was his sister’s
face he saw.

Wordlessly, Melisandre looked to the door, then back at him. Tyrion smiled wryly and nodded. A
kindred spirit, he thought as he rose and walked to the thick oaken door. He tugged at the iron ring.
Jon and Daenerys looked up at the sound of creaking wood.

“A bit of air,” Tyrion said to the pair before slipping from the room. And indeed, a rush of cool air
swept up to meet him. He inhaled the musty scents of the keep, smiling as he left the oppressive
heat of the solar. He walked to the end of the hall. Then, he waited.

The priestess appeared in the doorway a few moments later. He beckoned her come walk with him.
She did, striding down the hallway, her robes illuminated by the dim torchlight and her ruby
glowing like some hot ember. It was a curiosity to some and an ill omen to others. I have watched
dead men swarm Dothraki and serve a queen who rides a dragon the size of a small keep. I need
not fear some glowing jewels.

Wordlessly, they strode along the halls of Winterfell until they had reached a silent agreement that
the solar lay far enough behind them. He looked up at her – this eastern priestess who had served
Stannis Baratheon and ridden with Jon Snow. She wore that same knowing expression as before.

“So,” Tyrion began, hoping she would reveal her purpose here. Or at least stop smiling. She did
not. “Why have you come here, my lady?” Still no answer. Tyrion forged ahead. “You met with us
at Dragonstone, bid our queen summon Jon Snow, then sailed east. Why return when Volantis
offers warmth and safety?”

“It was the Lord’s will,” she replied.

“The same Lord who commanded you to burn a child?” Her smirk faltered, but did not fail.

“The same,” she agreed. “Blood is power, my lord Hand. More shall be spilt before we defeat the
Night King.” At least one of us likes our chances.

“But not the blood of babes,” he stated firmly. He knew of her obsession with a king’s blood and
had heard it before. From her, from Gendry, from Davos and Brienne and all the rest. Still, it
certainly had it uses… Arya Stark is alive by her hand.

“No, perhaps not,” Melisandre said. “But it is not of Baratheon babes of which I wish to speak.” Thank the gods.

“No?”

“No, it is of Jon Snow.” Something flashed in her eyes as she spoke. It was a knowing look, but different than before. It did not seem confident nor arrogant nor even smug. It felt ancient, yet strong – like Valyrian steel. It reminded Tyrion of his father.

“King Jon,” he reminded the woman, “he did wed Queen Daenerys.”

“No?”

“It is of Jon Snow.” Something flashed in her eyes as she spoke. It was a knowing look, but different than before. It did not seem confident nor arrogant nor even smug. It felt ancient, yet strong – like Valyrian steel. It reminded Tyrion of his father.

“Is that what makes him king?” The question was a whisper, but it struck Tyrion like a bellowed war cry. She knows.

He was not quite sure why his heart began to beat against his chest so suddenly, nor why his mouth went dry. Again, he had the distinct sensation of feeling small, watched. Judged. Like the times I might try to lie to father as a boy.

She knows the truth. Still, was the truth such a bad thing? Might it not be better for the realm to know the truth of it all? Or is this some feint? Some mummer’s farce? He could not be sure.

“Yes, that and the score of northern lords who placed a crown upon his head,” he said.

“He is king because of his blood,” Melisandre countered. And… here we are. “He is the Lord’s chosen, reborn amidst salt and smoke.”

“The Prince that was Promised,” Tyrion sighed. “Yes, I’ve heard the stories.”

“And still, after all you have seen, you doubt them?”

“Does it matter? Myths and legends are just that, my lady.” He knew the words were foolish even before they escaped his lips. Myths and legends, Tyrion? What then marches on Winterfell as we speak? Grumpkins and snarks?

“Myths and legends,” she agreed, a knowing look in her eye.

“It makes little difference here,” he said, “for what would you have me do? Stake his blood’s claim over the evening meal?”

“I would have you help him.”

“How?”

“By helping me.”

A dangerous proposal. He knew little of the priestess and liked less. No one here seemed to trust her – save Bran Stark. And he is, well, different. Pledging aid to her now was foolish. And I am no fool. Still… she has power. It’s said she raised Jon Snow and his sister. Well, cousin. She truly has some power – power that might be useful. Better to play my game and discover hers.

“And what is it you would have of me? Men? Gold? Blood?” He waited for her answer with bated breath.

“Knowledge,” Melisandre tilted her head slightly as she smirked again. Tyrion raised an eyebrow,
then smiled. Well, that I can provide by the bushel.

“Very well, what would you ask of me?”

“I wonder what you know of the boy Samwell,” she said. A curious topic and a less-than-curious person.

“Randyll Tarly’s son? What of him?” Another secret prince, perhaps? He mused.

“Him, yes, and the girl.” Tyrion knew them both well enough. Samwell was of Horn Hill, a fine keep near enough to Highgarden. The girl, Gilly, was a sweet young thing despite her coarse northern upbringing. Still, how many wildlings do we now house in Winterfell?

“Her name is Gilly – a girl raised north of the Wall. I’m told she and her son fled south with Samwell after a particularly poor ranging.”

“Her son,” Melisandre considered the words, her eyes revealing once more that ancient, threatening, knowing look. “I see.”

“Is that why you dragged me from the solar? To speak of little wildling boys?” he asked.

The Red Priestess seemed to come to, shaken from some trance. She smiled pleasantly at him and gestured down the remainder of the hall with one crimson-robed arm. “Not at all, my lord Hand. Come, walk with me for a time and let us speak of lighter things. Of your time in King’s Landing, perhaps. Or else in Meereen. I am told you know Kinvarra.”

Tyrion looked down the hall, back at her, then turned to look at the door to the solar. The soft glow of the hearth’s fire seemed inviting but threatened deadly boredom and ceaseless bickering. He nodded at his companion. She led the way forward.

…

Another three days past in cold silence. Meals were served and fire lit. Conversations were reduced to frightened whispers, barely heard above the shouted commands, clattering of steel, and howling winds outside the keep’s walls.

Having exhausted his own stores of wisdom in conversation with Melisandre, Tyrion returned to his books – both those the maester had lent him and those he had plundered from Dragonstone’s library before sailing to this frozen country. He pulled one from the stack.

Ah, Myths and Legends of the North. The irony of his earlier statement struck him in the back of his mind. Perhaps it will include Lord Tyrion Lannister if the maestres ever decide to add to the tomb. He thumbed through the old book absentmindedly, his eyes glazing over as they passed over thrice-read passages about White Walkers and ice spiders.

Boredom swiftly overtook him. These ancient tombs were useless. He could write twice as much simply based on his memories of the battle on the White Knife. No, it was conversation he needed. Conversation and good company. There was only one person he could think of in Winterfell that would offer him both.

A swift walk later, Tyrion was knocking softly on his brother’s door. A murmured invitation bid
him enter. He pushed at the door and was at once bathed in warm firelight. Jaime sat by the hearth, stoking the flames with an iron poker clutched in his hand. He looked up to regard Tyrion with an odd expression.

“The Hand of the Queen,” Jaime feigned awe as he greeted Tyrion.

“The hand,” Tyrion replied, nodding at his older brother’s stump. Jaime scowled.

“No plundered cask of wine tonight?” Jaime asked.

“No, I fear not. I’d be lucky to find anything other than melted snow if truth be told. Provisions are running low with so many here for so long.”

“I always wondered what a siege would feel like from the inside,” Jaime mused.

Tyrion raised an eyebrow. “Yes, well, all we’re missing is an army outside our gates.”

“If the boy is to be believed, that army will be here soon enough.”

Tyrion hummed ponderously to fill the sudden silence. The whole castle had been silent for the past week or two. The snow continued to fall. Men still worked to reinforce the walls, sharpen stakes, and dig trenches.

Jaime’s next words echoed his own thoughts. “I suppose Jon Snow is right. This is the best place to fight them. High on the walls with two dragons at our back.”

“I’d prefer them at our fronts, if it’s all the same to you. Jets of flame, and all.” Jaime rolled his eyes. “but yes, it might well be,” Tyrion agreed.

“So,” he said, sitting back in his chair. “Rhaegar’s son and heir and the prince’s baby sister - the last two dragons atop the last two dragons - fighting for the future of Westeros. They would make quite the pair if they won.”

“A pair,” Tyrion shook his head, “I know you’re not one for weddings, brother, but that was the point of it all.”

“And here I thought it was to ensure the legitimacy of the babe,” Jaime said. Tyrion examined his brother’s expression for a full minute, looking for any sign of jest or bluster. He knows… but how? Are there no secrets within these walls?

His brother read his face well. “Please,” Jaime said, “I watched Cersei grow with child four times – three of which were my own. I know the subtleties of royal childbearing.”

“Four,” Tyrion corrected him.

“Four what?”

“Four of your children, if our sweet sister is to be believed. She must be rather large by now.” His brother frowned.

He has forgotten. Or perhaps he willed himself to forget. She bears his child in the south. A child he abandoned. Jaime’s eyes took on an odd quality, as if he were gazing toward some unseen, distant horizon.

“They’ll be safe,” Tyrion assured him. Until either living or dead march south in force. Jaime nodded, but remained unconvinced.
Any confrontation with Cersei had seemed so distant of late. As far away as Asshai and as difficult to get to. The dead reigned in the North. As they surely shall in the south if we fall here.

Yet if we triumph... Daenerys would march south. Jon would join her. No southern army would stand against two dragons. And Cersei will never give in.

No... The path south – if indeed there was to be one – would not be so simple. The queen’s armies would be weak. They would need allies if they were to win and steadfast friends if they were to rule. Jon rode his dragon all too frequently now. That beast is no horse. You can’t simply learn to ride it. The truth might yet be known. Would the northerners follow two Targaryens? Would they even believe Jon’s claim?

It seemed a fickle question considering the circumstances. They would have Daenerys and Jon to thank for their lives if they won. Yet men are fickle creatures. In this winter of uncertainty, Tyrion was certain of that. Even so, he asked his brother what he thought of the matter.

“The Northern lords?” Jaime huffed out a disapproving laugh. “They’ll be the same as the southern lords. They’ll choose the winning side.”

Will they? “Or the side that’s already won,” Tyrion countered. “The ruler that defeats the dead will have proven his – or her – worth. They shall have that savior’s claim upon the realm and its people.”

“Perhaps they will,” Jaime said. “If we survive.”

Tyrion chuckled at the morbid absurdity of it all. “If,” he agreed. “And if we don’t, they can all bend their knees to this Night King. I’m sure he’ll offer favorable terms.” That got Jaime to smile once more. Then he was laughing. Then they both were.

As the laughter began to fade, a new idea took shape in Tyrion’s mind. A bold idea: clever and sharp and cunning as he was. Yes, he told himself. Yes of course. It would not matter if they were all slaughtered by blue-eyed corpses, obviously. But if they won...

He jumped up from his stool. Jaime raised an eyebrow, inviting an explanation. Tyrion provided none at first, instead moving to the door and pulling it open.

“Where are you going?” Jaime asked.

Tyrion did not answer. He was already hurrying away, thinking of how best to begin the message.

…

Varys looked at him as if he were a spoiled piece of meat. He folded the piece of parchment in half and handed it back to Tyrion.

“Truly, my friend, of all your many schemes, this is the most-”

“Ingenuity?” Tyrion suggested. “Yes, I quite agree. Only the fact that we very well might not live to see this seed bear fruit is a bit off-putting.”

“To declare it in such a manner,” Varys hummed his concern. Tyrion remained silent. I’ll not play
this game today. “Does the Queen know of this? Does Jon Snow?”

“No,” Tyrion said. “Nor shall they, until the hour is at hand.”

Varys sighed. “Your schemes grow more elaborate with each passing year, my friend.”

“I shall take that as a complement.”

“Elaborate,” Varys repeated the word. “Not wise. This might well turn has the realm against us.”

“And it might win the realm in its entirety. A risk I’m willing to take.”

“Very well,” Varys frowned and rolled up the parchment. “And what would you have me do with this?”

“You’re a master of forgeries. Afix the royal seal and signature to this and ready it for a raven’s wing,” he instructed the spymaster.

“Just the one?” Varys looked skeptical.

“Ah, no. Two hundred should suffice.” The larger man sighed in defeat. Undeterred – nay, confident in his plan – Tyrion continued. “Find me when you’re prepared,” he said.

With that, he left the man to his task and wandered down the long, dark hall back towards his own quarters, whistling merrily all the way.

Chapter End Notes

As promised, another (shorter) one for ya. I'm off to the mountains for a few days. Next update should be sometime toward the end of next week, Sunday at worst.

Many thanks for all those comments. I've rolled my face across my keyboard and outline a solid 3 acts for this Jon-to-Essos story thus far. If anyone is interested in being a "beta" for this emerging work, let me know. Here or Reddit work - then we can take it from there. The goal would be to refine and edit the content and style to make that story better than this one.

That said, no one should worry I'm going to jump ship. This still gets priority.

Hopefully I don't get eaten by a bear,

Todd
The storm grew worse with every passing day. Snow covered the windows of the keep. Hardened ice made the footpaths and battlements treacherous. The winds blew in from all directions and at all times of the night – for it was only night now. The sun was a forgotten memory. Darkness reigned over the north, with the black skies turning a deep grey in what most took to be the midday hours.

Still, Jon Snow found some source light in all this darkness, horror, and hardship. She was standing right in front of him, readying herself for another night’s rest.

Daenerys had been his strength these past few weeks, as he had been hers. There had been confusion during the flight from White Harbor, and anger and tears and doubt afterward. Yet there had been some change in his wife soon thereafter – some spark had rekindled her inner fire. She was confident and reassured, oddly at ease in this winter war.

His features softened into a warm smile as he watched her run an ornate silver brush through her long, silver hair. Usually it was Missandei who tended to the queen’s needs, but in recent days she had taken to doing it herself, humming some soft, sweet, and nearly silent melody all the while.

This had quickly become his favorite time of day – even in all this horror and uncertainty. Here were a few sweet, stolen hours he could spend with the woman he loved, the queen he had sworn himself to with sword and heart - and who he would one day, if they triumphed, rule beside. Her tune, though softly hummed, drowned out all the other sounds in the keep.

“That song,” he said aloud, taking care to speak over the crackling flames, harsh and howling winds, and Ghost’s rumbling snores, “what is it?”

“Hmm?” Daenerys paused her brushing and turned to face him, her violet eyes reflecting the light of the hearth’s warm light.

“You were humming a song just now,” Jon half laughed. He looked her over in full, chest rising with that warm and wonderful emotion. His eyes found the soft swell of her womb. We’ve done our best to keep this all a secret – to keep our child safe, but the truth will be known soon enough.

“Oh, I’m not sure,” Daenerys admitted. “I don’t know its name. I don’t even know if it has any words. I just remember it being sung to me when I was a girl.” She stood up and, setting the brush aside, pulled her evening dress tightly around her small frame. “It’s just a children’s song. A lullaby. One I thought to sing for our daughter.”

You’d need words to sing that – Jon’s stream of thought froze, then shattered. Daenerys walked toward him. She took one of his hands and guided it just below her navel. Her skin was hot to the touch. She looked up at him with eyes full of warmth and compassion.

“Daughter?” he managed to force the word out. “Are you certain?” She nodded.

“Our daughter,” she said. “Our first child. The beginning of our family.”

Jon could not help himself. His face split into a grin. Then he was laughing, his hand still over her womb. “Well if you know that much, I suppose you’ve already thought of a name?”
“I was hoping we might do that together,” she said. “My mother was called Rhaella and yours Lyanna—”

“Two names? We’ll need another daughter then.” Jon could feel the vibrations of her laughter as he kept his hand in place. The sound did more to warm him than a hearth lit with dragonfire.

For a moment, the rest of the world was shut out. It seemed an ocean away from their chambers. It might not have been there at all. Here they stood, a man who had sworn never to father children and a woman who thought herself cursed never to bear any. She was his world, his reason for being. *Perhaps my reason for being brought back.*

An uncomfortable chill crept up his spine as he thought of his own return… and of the Red Woman.

“How do you know?” he asked his wife, the mirth in his voice fading away.

“What?”

“That it’s a girl – that our daughter…” he did not need to explain any further. Daenerys’ eyes fell.

“She told me,” she whispered. “Melisandre.”

Jon’s face tightened into a scowl. “She told you our child was a girl?”

Daenerys turned away from him and stared into the fire as she spoke. “She found me one evening, when I could not sleep. We talked… and she told me that blood was the cost of power – of life – and that blood would be the price of our daughter’s birth.” The words tumbled forth.

“She threatened you?” his heart beat out against his chest in a sudden rush of righteous anger.

“No,” she hesitated, looking to keep their conversation calm and measured. “I don’t think it was threat. More a warning.”

*I’ll give her one in turn.* He knew of the priestess’ desire for king’s blood and the power she claimed it possessed. She had already burned one princess as a sacrifice to her Red God, and Jon had banished her from the North for that transgression on pain of death.

Daenerys turned back to him and grasped his hand. She could see the anger on his face and sense the confusion within him.

“We need her, Jon,” she insisted.

“We need her men,” he replied. Yet even as he spoke, he saw Arya’s still form and felt the scars on his chest itch as if they burned.

“She saved your sister. She saved you. Her god, the power she serves, it can help us defeat the dead. Do you remember Beric during that battle?”

Jon nodded. Of course he did. The man had saved the rest of them – had given them time to escape by calling forth a wall of scarlet flame to hold the dead at bay. *And he was brought back six times…*

“We don’t need to trust her, but we do need her,” Daenerys said again.

“If she tries to—”
“Harm me? Or our child? Then I’m sure my other children will have their way,” Daenerys said with the hint of a smile. “Or Ser Davos. Or even your sister Arya. She does not seem overly thankful.” Jon loosed a reluctant laugh.

"No, no she doesn't."

"Trust me," she said softly. "Trust us," she pulled his hand back to where their daughter grew inside her, blissfully unaware of her parents' struggle save the realm she might one day rule. Jon nodded.

They spoke no more of the Red Woman just then. They did not speak of the war either, or the thousands of wights they knew to be marching through the Wolfswood at that very moment. Instead, they settled into bed and under the furs, holding each other close and listening to the sounds of the winter storm outside. It felt good to just lie there next to her - like those nights on the ship that seemed stolen from some other man's life. And, like those nights on the ship, Jon wrapped his arm around Daenerys, buried his face in her loose hair, and slowly feel into a light sleep.

An unusual, almost eerie silence fell upon the castle over the next fix days. Yet the walls and keep were consumed in a flurry of activity. The Unsullied and northmen labored outside the walls, digging trenches, sharpening stakes, and setting pitch on the frozen ground. Such defenses were no fit substitute for strong stone walls, but they would slow and funnel the dead when it finally came to battle.

The Dothraki had withdrawn from their camp and found cramped spaces within the walls. Nearly half of their remaining mounts had to be killed, for Winterfell had neither the grain to feed so many nor the room to hold them. Still, there was some good that came of it: the stores were full of fresh and salted meat for the first time in months.

Elsewhere around the castle, soldiers and small folk alike settled in. Jon watched them all from his perch on the covered causeway. The spearmen of the Fiery Hand had encamped in the godswood – as had Drogon and Rhaegal, for that was the only clearing large enough within the walls.

They shared the space with Bran, who watched the dead when he was awake. The forest, he says, Jon thought. But never how close or how long. He may not know at all.

Winterfell’s ravens might have proved useful scouts and told him the distance and strength of their foe, but Tyrion had – in some fit of madness – cast the murder out into the winter storm. To call for aid, he claimed. Jon had been angry, but his frustration was nothing compared to his wife’s. Daenerys’ eyes had seemed towering infernos as she loosed her fury upon their Hand.

In the ravens’ stead, Jon had reluctantly sent forth scouts to patrol the Wolfswood – knowing all too well such rangings might mean death for the men who stepped forward to take up the task. Two had been Free Folk. A people who know the terrors of the dead all too well. One had been a northmen and two more had been Unsullied, whose brothers in arms were just now setting up orderly lines of tents around the base of the old broken tower. Some had even, with the Starks’ blessing, made a shelter of the crypts. Where the old lords of this castle and Kings of Winter will watch over them.

Jon wondered what Lord Eddard Stark would think of all this - and of him. Would he be proud? Thankful? Angry? And what of Robb? Jon’s oldest friend – the man he had called brother - had been hailed as the Young Wolf, undefeated on the field of battle. What I might give to speak with him now.

Would Robb have sallied forth to fight the enemy? Fled south to seek aid and allies? What would
he do about the enemy’s dragon? His giants? His vastly superior numbers?

Would he have ordered his wife and child to safety? That question weighed heavy on his conscience today, just as it had every day since Daenerys had told him to expect a little girl. Perhaps I’ve doomed us all.

That uncomfortable uncertainty crept down his spine like a trickle of ice water. Then he felt a pair of eyes upon him. He turned.

Melisandre stood in the tower doorway, framed by two flickering torches and two powerfully built spearmen garbed in flowing robes of crimson and gold. She tilted her head and regarded him with a curious look.

“Something troubles you, my king.”

Jon felt his anger congeal in his chest at the sight. He had avoided the Red Woman as best he could, not wanting to speak with her nor give her another excuse to trouble Daenerys with her portents and prophecies – even if they were the truth.

Still, Daenerys had been right. We need her. Melisandre might know how to defeat the dead, or else claim a victory where both armies and dragons had failed to do so. Or she might shepherd us to our doom, just as she did Stannis Baratheon.

“Fear has gripped this keep and its people,” she continued undeterred by his icy silence. “And it has gripped their king. You must not fear him, Jon Snow, nor fear for your family. Fear is his greatest weapon.”

“You speak as though you know what to do – what must be done,” Jon replied.

Melisandre smiled. “I have gazed into the Lord’s fires,” she said. “And He has shown me the truth.”

“And what did you see?” Jon could not help but ask.

“You, my king.”

“Me?” he asked, taking care to restrain the hostile skepticism in his voice.

“Yes. Bastard, you were once called, but soon all shall know your true name. Azor Ahai. Our Prince that was Promised by R’hilor himself. The union of ice and fire. The one that will bring the dawn.”

Almost as many titles as Daenerys, Jon thought. Then the weight of her statement hit him like a charging horse. She knows? Only Daenerys had known the truth, and a few trusted others. And Bran… Only this Three-Eyed Raven, as he so called himself, would share the truth of Jon’s birth with the Red Woman.

“Now I know why the Lord saw fit to bring you back. Why he guided the Vale’s knights to you in your hour of need. Why he graced me with fair winds and brought me to your side.” She stepped closer as she spoke, the ruby at her throat glowing brighter than he had ever seen.

“You think your god chose me?” Marked. The word sprung unbidden into his mind. Like Bran and Arya.

“As your mother chose your father wed. As your lords chose you to rule. As you chose Daenerys to
love.” She lay an ungloved hand on him – over his heart. *Where that final blade cut through me …*

“Yes, Jon Snow, he chose you. For the blood that runs in your veins.”

He knocked her hand away.

“Lay a hand on me, on Daenerys, on anyone here, and-”

“Fear not, Jon Snow,” she cut him off. “Your family shall be safe. It is the Night King’s blood that must be shed to defeat this shadow.”

With a sweep of her crimson robes, she turned away and left him there. Jon tried to followed her, but the two spearmen blocked his path with the shafts of their weapons. Then they too strode away into the gloom of the keep, leaving him to ponder the Red Woman’s words.

…

Two more days passed in snowy silence. Bran maintained the dead were still in the unfathomable depths of the forest. No scouts had yet returned.

Jon stood on the castle walls, the icy wind whipping his cloak around like some heavy woven banner. What light the day had left was fading fast.

Fires had been lit all along the battlements. They seemed to hold the darkness at bay. Many more had been lit within the walls as well, warming the thousands of soldiers and smallfolk now packed inside Winterfell, hoping to survive the battle to come.

He watched the last of the Unsullied patrols march through the gates, the black glass tips of their spears glittering in the torchlight. The gates shut behind them. They would next open by force or in sweet relief. Which it would be Jon was not certain.

Yet he did not feel burdened with the dread that should have preceded an attack. It was the same odd sensation he had known when Mance Rayder led one hundred thousand Free Folk down on the Wall. It was neither fear nor panic nor resignation, just a cold determination.

*This is it,* he told himself as his eyes scanned the far tree line for any hint of movement – any sign of the enemy or those few, brave scouts who had volunteered to venture forth into the forest. *We make our stand here.*

Four times he had fought the Night King: at Hardhome; then on that forsaken lake; then on the river; then finally at White Harbor. Each time he had been bested, defeated. Each time he had watched innocent people die, only to rise again as thralls to his foe.

His gloved hand formed a tight fist around Longclaw’s hilt. *No more.* He would meet his enemy here, outside and on the walls of Winterfell – his home. He would kill him or die in the attempt. There was nothing else to it.

Another man might have made plans for the rest of his family. Jon had certainly tried, commanding his sisters and brother to make their way north to Bear Island to wait out this war – or to flee across the sea should the dead prevail. *And that plan lasted as long as a snowflake in dragonfire.* The memory of his sisters’ outraged refusals brought a reluctant grin to his face.

*And Daenerys…* His wife was more focused than he. They had not talked of the battle to come. Yet her own determination burned with such ferocity he could at times feel it. Her words echoed in his mind. *We will destroy the Night King and his armies. We’ll do it together.*
What else they might do together seemed both within his grasp and impossibly distant. *We might rule together and bring peace to this land… and raise a family together… a daughter.* Jon found himself wondering what the girl might look like – violet eyes and silver hair and wildness like Arya’s or Lyanna’s. The image stood out clearly in his mind.

And suddenly that grim determination melted away before a burning sense of newfound purpose. His family, his friends, his people would survive. They would live. His daughter would be born in a world awaiting a beautiful spring…. Even if he himself had to die once more to bring this winter to an end.

Jon looked out to the tree line of the Wolfswood once more, seeing not the shrouded and ice-clad soldier pines but instead the endless possibilities beyond them.

He might have been there half the night. He was not certain. Below, northmen had secured the gates with hewn logs and heavy stones. They poured cold water atop the piles of debris, allowing the freezing water to bind the wood and stone together in hard packed ice.

The creak of iron hinges and groan of heavy wood cut through the wind’s howls and his own distracted thoughts. Jon turned to his left and saw Daenerys walking toward him, her own black fur cloak whipping around her as she crossed the stretch of wall and joined him in his silent vigil. She slipped her arm around his and leaned her head against his shoulder. Neither said a word. Neither had to.

After a few sweet, silent moments they turned and made for the door and their far more comfortable quarters. They made their way inside, where four Unsullied guards greeted them with wordless nods.

Once they had returned to their chambers, Jon began to ready himself for sleep, removing his heavy cloak and sword belt. Daenerys did the same, humming that sweet melody while idly brushing her hair. He smiled as he listened to her for a time.

Outside, the wind had died down, it’s howling reduced to an angry whisper. The fire in the hearth seemed to shrink too, as if all the other sounds in the world were giving way to the expecting mother’s lullaby.

Yet there was another sound, harsh and unexpected. Ghost stirred in the corner. Then he was standing, his blood red eyes glinting in the firelight, his teeth bared in a snarl. He stalked toward the door.


*Ahooouuuu.*

It was distant, but familiar. Daenerys turned back to him, her eyes wide. *She heard it too.*

The sound grew louder still. *A horn,* Jon recognized the deep and oddly rhythmic echoes of the sound. *One of ours.* It sounded again, closer this time. *Ahooouuuu.*

Then came a pounding at the door.

“Your Grace!” he heard Ser Davos’ muffled shout. “Jon!” He unlatched the door at once. Ghost kept snarling.
“The horns, Your Grace, they’ve-”

“I’ll return in a moment,” he turned and bid Daenerys stay as he walked past Davos and out the door. She pulled her evening dress close around her and followed him into the hall, the great white direwolf beside her.

Jon rushed down the keep’s stairs and out into the yard. Here he could hear it all the more clearly – a low, mournful tone cutting through the winter winds and snowfall.

“Is that-”

“One of ours, aye,” Davos nodded.

The horn blasts grew louder and more frequent. Jon and Daenerys made their way back to the western ramparts where they had stood some time earlier, looking over the frozen fields and forest beyond. The horn blew again.

Ahooooooooo.

They’re here. They’ve come, Jon knew. This is it. He turned to Daenerys. Her smaller hands were balled into fists. Her gaze was grim and determined, but her eyes shone with raw anger.

The horn blasts stopped, cut short by some unseen force. Another familiar sound took up the call – a low rumbling thunder than filled the sky and shook the icy earth. In the distance, the evergreen trees disappeared as a rising white mist swallowed them.

Jon reached out and grasped Daenerys’ hand in his, giving it a reassuring squeeze. She did not let go. Then, he turned friend and advisor.

“Davos,” he said. The man met his gaze. “Fetch me my sword.”

Chapter End Notes

Ok! Here we go. I considered another lead up chapter or two, but the pacing felt off and honestly it would have been a skin on another conversation. I think we’ve had enough of that. So we got a nice little moment with Jon and Daenerys, and then the beginnings of what we’ve been heading toward since good ol’ chapter one.

The battle itself will be six chapters, all different POVs. I'm writing it now and will have it all drafted before I publish the first part. Should be sweet.

As for my Jon-goes-to-Essos idea, that's got a working title, an outline, and two chapters done. The goal is a much tighter story told only from Jon's and Dany's POVs (much less narrative meandering and maybe more of a challenge). If anyone would like to volunteer as beta tribute, shoot me a message here or on Reddit (u/RollTodd18). I'm less interested in proofreading and more interested in larger plot and thematic questions that'll help me improve stuff.

On the note of other stories, I'd love to read some of yours! If you're writing one, do let me know. I try to better engage with the GoT community here where I can and
leave helpful comments on stories old and new.
Sansa III

Chapter Summary

Winterfell readies for battle.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The horns shattered the evening silence. Sansa could hear them from her room high in the keep. Here there were the familiar deep northern horns, and there the wildings’ shrill hunting horns. She could even make out those odd eastern horns the Unsullied and Fiery Hand used to assemble their ranks.

This is no muster, she knew at once. Those sounds were slow, rhythmic, and predictable. This was a harsh cacophony – the music of war.

Curiosity and fear mingled in her heart, but the former won out after a moment’s hesitation. I must see what all this is, she knew. She stood from her chair by the fire and reached for her black sable cloak, pulling it tightly around her shoulders. Whatever was causing this disturbance, she would see it with her own eyes.

Her measured paced became hurried as she stepped into the hall. The horns were louder out here – and she could hear men shouting commands out in the yard. Panicked shouts, Sansa thought, her heartbeat quickening with her footsteps.

She reached the tower door and, pushing against the wind, stepped out onto the western battlements. She froze.

White fog rose in a great, impenetrable wall over the Wolfswood. She could not even see the trees. The horn blasts and shouting faded away before a far more terrible noise. Jon’s right, it does sound like thunder. The sound was low and menacing – as if the very earth itself was rousing itself to fight the defenders of her family’s castle.

Shadows danced in the fog. She thought them the tips of the soldier pines at first. But they’re far too small... Then she noticed the flicker of otherworldly blue – like ten thousand icy stars. Sansa Stark had never seen this army of the dead before, yet here it stood before her.

They did not move beyond the trees – not at first. Yet slowly, Sansa watched the white fog roll across the hills and fields of her family’s lands. From the west, it crept north and south as if it meant to strangle the ancient castle. The thunder-like rumbling grew louder, responding to the horn blowers’ challenge.

Is this what Jon and Daenerys have fought? Is this what Bran sees? Is this the foe I sent Lord Royce to face? She swallowed and felt her throat go dry.

“My lady!” a voice shouted above the din. Sansa spun around and looked down upon the frozen yard. Soldiers scurried about like ants, readying themselves for war. She could make out the black-clad Unsullied, the wildlings in their furs and skins, the Volantene spearmen in their brilliant
crimson, and the score of northern banners.

Her eyes found Lady Brienne standing resolute amidst the chaos, already armored in her fine suit of lobstered steel and armed with Oathkeeper. She made her way to the stairs. Sansa met her halfway down. “My lady, I must insist you come with me.”

“Where?” Sansa asked.

“To safety, my lady. The dead will soon be at the walls.” Sansa did not take kindly to being treated like some frightened child. I’ve been through one siege and two battles and much else besides. I am the Lady of Winterfell. I will stay, watch and, if need be, fight.

“Where’s Jon? Where’s Arya?” she insisted. Her family would have need of her.

“Preparing for battle, my lady,” Brienne managed the words through her labored breath.

“I need to speak with them – with Jon, at least.”

Brienne let loose an impatient breath, then nodded. “This way,” she said.

She cut a swath through the chaotic center of the yard, heading straight for the hall. Sansa hurried along in her wake. Around her, the horns gave way to more shouting and clamor of armor and arming. Men hurried to the walls with strung longbows in hand and arrows full of black-tipped arrows. Others, many women among them, carried bundles of javelins and still others armfuls of heavy stones. The scene reminded her of the siege of the capital all those years ago.

Brienne pushed the heavy oaken doors open with both hands. Sansa moved to her side and beheld her family’s hall. The tables had been carelessly pushed aside, the benches and chairs pushed atop them in disorderly piles.

Dozens of people occupied the room’s center: Ser Jaime and Tyrion, Tormund and Sandor Clegane, Ser Davos and Varys and Ser Jorah, Podrick and Missandei and many other northern lords and their attendants. Even Samwell and Gilly, her son clutched in her arms, stood by to listen for commands. Bran sat by them, his eyes focused on some unseen, distant object. Only Arya and Gendry were missing, though where they might be Sansa did not know.

Jon and Daenerys stood at the head of the hall, the fire in the great hearth casting both the king and queen in shadow. Jon looked around and met her gaze but kept speaking to the others in the room.

“Ser Jaime and Ser Jorah will have command of the eastern and southern walls. Ser Davos and Sandor Clegane, the western and northern. Set archers on the walls and spearmen at the gates. We must hold the gates,” he said grimly.

“And what of the dragon? Archers will do little good if they’re piles of ash,” Jaime asked. Others murmured and nodded in agreement.

“We will be in the skies, atop my – our dragons,” Daenerys said. “Viseri… the enemy’s dragon will not get near the castle. You have my word.” Jaime nodded, but he did not look convinced.

“And what about these trenches you’ve dug?” Clegane asked. “They have any use?”

“Stakes and pitch,” Jon replied. “When enough of the dead have passed through the outer lines, we’ll light them from above and divide his army.” Clegane grunted in approval.

“It will not matter how many of his slaves you slay,” a woman’s voice announced to the gathering.
“He has the right of it, Your Graces,” Jorah said.


Daenerys took a step forward. “We’ve made it this far. I expect to see you all here come the morning. Go now and defend your people. Our people.”

In a rush of movement, they left for their posts. As they exited the hall, Sansa felt odd – useless, to speak true of it all. I cannot fight no more than I can fly. What am I to do?

“Sansa,” Jon cut through the small crowd and found her.

“Jon,” she began.

“There’s no time for any more talk now,” he insisted. “Lead the women, the children – anyone who can’t fight – into the crypts. Deep into the crypts. Take provisions with you and block the stair if you can. If we should fall—”

‘Jon—’

“If we should fall, then hide. Wait until your food is gone before venturing out. They all might have gone by then.” Sansa froze, horrorstruck. Her mind spun a whirlwind of terrible images: her home in ruins, Jon dead, Arya with burning blue eyes. Her will began to crumble.

“I… I can’t. I—”

He set a hand on her shoulder and looked into her eyes. “Listen to me. Get them to safety. Block the stair. Do you understand?”

“I…” a rush of memory came forth from deep within her. She remembered the siege of King’s Landing and how the queen had gathered all the highborn ladies in her own quarters for safety. But it was I who gave them comfort, who led them in prayer. I must do the same here. These are my
people. “Yes, I do. I will.”

Her brother looked at her for a brief moment, then pulled her to him. She held him close. This will not be the last time we embrace, she told herself. Jon stepped away, his face falling into that unreadable expression he favored. He nodded, turned, and followed Daenerys out of the hall.

There were only a few of them still left in the emptying room. The noises outside grew louder and more frightening. Sansa looked around. Her eyes found Bran first, slumped in his rolling chair with Sam and Gilly at his side. She walked to him.

“Sansa,” he turned and regarded her with cold blue eyes.

“Bran,” she responded. “Are you… we should get you to safety. Down with me in the crypts. Jon has order everyone who cannot fight there.”

“I can fight,” he said, his voice airy and distant. “Samwell will see me to the godswood.”

Sansa sighed. “Bran, visions will do more good now. The dead are here.”

“I know,” he said. “But there’s still more to do. I’m the Three-Eyed Raven, Sansa.” She bit her lip and nodded. Always the Raven. Perhaps I lost my brother long ago. She turned to Gilly instead.

“Gilly, you and your son should come with me. You’ll be safer down in the crypts.”

Gilly held her son tighter and before and looked between Sansa and Sam. She shook her head. “I’m staying with Sam. Both Sams. We’re staying together.”

“Gilly…” Sam sounded exasperated.

“Where you go, I go to,” she said simply. The important of the statement was lost on Sansa, but its influence on Sam was immediately apparent. His round face gave a sort of unfortunate spasm, then he sighed.

“Gilly and little Sam will stay with me. It’s all right,” he insisted, pulling a long dragonglass blade from his belt, “I’ve already killed one White Walker. What’s another two or three?” His uncertain smile almost made Sansa smile in return. “Come with me then, Gilly. With Bran to the godswood,” he said, stepping behind the rolling chair and pushing it forward with a great heave. The odd group left the hall to the sound of wheels clattering on smooth stone.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Missandei’s black-clad form hurrying toward the door. Surely the queen’s handmaiden will want to take shelter with the others, Sansa thought. Yet as she opened her mouth to call to her, Sansa noticed the dragonglass dagger in her hand and angry glint in her eye. Then she remembered Grey Worm, the Unsullied captain with whom she had seemed so close. I should be with my family. I should be fighting too.

Sansa looked around. Most everyone had left, save Lady Brienne and the Red Woman. She turned to her guardian. “My brother will want that sword of yours on the wall, my lady.”

“Lady Stark, I swore an oath to protect you and your sister.”

“An oath you would better fulfill on the walls than at my side,” Sansa replied. That, at least, seemed simply enough for Brienne of Tarth. She dipped her head and, with a shuffling of steel plate, she made her way out of the keep and to the battlements.

Which leaves you, Sansa thought as she saw Melisandre pacing across the now empty hall. Sworn
to comfort and defend the youngest and weakest of Winterfell she might be, but Sansa knew there was no one less in need of protection than this Red Priestess.

“You saved my sister,” she said, greeting the woman with the statement. It rang almost hollow in the empty hall – and against the growing sounds of impending battle outside.

“I did,” Melisandre replied simply.

“And all you wanted in return was to stay here and fight. You could have left weeks ago. Why stay? Why fight?”

“It is the Lord’s will.”

“Is it?”

“If we do not triumph here, Sansa Stark, the dead will sweep over the rest of this continent in force. In time, they will make their way east as well. If dragons cannot stand against them, who can?” Sansa could not think of an answer. “Consider that in your crypts – among your lifeless dead. I must aid your brother now.”

In a flash of crimson and amber, Melisandre swept from the hall leaving Sansa to wonder just how she planned on aiding Jon.

…

Chaos reigned in the keep. The thunder seemed to echo across the sky now, coming from the south and north as well as the west. *They’re surrounding us,* Sansa thought with a pang of dread. *It will start soon.*

Torches and braziers had been lit all along the walls and in the yard, but the fires seemed diminished, almost unwilling to share their heat and warmth. She had ordered the candles and torches lit in the crypts as well. Women too frail to fight and young children were being shepherded down the narrow stone stairs. Some stopped to offer the Lady of Winterfell their blessings, others could not force a single word through their choked sobs. Sansa watched the procession with a wrenched heart.

Then she turned at the sound of a familiar voice – two, in fact. “Arya!” she cried out, seeing her sister make her way to the gatehouse. Gendry walked by her side, wielding a shield and spear and limping in his uneven gait.

“Jon told me you were here,” she said.

“You should be here too. In the crypts with the others.” Even as Sansa spoke the words, she knew they were folly.

“I’m going to fight. Everyone is going to fight,” she said, stealing a glance at Gendry. He stood a few paces away, pointedly looking off into the distance. Sansa nodded. Blue eyes met grey and, for the space of a single moment, the two Stark sisters understood each other perfectly.

Then she rushed forth and threw her arms around Arya, who struggled to keep her feet. “Be safe,” she whispered into her sister’s ear.

“You too,” Arya whispered back. Then, she was marching away to the battlements with Gendry going after her.
Sansa sighed, her breath turning to white mist on the evening air. *I am the Lady of Winterfell. I must not be afraid.* She had been afraid for too long and had thought herself beyond all that, after Joffrey and Ramsay and so much else. What could hold a candle to those monsters? *True monsters,* she thought grimly. *The ones outside our gates.*

Yet she was strong, she knew that. Her people would have need of that strength if they hoped to ride out this storm. She watched the last of them descend down the narrow stone stairway. *Father will watch over us. And Robb and Rickon and Mother.* She would be with them for a time. *And if the keep falls?* She would be with them again.

As she placed her foot upon the first step leading downward to the crypts, a great, guttural cry went up all around the keep. It sent a chill down Sansa’s spine. Twin roars answered the challenge. As Sansa stood by the entrance to the crypt, she saw Drogon and Rhaegal rise into the sky, ready to meet their foe. It was time. She walked down the well-worn steps, the sounds of impending battle fading as she descended into the earth.

Chapter End Notes

Probably not the rough-and-tumble scenes you were expecting. There are a few reasons for that, some character driven and some plot driven. Rest assured that the next five chapters will be more, shall we say, exciting.

Anyway, the parallel here was Cersei during Blackwater. I had a scene with Sansa talking to people in the crypts, but it sort of broke the story's momentum so I tossed it. Thought having the dragons fly off was a better ending.

And a special shout out to Levicorpyutani who has graciously offered her time to help me write this new idea/story.
Davos

Chapter Summary

Ser Davos faces another battle

Chapter Notes

And here we go for real

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Six battles, Ser Davos Seaworth thought to himself as he paced back and forth across the battlements. Six damned battles I've seen. He had fought in more battles than he had fingers. The siege of Storm's End, the Blackwater, the wildlings beyond the Wall, against the Bolton Bastard, and then on the White Knife... and now here. He was not sure which of the others he would have rather fought again. But anything is preferable to this.

The howling wind carried off his shouted commands and stung his eyes. Gusts of ice crystals obscured his vision of the fields and hills beyond the walls. That damned thunder grew louder as the white fog crept closer, moment by moment, from the woods where it had first appeared earlier in that night.

Worst of all was the cold. It sapped what strength remained in his old body and made his chest and arms feel tight. The torches and braziers burning along the walls did little to warm him. The men and woman around him shivered into their cloaks and huddled together for warmth and comfort as they awaited their foe.

He doesn’t seem to be too keen to show himself. The fog had engulfed the trees first, then the far hills, then slowly crept toward the old camps and town itself. It had encircled the castle too, rolling off to the north and south as if to make Winterfell an island in a sea of white. And like an island, we are alone. There would be no cavalry charge from some newfound ally to save them here. We must fight with what we have.

King Jon had given him command of the western walls – the walls the dead would surely hit in force. Piles of stones, bundles of spears, and quivers of arrows lay at the ready for any man to cast down at the enemy. There were a few spare barrels of pitch somewhere in the yard too. Davos hoped it would be enough.

He looked around at the garrison. The northern walls by the godswood held many of the Red Woman’s spearmen and a number of wildling archers and axemen. The western walls were far more heavily guarded, for it was there Davos was sure they would make their stand.

Unsullied lined the walls while northmen stood atop the towers, bows at the ready. Tormund Giantsbane stood atop the nearest tower with a strung bow in hand and a sword at his side. The man had proved a capable warrior in taking the castle. I hope he’s as eager to defend it now.
Other men had been armed and sent to the walls as well – those with grievous injuries and those who had been thrown into the keep’s dungeons and anyone else who could fight off the dead. They needed a spear in every hand.

Dothraki screamers had filled in where they could with spear and bow, though it was the assembly below that gave Davos the most hope. Two hundred of the queen’s warriors sat mounted and readied in the inner yard. *Should the gate fall or need mending, their charge will buy us time.*

Levies from a dozen other northern houses manned the battlements and gathered by the gates, ready to hold back the tide of dead. There were hundreds of northern women too – those who had trained in spear and bow and sword with the Ladies Arya and Brienne. Davos saw young Lyanna Mormont among them. His heart fell. *We’ve lost enough children in this war – enough innocents.*

His eyes found Arya and Gendry running to his section of the walls. Guilt weighed on his brow like a heavy helm. *I’ve brought him to his death,* he thought grimly. *From the safety of the Street of Steel to this doomed castle.* Gendry would never flee, of course. Davos knew that well enough. He was proud, stubborn, and strong. *And the girl…* Well, Davos recalled what it was to be young. After all, he had raised a boy of his own…

He exhaled slowly, his hot breath forming a mist as dense as the dead’s fog. *Mathos.* His son had died on the Blackwater, a victim of Tyrion’s trap. *But she took him from me long before that.*

She had taken the princess too, sacrificed her like some animal. *And she tried to take the boy. She still might.*

His anger warmed him as no fire could. *What sort of evil would seek to kill a child? Or to take any innocent life? Our enemy,* he answered his own question. *And the Red Woman.*

Perhaps she had seen the error of her ways and brought a thousand men north to fight, but Davos knew better than that. *She’s never thought herself wrong before – save a single night when Jon Snow lay cold and dead. She burned the princess and corrupted the her father – that good, just man who raised me up. She…*  

No. He could let himself be consumed by old hatreds and open wounds. He had a task here on the walls. These men looked to him for command. He could not give in to distractions. He would not fail them.

Davos turned back to watching that cold, white fog roll over the roofs of the winter town, knowing the terrors it hid. His old eyes thought he saw movement amongst the shifting clouds, but he could not be sure.

Fog had been his friend once; a steadfast ally that cloaked him on many a journey. *Now I understand why I was never caught.* He could see nothing in it, even as it engulfed half the winter town.

“Steady lads,” he forced a measure of sturdiness into his tone. “It’s only a bit of snow and wind.”

“Nothing we haven’t seen before,” Gendry noted, climbing up the last stair and moving to Davos’ side.

“Ya shouldn’t be climbing on that leg,” he said.

Gendry just laughed and looked around. “Suppose I’ll stay up here, then.” A few northmen laughed reluctantly. The lad hefted his hammer up to eye level.
“Another one?” Davos asked with a smirk.

“Fresh forged,” Gendry said with a smile. “Inlaid with dragonglass just like the last one.”

“See ya don’t lose it, hmm?” And see you don’t lose anything else precious to you.

Arya came up after him, her Valyrian steel dagger held in her left hand. Neither youth wore much armor. Gendry had an old northern breastplate that covered his muscled front but left his back open to attack. The girl wore her usual leather jerkin, though she had left her wolf skin cloak behind.

They watched in silence as the white fog swept over the walls and consumed Winterfell. He could not see beyond the first line of staked trenches now. Great columns of snow and ice swirled around like thin, ethereal towers. He watched them rise, crumble, and reform over and over again.

“What’s that?” Arya asked.

“What?” Gendry responded. Others turned around too, their eyes showing their fear and uncertainty.

“That noise,” she said. “It almost sounds like—”

An awful shriek rent the air. The dragon, he knew, his heart hammering against his chest in sudden rush of fear. He looked up at the darkened sky, but saw nothing. He’s brought the dragon against us now. No tricks this time. No ambushes. No feints. This Night King had marched north again to finish them off. He would throw everything he had at their walls.

Twin roars echoed around the castle. The two massive shapes rose in across the way. Davos turned at the deep thrums of heavy wingbeats and beheld Drogon and Rhaegal rising into the skies with the two dragon riders atop them. He whispered a silent blessing for both Jon and Daenerys as they rose into the low clouds. It was all the protection he could offer.

Just beneath the sound of beating wings, he heard something else. It seemed distant at first, but quickly grew in strength and tenor. The dead. Guttural growls and shrieks of a hundred thousand wights echoed through the fog. Davos moved to the edge of the wall, peering into the storm to mark the enemy’s location.

“There!” Tormund cried out from his perch atop the tower. Sure enough, shadows were appearing from the fog. Davos could see their eyes burning in the darkness. It was like star-filled sky’s reflection on the sea. There had to be thousands of them, far more than he could count at a single glance.

Most were men – or had been once. They’ve no siege engines nor strategy, he assured himself. We can hold them.

As if in response to his daring to hope, other shapes emerged from the fog. Davos cursed under his breath as he saw each in turn. Giants, he knew. And wolves and bears and… gods! A mammoth? He hoped the gates had been remade strong enough to withstand such an assault.

“Steady lads,” he assured the men beside him. “Hold steady now.” Horns sounded again as other parts of the castle spotted the advancing enemy. For each echoing horn blast, the guttural cries grew louder.

Davos watched with bated breath as the first few ranks of wights stumbled into the trenches and climbed up the other side. The sharpened stakes slowed some corpses down and tore bits of hide and flesh from others, but they did nothing to stem the tide of dead surging toward Winterfell. The
walls, he told himself again, *we’ll hold them at the walls.*

Yet they were drawing closer. Rank after rank of dead emerged from the fog. He could count four giants among them and beasts of every ilk.

A roar echoed above his head and a great black shadow descended from the clouds. His breath caught for a heart’s beat and he froze in fear – until the dragon opened its maw and loosed a column of red flame on the dead. Davos watched the fire consumed the first rank of the dead.

Yet the fire burned brighter and hotter than any brazier or torch, so that even as he watched Drogon’s black form climb into the swirling clouds once more he saw the endless ranks of wights beyond them. Perhaps the others had not noticed. Rhaegal swooped in after his brother; his fire a wave of amber that consumed scores of dead and set the hide of a bear alight.

The two dragons circled back and unleashed twin jets of flame on the approaching hordes. Davos could feel the heat of the dragon fire on his face – the only warm thing he had felt all night. After a third pass, Jon and Daenerys guided their dragons deeper into the swirling clouds, though Davos could see the dragons’ flames light up the storm clouds.

A cheer went up on the walls as men waved torches and spears at their leaders. The joyous sound mingled with the shrieks of burning wights. Davos looked at Gendry. The boy was smiling. *It can’t be this easy,* he thought. *Can it?*

Undeterred by the attacks, the dead continued their advance toward the walls. They were well within bowshot now. He prayed they had enough arrows.

“Ready!” he cried out. “Archers! Notch!” His command was by the wooden rasps of three hundred arrows being pulled from their quivers and readied to fire. “Draw!” he commanded. The great longbows of the northmen groaned under the strain of the archers’ effort. “Loose!”

It was a glorious sound. Hundreds of arrows flew upward, disappearing into the storm then landing in the swelling ranks of the dead a moment later. The wights were so tightly packed together that nearly every obsidian tipped arrow found its mark. Rank upon rank of their foe felt to the snow, truly lifeless once more.

A great cry went up from all the wights – even the ones not struck down. The awful sound made him shudder. Then, as one, the dead men and beasts broke rank and charged the walls. He watched as those that had been men slammed uselessly into the foundation stones or else tried to scramble up the age-smoothed stones.

Those on the wall began dropping torches and rocks down on the enemy, but the archers stood still waiting for their next command. *Command…* Davos winced at his own foolishness. *There’s no command here. No generals nor admirals nor need for coordinated fire. These are dead men Davos. They feel no fear.* “Go on! Fire!” he shouted to the men beside him and on the tower above. “Kill ‘em!”

The walls came alive with the twang of bowstrings and rush of arrows. After a moment, Davos peered over the edge and saw the bodies already piled high, some riddled with arrows and others writhing and burning. He set his own weapon aside and picked up a large, jagged stone. Raising it above his head, he threw it down at the closest wight. It found its mark. The dead man collapsed, but still the body rushed onward.

*It’s working,* he thought with some amazement. The archers fired well-aimed arrows into the surging horde, which broke upon Winterfell’s walls like a wave against a cliff. *The only way to*
As if it had heard his thoughts, a great giant came lumbering out of the fog. Lowering a great hidebound shoulder, it began to charge at the castle’s gates.

“Archers! The giant! Kill the giant!” he shouted his command. At least two dozen turned and began firing flaming and dragonglass arrows at the great wight.

None found their mark. Half a hundred shafts buried themselves in the thing’s rotten hide and armor. “The head! Aim for it’s head!” Tormund shouted from the tower above. A great crash echoed through the castle as the giant slammed into the gates. Davos almost lost his feet as the walls trembled.

Then the giant fell to the side, an arrow shaft protruding from his once burning blue eye. An Unsullied spearman dropped a torch down onto the corpse. The fire caught but struggled to burn in the fierce storm winds.

Two more giants rushed forward to throw themselves against the gate, but a hail of arrows halted their advance. Another cheer went up from the men on the western walls. His chest swelled with confidence. It’s working! He almost laughed out loud. By all the gods it’s working.

A great furnace wind blew from behind him. More cries rang out from the battlefield. No… he thought, pausing in his effort to cast down another stone onto the enemy. Human cries. Human screams. He turned and felt his breath catch in his throat.

A column of blue and white fire was streaming down from the low clouds. It engulfed one of the eastern wall’s towers. Bits of stone and wood and flesh were sent flying into the air. Men leapt from the inner windows into the yard, their flesh and armor burning horribly.

A great shadow descended from the storm. Viserion’s body was wracked and broken, but still it flew – its torn wings beating an uneven rhythm as it unleashed a torrent of flame onto Winterfell’s defenders.

Archers fired arrows up at the enemy, but the dragonglass heads simply bounced off the hardened dragon scales. Nor did any arrow seem to hit the pale, armored figure riding atop the terrible beast. Frozen with fear, Davos watched the Night King’s mount shriek in fury as it turned toward the next tower, its broken maw glowing blue like new kindling in a hearth.

A mighty roar answered. Rhaegal dove from the clouds and swept low across the keep. The green dragon and his rider slammed into the enemy with a great crash. Claws and wings and tails trashed about as the two beasts struggled to strike a killing blow.

With an uncommon swiftness, the Night King’s mount dislodged himself from Rhaegal’s grip and flew northward in retreat, leaving the burning ruins of the tower in their wake. Jon and his dragon pursued him. More roars echoed through the swirling storm. As the dragons dueled and dance for supremacy in the night sky.

A hand on his shoulder made him turn abruptly from the enrapturing scene. Gendry stood by him, his chest heavy from exertion and his eyes wide with fear.

“What is it?” he demanded of the lad.

“The corpses,” he panted. “They’re piling up!”

Davos ran to the edge of the wall and peered down at the writhing mass of bodies. The wights...
growled and shrieked as they pressed against the walls. Others were still trying to climb up, but their broken and boney hands found no purchase — or if they did, they were quickly slain by an arrow or knocked away by a well thrown stone.

Yet they seemed closer than before. Davos saw the broken corpses of the first few ranks below the closest wights. We need to burn them, he knew. There were hundreds of thousands of wights and it would only take a few thousand more to form some sort of ramp up the walls. He had seen it happen in the battle against the Bolton bastard. It could happen here and now.

“Fire,” he shouted to Gendry above the din of battle. “We need fire!”

“The dragons?”

“Are ya going to get them yourself? Damn the dragons! Bring up whatever pitch we’ve left in the keep!” Gendry sped away as fast as his wounded leg could carry him.

He turned and surveyed the scene outside the walls once more. The Night King’s thralls had thrown themselves against the castle walls to no avail. And once we’ve burned their bodies they’ll have no way through — save the gates.

“Cease fire!” he called out to the archers to either side of him. “Did ya not hear? Cease fire! Hold those arrows and stones!” Slowly, his order spread from soldier to soldier. Some stepped back from the walls, others looked around, their brows glistening with sweat in the firelight.

“Taking a break?” Tyrion Lannister stormed toward him, a double-bladed dragonglass axe in his hand. “We need to keep them off the walls, ser! Tell these men to keep firing!”

“We’re going to burn them,” he replied. “We’ve drop pitch and fire on them from above!”

“We set all the pitch out on those damned trenches!” Tyrion shouted back. The trenches! He had forgotten in the chaos and confusion of the enemy’s advance. We’ll set them afire from here and fire flaming arrows into the trenches. We’ll cut off their advance for a time.

“We’ll have enough, Lannister,” he said. “Now get back!” He nodded to the teams of Unsullied spearmen carrying a half-dozen small barrels up the stairs. Gendry stood behind them.

“All we had!” Gendry shouted from the base of the wall. Davos nodded. He ordered the archers away from the walls as the barrels were brought up. With backbreaking effort, the black-clad eunuch soldiers heaved them up on the battlements. Gendry hurried up after them.

Davos looked back over the battlefield. More giants were massing in the distance. A great mammoth had joined them. The gate, he knew, they’re going to try the gate again. We need to set them afire now!

“With me!” he shouted and moved to grasp the nearest barrel of pitch. It would not budge. Gendry joined him as did some wilding archer he did not recognize. Together, they flung the barrel over the wall.

It landed among the wights with a muffled crack of wood. Five others followed it. Davos saw them break and their content spill onto the corpses. A thousand pairs of blue eyes looked up at him, their owners growling in rage.

Another great crash shook the walls. Davos struggled to keep his feet and saw a great hairy mammoth bashing its head against the gate. The doors buckled but did not break. There was no time left. Now! He turned and gave the order.
“Set them afire! Torches below and arrows into those trenches! The man who makes the shot can claim lordship over all the lands north of the Wall!” There was scattered nervous laughter and a flurry of movement. Two northmen brandished their burning torches and dropped them down onto the wights.

A great wall of flame burst upwards from the below. Davos jumped back in shock. The wights howled in what might have been pain as the pitch fire turned them to ash. The mammoth had caught fire too, its great hide covered in patches of burning pitch. Yet it still continued to throw itself against the gates.

“Archers! The gates! Bring that beast down!” Half a hundred northmen and wildlings turned and, lighting their arrow, began firing down at the mammoth.

Another wall of flame erupted in the distance. Yes! An archer had hit the pitch set in the trenches. Davos watched the ghostly line of gold and crimson snake its way north and sound. The countless wights beyond halted, turned, and tried to flank the flames. Many others were caught in the sudden rush of fire. He watched them collapse, their tattered arms flailing as they embraced death one final time.

Soon all of Winterfell was encircled in a ring of fire. It shone brightly against the enemy’s storm – a beacon of hope in the darkness. The pitch set alight both below the walls and in the trenches had trapped the Night King’s vanguard here while the rest of his host stood idly beyond them. We’ve cut them in two!

What I’d give for a dragon to burn the lot now. A mighty roar answered his thoughts, but no dragon emerged from the clouds to incinerate swathes of dead with a single breath. Another roar boomed like thunder in the sky above. A broken shriek answered the challenge. Jets of blue and orange fire lit up the night sky like flashes of colored lightning.

They’re fighting him, Davos knew, keeping him away from us. They would have the slay both dragon and rider if this war was to ever end. He hoped to see it done tonight.

Around him, the men and women on the walls began firing once more, throwing javelins into the mass of dead or sending arrows into the decaying flesh of their foes. The wights surged back and forth like an ocean tempest in a bronze tub, but mounted no assault. They were trapped between the fires.

Smoke rose in great clouds from the base of the wall, further obscuring his view of the battlefield. The mammoth had fallen beside the gates. Its hide was stilling on fire. The acrid stench of burning flesh assaulted his senses as the smoke stung his eyes. Many others were backing away from the walls in turn. One man emptied his stomach into the yard.

Even as he watched the far ring of flame dance in the storm winds, Davos knew it would not last. The further flames seemed diminished – fading away as no fire truly should be. Through the smoke and fog of battle, he saw them: three pale figures clad in black; their weapons glittered in the light.

As the fires died away, a horde of wights surged forth from the gap, spilling onto the battlefield before the walls like a flood. More giants, Davos realized with a surge of dread. And more mammoths. The massive beasts strode silently behind the walkers in a slow, relentless march forward. They mean to try the gate again.

It was the weakest part of their defenses – even with the rubble and wood packed against it. One living giant had smashed the old one to pieces. What could ten do?
“Archers!” he called out once more. “Focus your fire on the giants! Bring them down!” A cloud of arrows rose into the sky at his command. The winds buffeted and scattered the volley. All fell short of their marks. He ordered another volley fired as the walkers, giants, and mammoths drew closer. And then a third.

Though they hit their targets on the fourth volley, not a single enemy fell. The obsidian arrows were lost in the mammoths’ hair and hide while the flames on the arrows set alight seemed to simply wither and die midflight.

Around him, Winterfell’s defenders fought a vigorous, desperate battle for survival. Women cast down great stones upon the heads of the wights while men threw javelins and fired arrows. He watched Gendry lift a rough cut stone above his head and heave it over the walls. It landed with a sickening crunch of bone and sinew. The girl Arya stood beside him armed with a bow made of horn. She loosed arrow after arrow so quickly that Davos heard her call for two more quivers.

Yet his gut sank as he looked around. The piles of stones were smaller than before and the bundles of spears and arrows diminished. *There are too many. Hundreds of thousands. Even if every arrow is a kill, we may not have enough to last the night.*

A shout from the tower above made him took up. Tormund, his red beard faded with snow and ash, pointed down at the approaching mammoths and giants. They were closer now – far closer. Davos could see the largest beast. Its hide was thick and matted, covered in icicles of frozen blood. Only its head remained barren of hair and flesh. Its great skull was battered and bone white, but its eye burned blue. Ice cold fingers gripped his heart as he watched the beast lower its skull and begin to charge the gate.

“Bring it down!” he heard Tormund shout from above. “It’s eye! Aim for its eye!”

Davos watched in horror as a hundred arrows bounced uselessly off the mammoth’s dense bone. It picked up speed. The wights around it shrieked in rage. He watched its charge and watched its eye, hoping some archer would strike true. None did.

Then its eye flashed white. Then blue again. Then settled into a white as pale as its skull. The beast swerved and stumbled like it had forgotten how to walk. It turned into the horde of wights, shaking its head back and forth and knocking scores of wights aside with its tusks.

It cut a swathe through the oncoming mass of wights. Countless dead were trampled in the chaos. Bodies flew in every direction. Then it stumbled again, it eye flashing back to blue. The mammoth turned and began its charge once more, barreling toward the gatehouse.

This time some archer found his mark. The beast fell motionless to the ground at the base of the wall, crushing another dozen wights under its immense weight.

Davos breathed a sigh of relief. *The boy,* he knew. How many days had he spent in that godswood with young Bran Stark, Sam Tarly, and that child? He knew how his eyes flashed white. *Was he in the beast? Like his ravens?* If Bran Stark could turn the endless waves of dead against themselves…

He had no time to consider the matter. Three dead giants made to complete the mammoth’s assault. They ran headlong at the gate. Archers filled them with arrows. Two fell, but one slammed into the gates. The walls shook harder that before as a great *crack* cut across the sounds of battle.

Davos heard the groan of stressed wood as the gates were battered inward. Yet they held. A volley of arrows brought down the final giant. *One more charge like that will shattered them. And then*
As he turned back to find Gendry, flashes of movement cut across his vision. Men screamed in surprise and terror. Davos reached for his dragonglass dagger.

Four wights had leapt onto the battlements. More were climbing up. The dead mammoth’s corpse had set the foundation for a new ramp of bodies – just tall enough to allow some of the wights to mount the walls.

Gendry met the closest one in the briefest of battles. One swing of his hammer shattered the thing’s skull. It crumpled to the floor as the boy kicked it aside. His companion proved equally capable. The girl brandished her Valyrian steel dagger and drove it into the remaining blue eye of what had been a wildling woman. Then she withdrew the blade, turned it in her hand, and drove it up into another wight’s skull.

The archers turned their attention to the new assault, loosing their arrows in a continuous stream of fire that felled a wave of wights. Yet more wights charged forth to take their place. Worse, for every wight slain, the great pile of corpses grew. And we’ve set all our pitch alight.

Davos and Tormund both commanded the soldiers to toss torches on the pile, but perhaps only one in ten caught before withering away in the cold. They would have to fight to hold the walls and castle. And our lives.

Men screamed as they were driven backwards and fell over the edge into the yard. They hit the frozen earth with the same awful thuds the stones had produced when cast over the walls. The men did not rise again, but the wights that that killed them did.

The Unsullied in the yard rushed forth to meet with with dragonglass tipped spears. Davos breathed a brief sigh of relief as he saw the soldiers drive their weapons clean through the corpses, then rush toward the walls to aid in their defense.

The old knight joined the growing fray, driving his dagger into the back of the nearest wight. It ceased writhing and less limply to the stone floor. He went for another, only to dodge Gendry’s hammer as it smashed into the thing, caving in its head.

The boy and girl fought as one, with him smashing foes apart with his hammer and her weaving through the chaos, driving her dagger between ribs and into chests. It seemed oddly beautiful to Davos, like a dance.

They were certainly the finest warriors on the wall, but others aided them in the defense of their home. Northmen and wildlings fought side by side and ferociously against the wights. Archers atop the tower continued to fire into the oncoming hordes to which Davos had spotted no rear nor end.

Tormund rushed from the tower to join the melee, swinging his dragonglass weapon like a butcher’s cleaver and howling in rage. Even Tyrion Lannister struck a killing blow with his axe, cutting off some wight’s leg before burying the weapon in the thing’s neck.

More wights surged forward up the ramp of bodies. The living rushed to meet them. The dragonglass and steel clashed with rusted iron and bone at the battle devolved into madness. Wights managed to rush through gaps in the line or leap from the ramp onto other parts of the battlements. Shouts and shrieks echoed in the cold night air as the living fought to remain so.

Davos pulled his weapon from another slain foe, then doubled over in pain. Something hit him in this battle might well be lost.
the gut and drove the breath from his chest. The dragonglass weapon flew from his hand as he collapsed backward. A massive wight loomed over him, his eyes as blue as the falcon on his rent and tattered. It raised its sword to strike.

He blinked and the face into which he looked fell beside him, separated from its body. Someone pushed the decapitated corpse aside.

Tormund loomed over him and offered him a hand. “No time to rest now,” he said, forcing himself to smile. “Better to keep fighting before they take the rest of your fingers.” Davos returned the smile as he grasped the wildling man’s hand with his own. Tormund pulled him to his feet.

As he rose, something else rose up behind his savior amidst a fresh wave of wights. Davos saw the pale, jagged flesh and woven black armor. He felt the cold and he saw the long, spear of ice it held in its had. Tormund did not.

With a shout, he tried to push the man out of the way. It was too late. Blood spattered his face as the White Walker drove its weapon through Tormund chest. The mortal blow made no sound. The wilding’s face went white with shock as he looked down at the spear protruding from where his middle, steam rising from its point. Blood rushed from his mouth, turning his beard an awful shade of red. Then a hand grasped his neck and flung him over the walls.

Davos cried out in rage and lunged forward for the man’s killer. The walker sidestepped his assault and hit him with the shaft of his spear. More wights clambered up the walls around them. Not like this, he thought. Not here. He scrambled for a fallen soldier’s weapon and rose to his feet once more.

The White Walker was locked in battle with Gendry and Arya. The thing was stronger and swifter than its two foes, but it did not have the room to put either advantage to much use. Gendry parried the enemy’s attacks, the dragonglass and steel head of his hammer singing in a strained, shrill tone. A crack appeared along the side of the weapon. He parried another thrust. Then it shattered.

Gendry stepped back in shock and looked around for a weapon. The White Walker drove its spear forward. He missed.

Arya knocked Gendry out of the way with a forceful shove. The tip of the spear grazed the boy’s shoulder as he fell to the side. The walker eyed the girl now as it pulled it weapon back and thrust a killing blow at her heart. She rolled under the thrust and regained her feet behind her enemy. Then she drove the dagger into its back.

The White Walker screamed. Its icy flesh turned as blue as a southern sea. Cracks appeared along its arms and legs. Its eyes burned with malice. Then it fell away to nothing, turning to icy dust in a gust of wind. Somewhere above the castle, Viserion screeched his fury.

Hundreds of wights on and below the walls collapsed too, their bonds to undeath shattering with the walker’s body. Remembering the ambush at the White Knife, the Unsullied drove their spears into the limp corpses, ensuring they would not rise again. The endless hordes regrouped for a new assault, but the living had won a moment’s respite.

Arya rushed to Gendry’s side and helped him up. The boy thanked her with a word and unsteady smile, then frowned as he grasped the hilt of his ruined hammer. Arya picked up a discarded sword and thrust it into his hand.

“That’ll have to do,” Davos said as he joined them. “They’re coming again.”
And they were. Another wave of wights – thousands of them – was rushing toward the western wall. Bodies of the fallen littered the ground from the base of the castle to the trenches. He tried to see a red-bearded body among them, but it was no use. No one could have survived such a wound.

“Hold them here, lads!” Davos cried out. Many wights stumbled over the broken corpses of the dead as they surged forward toward the great mound of bodies that sloped up to the battlements. In a moment, the battle was joined once more.

He melted away toward the back of their lines as the Unsullied formed a shield wall and pointed their spears at the oncoming horde.

Smoke drifted across the battlements. Odd scents filled his nostrils – sweet and smoky scents than reminded him of a crisp autumn day in the Stormlands. That’s wood – living wood, he knew at once. And it’s coming from within the keep.

He turned from the battlements and the terrible shrieks of a hundred thousand dead men… and held his breath. Smoke rose in great black plumes from the godswood. Small patches of flame burned atop the great red canopy of the heart tree, shining brightly in the darkness. They’ve broken through! The dragon’s set the grove afire.

Yet the trees burned with common orange flame, not the blue and white he had seen moments ago. Nor did he hear sounds of a struggle from that direction. Only fire and smoke…

*But the boy is there,* Davos knew. Brandon Stark would not be able to flee the flames on his own. He had seen that mammoth turn with his own eyes. They needed him.

He turned to Tyrion Lannister, who wore a small steel breastplate and a terrified expression. “You have command of the walls!” he shouted.

“What?” Tyrion asked as the dragon’s shrieked in the distance.

“Take command of the men,” Davos said again, motioning to the archers and spearmen with his whole hand.

“And what are you going to do?” Tyrion demanded. He pointed to the black columns of smoke in the godswood. Tyrosh’s eyes widened and he seemed to think better of his questioning. “Good luck!” he shouted before turning back to the fighting.

Davos clutched his dragonglass dagger to his breast as he hurried down the steps and across the yard. Some of the men holding the gate turned to watch him pass, but another great crash from the other side caused them to yell in disarray then redouble their efforts to keep the dead out of the castle.

He passed under the great stone arch and into the godswood itself, the clouds of smoke stinging his eyes and making him cough. Then he stopped and, with growing horror, took in the scene before him.

He saw Gilly first, her face bloodied and panicked. She was screaming for aid, begging for mercy. No fewer than four eastern spearmen were holding her back. Sam knelt beside her, half conscious and bleeding from multiple head wounds. Six crimson-clad spearmen held him back even as he struggled to stand once more.

Perhaps another ten spearmen stood sentry around the heart tree, their weapon points’ gleaming in the great fire. Gods… Fires ringed the heart tree, set in smaller patches at first with lines of wood and tinder leading to the great weirwood’s trunk. The upper branches had already caught flame
from the drifting embers.

Through the smoke, he saw her. The ruby at her throat glowed like that night she had birthed that great and terrible shadow. Her hair and robes matched the flames that danced around her. Beside her sat young Brandon Stark, slumped and motionless in his chair – his eyes white and his mind consumed by some vision. Davos kept his gaze on Melisandre, yet as she moved aside, he saw something far worse. No…

The little boy, his bright blue eyes filled with tears, struggled against the grip of one of her soldiers. His cries mingled with the crackling fire. With growing terror, Davos saw the length of coarse rope held in the closest spearman’s free hand.

“What are ya doing?” he demanded, storming forward to confront the Red Woman. “Let ‘em go! The enemy’s out there!”

Melisandre turned to regard him with cool blue eyes that revealed no surprise. “Ser Davos,” she said with a smirk. “Have you come to aid me once again?”

His blood caught fire at sound of her mocking words. Pure hatred coursed through his veins. No more. Never again. Not after what you did to that little girl.

He brandished his dagger and charged.

Something narrow and hard slammed into him, knocking him to the ground. The burning canopy spun above him. He struggled to his knees, only to find two black spear tips pointed at his face.

Melisandre spoke a command in some foreign tongue and the two spearmen each moved forward and grasped his arms, pulling him up and holding him firm.

“I’m tellin’ ya. I warnin’ ya. Stop this,” he forced the words out through ragged breaths. His chest stung where he had been hit.

“Would you truly doom the realm to save the life of a single child?” The question was genuine. He met Melisandre’s eyes once more. She was looking at him with… what, pity? She walked to him and gently cupped his cheek with once had. “Is this boy’s life worth more to you than your own?”

“Aye,” he spat back.

“More than Jon Snow’s? Or his queen’s? Or their child’s?” Davos pressed his lips together. Gilly kept screaming. “More than your Baratheon bastard?” He lunged at her – or tried to. Her soldiers held him back.

“He’s a babe. A child. The girl’s son,” he growled through the pain.

“Her son, yes, but not her blood,” Melisandre said, “but I have seen the truth in the flames. I have heard it in these very halls. His blood is theirs… is his,” she gestured beyond the walls. The sounds of battle seemed oddly distant from within the grove. “We have both seen the power of king’s blood before, Ser Onion Knight. Was it not the princess’ blood that gave me the strength to raise Jon Snow? To breath new life into the Prince who was Promised?”

He howled in rage and lunged for her again. The soldier on his right struck him between the ribs. She uttered some other command in her foreign tongue. At once, the soldiers dragged Davos away. His vision was blurred by tears and his chest throbbed in pain, but he kept his eyes on the terrible scene before him.

Melisandre had turned back to the burning tree. He saw her raise her arms in prayer before the spearmen dragged him away and cast him back into the chaos of the yard. He ran for aid.
Chapter End Notes

Dun dun dun. Still four more chapters of this fight left. Hope to see some favorable reactions below (or, in all likely hood, some "how could you?!"s)
The godswood was on fire – or at least it seemed that way to Jon as he strode under the stone arch with Daenerys at his side. Crimson, gold, and flaming orange stood out among the all the Stark grey. The men of the Fiery Hand had lit braziers and torches all along the walls they manned.

Closer by, the Red Woman stood by the heart tree, her red hair and deep, blood red robes matching the canopy of the weirwood. Bran sat beside her, looking pensive and lost. Behind him stood Sam, Gilly, and her son.

At the other end of the grove, Drogon and Rhaegal stirred at the howling of the winter winds. Perhaps they can sense the dead are here, Jon thought as he watched the greater black raise its head and release a quick puff of black smoke.

“My king,” Melisandre turned to greet them. “My queen,” she bowed her head low in acknowledgement.

“You’re going to stay here during the battle?” Daenerys asked, her voice biting like the cold winds.

“I fear I am no great warrior, my queen. My powers are better put to use here, aiding the king’s brother,” she motioned to Bran.

Bran… Jon looked over the boy who had been his brother. Bran was full of life and laughter, climbing towers and playing pranks. This ‘Raven’, powerful though he is, is not Brandon Stark. Perhaps Bran was truly gone… Jon missed the boy he had been.

Kill the boy. The words sprang unbidden into his thoughts. The gaunt young man sitting before him had proved an able ally against the dead, standing vigil in the godswood to watch the dead with his many eyes.

He can see them. He can blind them. He knows the Night King as I do, perhaps more so. Jon understood little enough of magic… but we need every weapon we have here and now. Perhaps it was better that his young brother had become something else – something more.

He left Daenerys’ side and walked to the great rolling chair. Snow crunched under the weight of his knee as he knelt at Bran’s side. The boy turned and examined him with cold blue eyes.

“Hello Jon,” he said all too casually, as if war horns were not announcing the arrival of hordes of dead men at their doorstep.

“Bran,” he said, placing a gloved hand on his brother’s knee. “Tonight, this battle, it won’t be easy. If we’re to survive - if we’re to win – we need you.”

He nodded, as if considering Jon’s statement a request. “He’s out there,” Bran said.

For some reason, the bland pronouncement made Jon smile. “I thought he might be,” he said through stifled laughter. Bran did not laugh. The blank look on his face quickly killed Jon’s brief bout of merriment. “Listen, Bran. Listen to me. I know you. You’re strong, stronger than even you know. You survived north of the Wall. Whatever it is you can do, whatever it is you have to do, I know you will.” Bran nodded, but offered no response. He stood, bent and hugged his brother, then
he returned to Daenerys.

He found her halfway through a conversation with Sam and Gilly, who held her son in her arms. “Sansa has taken the others to the crypts. I’m sure he would be safe there.”

“No, Your Grace, he must stay with me,” the wildling woman protested, holding her boy close.

“It’s no trouble, Your Grace,” Sam explained. “We’ll only be watching over Bran while he… well…” he finished lamely and shrugged.

Jon looked from his friend, to the boy, to his brother, and then finally settled on the Red Woman. All his instincts told him this battle would be decided on the walls of his family’s castle and in the skies above it, but if the scars on his chest were anything to judge by, it might well be decided beside the heart tree.

As he opened his mouth to bid his friend farewell, a great, rumbling thunder echoed across the night sky. They all looked through the red canopy to the dark sky beyond, the firelight illuminating the low swirling clouds.

“The night is dark and full of terrors,” Melisandre mused.

“Not for much longer,” Daenerys said, a steely glint in her voice. Her eyes shone with a fiery determination. Her dragonglass armor glittered in the dim light of half a hundred torches. She looked to the dragons then back at Jon. It was time.

Wordlessly, they left the small group and made their way to Drogon and Rhaegal. The dragons stirred. They seem restless, Jon thought. Both had faced the dead many times before. They had lost their brother to the Night King. Perhaps they know what we must ask of them now.

As Jon approached Rhaegal, a large white shadow emerged from the gloom of the grove. Ghost stalked toward him silently, his eyes gleaming in the light of the fires.

“Ready, are you?” Jon asked his friend. Ghost growled low and moved to his side. Daenerys joined him, running her gloved hand through his thick white fur.

“You’ll have to stay here, I fear,” she said. Jon looked at his constant companion. Ghost was a part of him – his dreams were enough to prove that. Would the direwolf make it to the morning? Would the rest of his family? Will I? He ignored the final thought as he looked into Ghost’s blood red eyes.

“Go find Arya, hmm? Keep her safe for me,” Jon said. Perhaps Ghost understood the words, or perhaps he simply sensed Jon’s thoughts. His eyes bored into Jon’s own for the space of a single breath before he bounded off through the underbrush to find Jon’s sister.

Then he and Daenerys stood alone, save the two dragons. He drank in the sight of her, memorizing every detail… the way those loose wisps of silver hair blew about in the wind, the heat of her breath misting in the cold air, the soft swell of her womb under the furs and armor… and her eyes.

Her violet eyes shone like the sun in a land that had not seen it for months. Yet Jon thought they were far more brilliant still. They had burned with raw fury when the Night King brought her dragon down and had welled with tears at his bedside on the ship south once more. They had come alive with laughter in those stolen happy moments before this war had revealed its many horrors. And every night when they settled in beside each other, her eyes were full of love.

Daenerys’ expression here and now was new yet altogether familiar. She was determined, as he
was, to see this battle won; to avenge the fallen, save the living, and fulfill that promise they had made so many months ago. He saw a tenderness there too, for him and their child and this quiet moment before the storm broke all around them.

Jon was not sure what to say. He fought against himself to find the right words, yet none came. Strange emotions swirled about and rose from deep inside him. There was a sudden rush of hope that a future with his family might yet lie just over these walls. He need only fly out and claim it.

Cold dread tempered his dreams. The cost of failure was high. *Arya and Sansa and Bran. Sam and Gilly. Daenerys and my child and my people. All of Westeros…* The cities of the south would suffer worse fates that White Harbor should they falter here.

*Is this what my father felt when he left my mother to march to war?* What had Rhaegar thought when he arrived by the river or first traded blows with Robert Baratheon? Had his last thoughts been of his family? Or his secret wife? Did he consider the son he would never meet as his life’s blood flowed downriver to the sea? *Or did he only feel the cold, as I did?*

Jon Snow was not afraid to die again, but it was not his death he feared. It was hers…

A hand in his scattered his grim musings like so many startled ravens. He looked into Daenerys’ eyes again. Perhaps she had been lost in thought as well, with her hand at her navel and her gaze distant, but when she spoke it was with a queen’s confidence and a wife’s warmth.

“Are you ready?”

“Aye,” he responded, wanting desperately to offer something else in this final moment of solitude. A distant shriek made them both look skyward, their moment falling to pieces as the enormity of the task ahead made its presence known. Daenerys pulled away and made to mount Drogon. Jon took her hand and held her back.

“I love you,” he said. Her determined expression softened, then she rushed forward and kissed him. He held her close for a moment.

“And I you,” she whispered.

Her body pressed against his, against something on his right hip. *The dagger,* he knew. As Daenerys backed away, he drew the short dragonglass blade and offered it to her.

“Take it,” he insisted. She raised an eyebrow. “Just in case.”

Another shrieked echoed around the grove. Drogon and Rhaegal roared their challenges. “It’s time,” Daenerys said, taking the dagger and tucking it away. She turned and walked toward the greater black dragon, scaling his spines and settling in atop his back.

Jon nodded and turned to his own dragon. Rhaegal stood restless and ready despite his injuries. His wing was still torn and his leg battered. Twice he had fought the enemy’s dragon – that thing that had been his brother – and twice he had flown away worse for it. *It must end here,* Jon knew as he climbed atop the dragon, Longclaw sheathed and secured at his side.

With a few powerful wingbeats and a rush of cold air, the two dragons rose from the godswood. Viserion shrieked somewhere in the cold, white fog. Drogon and Rhaegal called back in unison.

It was far darker up here. The fires of the castle below seemed like so many tallow candles flickering in the wind. The swirling clouds engulfed both Jon and Rhaegal as they rose. He could barely see Daenerys, but the mighty beats of Drogon’s wings let him know where she was.
Rhaegal rose above the walls of Winterfell – above the ranks of Unsullied and wildlings and northmen on the walls and in the yard below. He flew into the swirling clouds and across the darkened fields. The enemy was out here somewhere…

Then the clouds shifted underneath him, revealing the army dead men marching on Winterfell. They moved slowly, thousands of corpses shuffling forward in uneven ranks. The hordes stretched far back into the Wolfswood and continued off to the north and south.

*There must be tens of thousands,* Jon thought. *Or hundreds of thousands. Far more than at White Harbor.* As the clouds shifted again, he could see giants and mammoths and bears among the legions of men. Eight thousand years of death was marching on his home. Winterfell, strong as it was, would not long stand against such a host.

*Two dragons cannot defeat them all,* he knew. Their defeats in the field had proved as much. There was only one way this war would end: he had to fight the Night King and he had to kill him.

Yet his enemy did not reveal himself. Of the enemy dragon there was no sign, save the distant shrieks and muffled beat of torn and tattered wings. *He’s wounded.* Dead dragons did not heal as living ones do. *And he’s been bested twice.*

They would have to draw him out. *Burn his armies and force him into the fight,* Jon thought as he nudged his knee into Rhaegal’s side and guided him in a wide, sweeping arc high above the dead. Drogon and Daenerys rose to meet them, his wife’s hair whipped around wildly in the winds. Both riders looked down onto the advancing army.

“With me!” he shouted. His words might have been lost to the wind, but his commanding gestures made his meaning plain enough. He saw Daenerys lean forward, guiding Drogon into a dive. At Jon’s urging, Rhaegal followed his brother.

Jon squinted as bits of ice and snow peppered his face. The freezing air stung his eyes and lungs. It was all he could do to simply hold on as Rhaegal dove. Drogon was heavier though and his dive faster. With a roar, his opened his black maw and loosed a column of crimson flame onto the wights. Scores burned and turned to ash.

Rhaegal drew up from his own dive and – without urging from his rider – bathed another group of wights in amber flame. The streaks of fire lit the darkened battlefield and cast a warm glow onto the advancing hordes.

Both dragons began to circle the castle in wide passes, turning enemies to ash and cinders as they flew. Cruel winds buffeted Rhaegal and strained his more injured wing, but he kept himself aloft as he exacted his vengeance on the dead. Ahead, Drogon roared in fury between every breath.

Jon thought he heard cheering on the walls even as the first of the wights crashed uselessly against Winterfell’s ancient defenses. It was an odd sound, ghostly and ethereal upon the winter winds. Still, it gave him hope.

The defenders of Winterfell met the enemy with arrows, stones, and spears. Through the clouds and snow, he watched his people fight for their home and for their lives. Fire and stone rained down upon the dead, who pressed against the great stone walls. Giants threw themselves against the sealed gates, but they too were brought down.

More wights were marching for from the gloom of Wolfswood to surround the castle. The living would run out of rocks and arrows before they even dented the dead’s numbers. *And he’s still out there…*
They continued to burn the dead. Rhaegal unleashed a torrent of fire down on the wights. A giant erupted into a tower of fire, then collapsed to crush a dozen wights. The battlefield was scarred with bright patches of flame, though they burned only for a time before withering in the cold. Drogon flew across the battlefield, far ahead of his brother. Daenerys had guided him away to the south where the dead were pressing hard against the walls. Jon made to join her.

Awful screams rent the air. Jon snapped his neck toward Winterfell to see a pillar of blue fire descending from the swirling clouds. The dragon, he thought as his heart beat against his chest. He urged Rhaegal back toward the castle… and toward the Night King.

This was it. He had to bring him down here – slay the dragon and then the enemy himself. Rhaegal roared as he saw Viserion’s battered form descend from the clouds and engulf the squat tower in blue fire.

He was vulnerable there, hovering just above the walls. Jon leaned into and between Rhaegal’s great spinal spikes, urging his dragon onward. They swept over the western walls and the keep, but they did not slow.

With a great crash that almost shook Jon from his perch, the living dragon collided with the dead. Teeth and claws and tails thrashed about as each struggled to land a blow against the other. Rhaegal buffeted his wings and drove his fallen brother back, away from the tower and over the eastern fields.

He roared in fury as the wight dragon twisted his body and escaped the assault, white scales falling away to the ground in his withdraw. Jon caught a glimpse of burning blue as he focused his attention on his foe. The Night King sat atop his dread steed, his great scythe slung across his back. He met Jon’s gaze, then turned and flew away into the storm.

Rhaegal followed him. Up and up they flew into the near blackness of the night. His green dragon loosed bursts of amber fire that turned to black smoke in the night. The echoes of battle rang out from the castle below. Underneath that cacophony, he heard the thrum of heavy wingbeats, but neither he nor Rhaegal could see the enemy.

That I could speak to him, Jon thought. Daenerys had only taught him base commands – fly and fire and whatnot. He grasped the dragon’s spikes and reached out in a different way, urging his thoughts to be heard though they remained unspoken. Up, he thought. Higher Rhaegal, take us higher.

And, to his utter surprise, Rhaegal flew higher, pushing himself through the winds and snow into the night sky. Higher ground, Jon thought to himself. Then we’ll take him like a hawk takes some common dove.

He looked down through the swirling clouds. Winterfell was a blurred vision of fire, smoke, and bodies. A hundred thousand blue eyes burned against the darkness all around the walls. Some had even made it atop them. They cannot hold them any longer. Jon knew it for certain. I must find him.

The Night King found them first.

With a vicious shriek, Viserion dove from the clouds and flew toward Jon and Rhaegal. They had no time to react. The dead dragon locked his jaws around Rhaegal’s neck, slamming into him with such for that Jon was almost thrown off. The green dragon lost his position and fell sideways, his wings struggling to find purchase in the storm air. His claws and tail slashed against Viserion’s ruined scales. Jon struggled to hold on as his dragon fell toward the earth. His forearms burned as he clung to Rhaegal’s spikes.
The Night King pressed his advantage, driving them downward. Viserion lashed his tail against Rhaegal’s head and raked his sides with his broken claws. He kept his jaw locked around the green’s neck. Rhaegal cried out in pain – it was an awful sound.

Jon focused on his dragon as the earth and sky spun around him. He had to do something, else both dragon and rider would break on the frozen earth below. He reached for Longclaw’s hilt and drew the blade’s length, holding it tightly in his hand. Then he lunged to his right, keeping one hand on a spike whilst slashing at Viserion’s side with the other.

His first blow glanced off the dragon’s white scales. The second proved equally useless. As the two dragons twisted and traded blows, Jon found another chance. He drove his sword upward at Viserion’s ruined neck.

The dragon lunged away, releasing his vicelike grip on Rhaegal’s neck. Jon saw globules of steaming blood falling from the fresh wound. He sheathed his blade as Rhaegal righted himself in the sky. They were far lower than before. Hordes of wights looked up at them as they stormed forward toward Winterfell’s walls.

Yet above them, Viserion held his position in the sky. The Night King looked down at Jon, his dragon’s maw glowed as blue as his eyes. Jon could almost feel the flames from where he sat.

“Go!” he shouted. “Go now!” Rhaegal dove just as a column of blue fire shot overhead. Heat washed over him before fading away to smoke and embers. They swept low over the ranks of the dead, just above the heads of the giants. Viserion pursued them, his shrieks echoing over the battlefield and drawing an awful chorus of calls from the wights below.

*I cannot defeat him alone.* Rhaegal was injured and the enemy too swift. He scanned the sky for Drogon’s black form. *Where is she?*

A mighty roared answered his thoughts. Drogon burst through a grey cloudbank and flew headlong toward the Night King’s mount. Daenerys pressed herself against his back, bracing for the fight.

He watched the black dragon close on his foe, but there was no great shuddering impact. Viserion shot upward with unnatural swiftness, evading the slower but far more powerful dragon.

Drogon rushed past him and banked hard, turning on the wind and sweeping around for another pass. Fire roiled in his maw. Then he breathed a jet of crimson fire toward Viserion. It met a column of blue fire in midflight. Jon watched the brilliant explosion light up the wall of clouds.

Then Viserion was gone, flying up and away into the storm. Daenerys pursued him as Jon urged Rhaegal back into the fight, but he was slowed by injury and fatigue.

The two dragons danced across the night sky, weaving between clouds. Drogon bathed the enemy in dragon fire and while Viserion raked his living brother’s sides with vicious swipes at every pass.

The battle raged below as well. Jon could see more wights had made it to the walls while others rammed themselves against the gates. Countless others shambled forward to take the place of the slain. *Too many.* The thought repeated itself in his mind as Rhaegal flew upward to aid his brother.

Fires erupted outside the walls, snaking their way across the battlefield. The shrieks of burning wights echoed upwards as some archer set the pit-lined trenches alight. The fires cast an eerie orange glow on the ranks of dead, dimming the burning eyes and…

Jon’s heart caught in his throat. Even as he flew upwards, he could see the pale figure below climbing down from its dead mount and reaching for its spear of jagged ice. He watched –
powerless to intervene – as the White Walker prepared to throw the spear skyward, but not at him. At Daenerys. There was nothing he could do but watch.

The spear never flew. A score of wights had turned from the walls and swarmed the lone walker, their rusted weapons shattering as they rained down blows. The sheer weight of the assault drove the walker back. And their eyes… He had seen it twice before, but never like this. The dead men’s eyes shone not blue, but pure white as they turned against their master.

Bran, Jon knew, his chest swelling with renewed confidence. His brother was using what power he had to aid the living. The dead men’s assault faltered, their eyes shifting between the two colors, blue then white then blue again. They stood rigid as powers unseen fought for control.

The White Walker dispatched the rebellious wights with ease and turned to find its target, but its moment had passed. Daenerys and Drogon had disappeared into the clouds. Rhaegal moved to join them.

Bouts of flame lit the clouds like lightning as Jon and his dragon made to aid Daenerys. He could not see them, but he could certainly hear them. Roars of pain and shrieks of anger echoed across the sky. As Rhaegal rose through a swirling mass of storm clouds, Jon caught sight of the terrible dance once more.

The two dragons circled each other, shooting jets of fire that singed wings and blackened scales. Their wingbeats scattered the clouds. The Night King sat atop Viserion’s back just as Daenerys did Drogon’s. Both riders turned to look at Jon and Rhaegal as they drew even.

Jon met Daenerys gaze. “We’ll take him together!” he shouted, forcing himself to be heard above the winds and wingbeats. She nodded. This ends here.

Viserion screeched and turned towards Rhaegal. He loosed a column of icy blue dragon fire at the green dragon’s head. Without need of the command, Rhaegal countered with an attack of his own. The streams of fire collided and combined into a roiling fireball that burned as bright as the sun before fading away into a wall of thick black smoke.

With a roar, Drogon surged forward and out of sight. Jon could not see through the smoke, so he urged Rhaegal to attack. He gripped the spikes tightly and braced for another collision.

Only none came. Rhaegal drew up even with the other two dragons. Viserion was writhing about, his tail thrashing wildly about. Drogon loomed over him. With one swift, sudden movement, the larger black dragon locked his powerful jaws around Viserion’s weakened wing – right where it met the ruined body. With a powerful twist of his neck and body, he tore the wing from the dragon’s body.

Frozen blood, fire, and bone exploded from the wound. Viserion listed. His remaining wing beat furiously. Then he fell away from Drogon and Rhaegal and plummeted from view.

Jon exhaled a breath he did not realize he was holding in. Drogon dropped the wing he had torn off, the dead limb still flapping wildly of its own accord. He roared in triumph as Jon looked at Daenerys. She did not look back.

Instead, she pressed herself to her dragon’s back and guided him into a steep dive, pursuing their maimed foe. Rhaegal followed his mother. Two dragons and two dragon riders shot downward through clouds and smoke and snow. Drogon, far heavier than his brother, was quicker to reach their foe.
Roaring in fury, he drew up his legs and landed on Viserion’s neck with a sickening crack. Then he turned and bathed the wight in a continuous stream of fire. He did not relent. The enemy dragon’s white scales cracked and splintered in the intense heat. His remaining wing flapped feebly. His legs scrambled uselessly, trying to rake Drogon’s sides. His head was half buried in the ground, yet still he spewed weak jets of fire. He was broken.

Thousands of wights turned away from Winterfell and began advancing on the two dragons while thousands more stormed forth from the forest. In the distance, dark smoke rose from the godswood and the walls of the castle. He could hear the shouts of panic amidst the din of battle. *There are too many. We have to kill him now.*

Rhaegal swooped in low, flying in circles around the scene and bathing ranks of wights with his own amber fire. Around and around he flew, turning the enemy’s forcing to ash. Rhaegal scarred the earth with his flames as Drogon maintained his relentless assault on their broken foe.

An intense cold swept over the field. The winds howled and the fires withered away. Jon looked down and saw the Night King – unscathed an unharmed – step from Viserion’s body and draw his great scythe. In a single, sweeping movement, he struck Drogon’s leg. The weapon cut through the hardened scales with ease. Drogon roared in pain and buffeted his wings, drawing away and taking flight once more.

Jon’s heart raced. *He’s here. We have him.* There would not be another chance. It had to be now and it had to be him. Without a second thought, he guided Rhaegal to the ground and leapt from his back, landing on the hard earth. He drew Longclaw and turned to face the Night King as his dragon took off once more.

At once, wights stormed forth to attack. He cut through the first body with ease, then parried another’s rusty blade and drove his sword’s length through his enemy’s rotten torso. Still more wights charged his position, their guttural and ghoulish calls forming a terrifying war cry.

A familiar voice rose above them. “Jon!” Daenerys shouted. He dispatched another wight and spun around to find his wife atop Drogon. Her face was blackened with soot and smoke, but her eyes shone with determination.

“Keep them off me!” he shouted back. She nodded, yelling something in Valyrian that earned a roar from Rhaegal in response. The two dragons began to circle above the scene, their attack reforming a wall of fire that kept the legions of dead away from Jon. *Stay up there,* he thought as he gathered himself. *Stay away from him.*

Jon grasped the hilt of his blade with both hands and stepped forward. From across the small field, he saw the Night King raise his own weapon. His hands felt cold and stiff. His heart hammered against his chest.

He looked back across the battlefield to where Winterfell lay drowning under the endless tides of dead men. Arya was in there. So were Bran and Sansa and all the rest of them. *Save Daenerys.* He looked up to where his wife – carrying their unborn child – circled overhead and burned the dead atop her dragon. The memory of her smile warmed him as nothing else could.

Finally, his gaze settled on his enemy – the cause of all this strife and suffering and death. The Night King regarded him with burning blue eyes. His breathed deeply, the ice cold air stinging his lungs. Then he charged.

Chapter End Notes
Well, here's another installment. Odd to think that it's almost August 4th! I've spent almost a year on this thing. Yikes!

Not my favorite chapter as it felt a little bit repetitive in places, but it had a few moments I enjoyed writing. There are two main threads in this battle that tie together at the end, so it's proven to be more of a challenge for me in writing (and editing. Mostly that really).

Have an excellent weekend and, as always, comments are appreciated.
Arya V

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes


The words beat a steady rhythm in Arya’s head. The mantra kept pace with the pounding of her heart as she wove between the living and the dead, cutting down the wights with her Valyrian steel blade in her left hand and a shard of dragonglass in her right.

The foes she could not reach met a less refined fate on the ends of Unsullied spears or under the angry blows of the wildling warriors. For every wight that fell two took its place atop the walls.

They had won a brief moment’s rest after she and Gendry had killed the walker, but it had not lasted long. New ranks of wights had massed below and climbed up the great mound of corpses piled high against the wall. Every time she peered over the edge of the battlements, thousands of blue eyes stared back up at her. There were just too many.

Davos had fallen or fled – she was not sure which. Somewhere, Tyrion Lannister shouted panicked commands. The godswood was on fire. More giants threw themselves against the battered gates. The walls shook with each great crash. Even she struggled to keep her feet.

Yet still she fought, driving her steel into the backs of the dead then kicking their limp forms from the walls. A wight charged her, growling like some wounded beast as it brandished a worn and rusted blade. It swung wildly as it came at her. She ducked and spun, drawing her blade across her enemy’s leg as she evaded the blow.

Then her ankle caught on some severed limb. She missed her next step and stumbled, falling amidst the blood-soaked bodies of the slain defenders. Arya turned and made to regain her feet. A great weight pushed her down. Another wight had scaled the battlements and leapt on top of her. She drove her dagger up through the thing’s rotted chest and felt the steel break the old bones.

She tried to push the limp body away. With a dull thud, another fell on top of it – an Unsullied spearman with an axe buried deep in his helm. The impact drove the breath from her lungs.

Not today, she thought again as she tried to push the bodies away. Not like this. A third body fell across her legs. Weapons clattered around her. A soldier stepped on her leg, making her cry out in pain. Not today…

The weight on her chest suddenly lifted. She drew in a sweet breath of relief and tasted the smoke on the night air. Arya pulled her arms in and tried to push the other bodies – just as a rough hand reached down, grabbed her around laces of her leather jerkin, and pulled her back to her feet.

Gendry stood beside her, his face covered in ash and blood and muck. His hammer was gone, shattered in the duel with the White Walker, but had had a well-worn blade in hand.

“Thanks,” she said, trying to smile amidst the chaos. Gendry tried to smile back.

Another booming crash shook the walls. Wights storming over the battlements fell to either side as archers and spearmen struggled to keep their feet. She reached out and grabbed Gendry’s arm to steady herself.
His eyes widened in shock. “The gate!” Together, they stepped forward and peered over the edge of the walls. The endless hordes of wights still stormed forth from the darkness, their eyes burning with cold malice. Two more giants drive their broken fists into the battered wood of the gate. The cracks of splintering wood rang out amidst the cries of wights and men.

“If they get through-” Gendry began, just as another crash cut him short and shook the walls. *We die,* Arya finished his thought in silence.

For a moment, she left the walls and the battle behind. She was with Gendry in her chambers – just as she had been only hours ago. It had been a happy moment, stolen away as the war horns sounded outside the walls. For a blacksmith, his hands been surprisingly soft

No, not today. She was not going to die here. Neither was he.

Perhaps he had been remembering what she had, for the look in his eyes was one of fresh-forged determination. He tilted his head to the yard below where Unsullied spearmen and Dothraki screamers fought back those wights that had fallen off the walls. She nodded.

Gendry led the way to the stairs, displacing wights with his sword and shouldering soldiers out of the way. Arya followed in his wake, her every footstep carefully placed between the severed limbs and forgotten weapons that littered the walls.

As she hurried down the steps, another booming crash echoed from the gatehouse. The walls shuddered and she almost lost her footing before leaping from the stairs and landing in a low crouch on the frozen ground below. Her legs ached in protest from the impact. Gendry hurried back to her side, his cheek bleeding from a fresh wound where some claw or hand had raked him.

From here, Arya could see the state of her home far more clearly than before. She could hear it, too. The awful shrieks of the dead sounded from all around her as they scaled the walls and fought to take them from the living. Men and women cried out in pain and fear. She heard the crackling of fire and panicked shouts from the godswood, where great black plumes of smoke rose into the dark night sky. And there, somewhere in the distance, a dragon roared.

Above it all she heard a terrible sound, like the splintering of some ancient, mighty tree. The gatehouse shook. Snow and ice and bodies fell from the towers. She looked to the gates, barely visible through the piled stones and timbers, and saw scores of dead hands clawing at the debris. Then she saw the barricade shift toward her. Their defenses were failing.

“Gendry,” she spoke his name aloud and heard the fear in her voice.

“We’ve got to hold the gate,” he said, his own voice wavering. “You! And you!” He turned to the Unsullied soldiers nearest him, “with me! Now!”

He ran toward the piled defenses and began shifting rocks and putting timbers back in place. Perhaps the queen’s eastern soldiers did not understand him, but they could see what he wanted by his actions. They rushed to help, as did two score more.

More shouts filled the night air. Arya saw a fresh wave of wights swarm over the walls and rush toward the closest defenders. Others simply spilled over the battlements and into the yard, their limbs snapping and breaking from the impact of the fall. Yet those injuries did little to slow their assault.

She brandished her dagger and ran at the closest, slashing at the dead man’s ruined throat to silence him once and for all. The sharp steel tore through his ragged flesh with ease.
Boney hands raked her back and dug into her leather armor. She turned her blade in her hand and drove it behind her without turning. A dead weight slumped against her legs and fell away to the ground.

Arya moved to Gendry’s side, keeping the wights from him and the Unsullied as they struggled to hold the defenses in place. They were failing. Through the debris she could see the ruined remains of the great wooden gates… and the writhing mass of dead forcing its way ever closer to where she stood.

Still more wights poured over the walls, some charging the archers and swordsmen on the battlements while others leapt into the yard below. Archers – now trapped in their towers – fired arrows down at the dead. Their efforts did little to stem the tide of death.

Arya looked up just in time to sidestep a falling body. It landed with a dull thud on the ground beside her. As she turned the dagger in her hand and made to drive it through the wight’s skull, she looked more closely at her target. *Black armor. One of the Unsullied.* The fall had killed him. She turned away and found another target as scores more wights poured into the yard.

She spun and wove through the sea of bodies, slashing at legs and backs while dodging blows from rusted axes and worn swords. Wight after wight fell limp and lifeless to the dirt. Still more charged at her. Her arms began to tire from the strain of each assault. Her chest burned with exertion. Behind her, Gendry grunted in pain and yelled out some command. She looked back across her shoulder

Through the piled debris she saw a giant crushing timbers and casting stones aside. Gendry’s heels shifted in the dirt as he struggled to hold the defenses in place. Rotten hands reached out through the gaps in the barricade, clawing at the arms and legs of the defenders holding back the endless tides of dead. Gendry turned and caught her eye.

“Get out of here! Get back to the keep!” he shouted. Arya shook her head and turned to strike down another enemy.

“I don’t think that-” she drove her dagger up into a wight’s skull “-matter’s much now!”

An awful roar echoed from beyond the barricade. *No…* A great, blue-eyed giant began to charge the remains of the barricade. Arya dropped the dragonglass blade in her right hand, reached for Gendry, and pulled with all her strength. He stumbled and fell across her body as the charged forth and smashed the rest of their defenses like so much kindling. Hundreds of wights followed it into the yard.

The defenders of Winterfell rushed to meet them. The Unsullied closed ranks and advanced in tight, well-formed lines of spears. The Dothraki charged forward on horseback and on foot, cutting down their enemies with arakh and spear and hoof.

Northern levies and smallfolk armed with whatever they could find grouped together, slashing at any wight that came at them. Archers on the towers above turned and fired their arrows into the castle even as the dead continued to scale the great mounds of corpses and pour over the walls. A volley of their arrows brought the giant down in the middle of the fight.

Gendry and Arya found their feet as the battle descended into pure madness. Save the ranks of Unsullied, it was hard to tell friend from foe. She drew up her dagger as Gendry found a discarded blade. Together, they hacked their way clear of the oncoming wights and huddled together at the base of a tower.
He looked at her and she at him. The gates had fallen. The walls might soon follow. *Not today. Not today. Not today.* Each time she said it, it felt less true. *If there is a god of death, he’s outside these walls on that dead dragon.*

The Unsullied were in retreated and the northerners fell back in disarray. She saw the banners of Houses Cerwyn and Glover falter and fall beneath the swarm of blue-eyed corpses. They were surrounded by dead men.

Six wights turned toward the isolated pair, brandishing bent spears and rusted blades. Gendry turned and ripped a torch from the wall, waving it before him to ward off the dead with one arm while moving to shield her with his body. The wights growled and paced around, but not one made to attack. That flame was all that stood between Arya and Gendry and the dead.

Someone shouted in anger. Arya looked up at once, then down again as four wight heads rolled to her feet. An armored figured emerged from among the press of bodies – two in fact. Brienne led the way, Oathkeeper dirtied with old blood and flesh. Podrick Payne ran behind her, a sword in one hand and battered shield in another.

With another savage blow, Brienne split the other two wights in half. “Lady Arya,” she rasped. “Quickly, come with me!”

“Where?” she demanded. More wights charged at them in the midst of their shouting. Podrick slammed his shield into one while Gendry split another’s skull. Brienne relieved two dead men of their heads in a single swing. She turned back to Arya.

“The keep, my lady! We’ll reform the lines outside the hall!”

“If we don’t hold the gatehouse, it won’t matter where you reform your lines!” Gendry shouted back.

Brienne looked at him as if she had never seen him before. She opened her mouth to speak, but a welcoming sound cut her off. Horned buzzed across the way. Each blast earned a chorus of guttural calls from the wights within the walls.

Through the press of bodies, Arya saw the Unsullied moving to reform their lines. They held their shields together tightly, overlapping like scales on a dragon. Their spears they placed over them, two ranks of jagged dragonglass facing the oncoming hordes.

With another horn blast, they advanced. The Unsullied moved forward in lockstep. Their assault was oddly rhythmic. The first two ranks would thrust out with their spears, withdraw, then lead the march forward once more. Wights threw themselves against the black shield wall, but they were quickly pushed away and slain in the next advancing step.

Dothraki and northmen rallied around the flanks of the formation, keeping the spearmen safe from attacks from the sides and rear. The sound of their horns drowned out all noises in the yard. It blew, they advanced a single step. Then it blew again.

Hundreds more wights stormed through the gatehouse, offering an awful chorus of guttural shrieks in response to the buzzing of the eastern horns. The dead men fell upon the Unsullied lines… and broke like waves upon jagged black rocks.

Scores fell to the line of dragonglass spears. Others writhed about as they were pressed backwards. Northmen and wildlings flung torches into their ranks. The dead flesh caught fire at once.

Arya watched their advance in awe, fresh hope swelling in her chest and giving her sword arm
strength. Brienne looked at the pair again and gave them a curt nod. The four warriors shadowed the base of the wall as they circled around the yard. Every wight within Winterfell had focused its attention on the spearmen and fell before their onslaught.

As Arya reached a clearing by the forge, the Unsullied reached the gatehouse and reformed their lines around it. The wights continued to storm past the ruined gates, but could not break the spearmen’s lines nor make it into the yard. More torches were flung over the ranks or dropped from murder holes in the vaulted ceiling above. Scores burned.

With nowhere to flee, the flames caught quickly on the stiff hides and rotten flesh. An inferno erupted from within the gatehouse. Black smoke carried the scents of burning flesh and hair back into the yard.

It’s working, Arya thought in wonder. The tide had been stemmed – for the moment – and the yard had been retaken.

She and the others dispatched the few wights remaining inside the walls whilst soldiers fought desperately atop them. Arya drew up her dagger as another body came barreling toward them from across the yard – a living body. Davos, Arya recognized the old man’s short grey hair and salt-stained robes. His face was covered in sweat and soot, his eyes were wide with fear.

“You’ve got to help,” he forced the words through ragged breaths.

“What is it?” Gendry asked, moving to the man’s side and helping him stand upright.

“It’s her. There in the godswood,” he pointed back to the columns of smoke rising from the grove.

“We need to hold this keep, Ser,” Brienne stated harshly. Behind her, the Unsullied commander shouted something to his troops as the wights mounted a fresh assault on their lines.

“Ya don’t understand. Those fires – the boy. She’s gonna burn him!”

“Bran?” Arya asked with a sudden rush of fear. She looked to Gendry, then back at Davos. She wanted to kill him to.

“No! The girl’s son. The little wildling boy.” Davos’ panicked words spilled from his mouth. “And your brother is trapped beside the fires. If we don’t stop her–”

Arya did not wait to hear the consequences. She tucked her dagger away and sprinted for the godswood. She ran across the yard, dodging battles and frightened horses and loosed arrows. Each footfall was carefully placed between severed limbs and fallen soldiers.

Her mind raced. Bran’s in there. She’s in there. Hatred made her heart beat faster. The Red Woman.

Shouts rang out behind her. She heard Gendry’s voice and Brienne’s among them. Smoke wafted toward her from the stone archway. Flames rose up above the inner wall. The leaves of the heart tree were alight. She grasped the hilt of her weapon and made to run in. A strong grip on her shoulder stopped her.

Arya spun and put the blade to her assailant’s neck – then quickly pulled it away. Gendry’s chest rose and fell in hurried breaths. Davos ran behind him. Brienne and Podrick were close behind.

“Stop,” she said, trying to pull away. Gendry held her firmly in place.
“No,” he replied. “Wait. We’ll go together.”

And they did. The five of them walked through the smoke and dust, through the archway and into the grove. A single voice filled the air, calling out to some power unseen. “R’hillor! Hear us! Accept this sacrifice and show us the way! Aid your humble servants here in our hour of need! Give light to the Prince you promised us!”

Arya took in the scene. Melisandre stood by the heart tree. Small fires had been lit all around her. Their embers had carried up and set the white branches ablaze. Behind her, ranks of eastern spearmen stood silently, their black spear tips gleaming in the firelight. Six of them stood over Samwell and Gilly, the former unconscious and the latter crying out for mercy. Bran sat behind them all, motionless and utterly unaware of the scene unfolding before him. His eyes seemed to glow white.

Her heart rose into her throat as she saw the little boy tied to the carved white trunk. Kindling had been set all around him. It was beginning to smolder. Melisandre turned around as Arya moved forward, Gendry and Davos at her side.

“Ser Davos, you’ve returned,” the Red Woman said, the flames behind and glowing ruby at her throat casting her face in shadow.

“Aye,” he said. “And not alone either. Let ‘em go.”

Melisandre smiled. “This is the Lord’s will. I cannot allow you to interfere.” She turned to the ranks of spearmen behind her. “Keligon ziřy,” she said. Arya recognized the Valyrian command: Stop them.

The soldiers lowered their spears and advanced. Arya heard the shuffle of plate as Brienne moved forward in response. Gendry raised his sword. So did Davos.

“Stay together,” Brienne cautioned the others. “And stay behind me.”

Arya charged. Two of the soldiers ran at her, thrusting their spears at her chest. She spun around the blows, dancing around their sides and driving her dagger into the closer enemy’s back. He grunted and fell to the earth. The other lashed out with the butt of his weapon. It caught her in the ribs and she fell back across the man she had just slain. He raised his weapon for a killing blow.

Gendry roared and barreling into him, knocking the spear from his grip and sending both men sprawling into the dirt. His sword was forgotten in the fighting – he rained down harsh blows with his bare fists instead, turning the man’s copper face into a red ruin.

Davos, Podrick, and Brienne charged forth to fight the others. The squire and older man battled one spearman a piece while Brienne challenge five, perhaps six. Her shining sword cut through their spears and brightly colored armor and flesh as though it were all little stronger than the smoke around her.

Then men of the Fiery Hand recognized the threat at once. A dozen more stormed and surrounded her, cutting her off from the rest even as others emerged from behind barren trees and blazing fires.

Arya regained her feet and helped Gendry up as well. His hand was slick with blood. Two more spearmen charged them. She parried a blow and rolled under her opponent’s spear, slicing open his leg at the thigh and knocking him back into the dirt. All the while, she kept an eye on the Red Woman.

But she could not reach her. The eastern slave soldiers rushed to fill the gaps left by their fallen
brothers. Melisandre turned from the battle and, torch in hand, walked toward the struggling, screaming boy. She touched the fire to the kindling and stepped back, raising her hands in prayer once more. Behind her, Bran sat motionless.

_Not today._ It was her only thought now as she dodged the spear thrusts and countered with blows to her enemies’ backs and legs, crippling each man before turning to the next. Gendry fought beside her, a broken spear tip in hand.

An opening appeared in the lines. Arya saw her brother clearly across the way and ran for him, ignoring the shouts of her friends and the distant cries of the wights beyond. The fires around the weirwood burned fiercely at her side. The heat felt good, but threatening.

She put a hand on Bran’s shoulder and tried to shake him back to consciousness. “Bran! Bran! Wake up!” He slumped sideways in his chair. “Bran! Help!” she shouted again over the sounds of the crying boy and the fighting behind her. His white eyes looked back at her, unseeing and unknowing.

“He won’t wake,” Melisandre said from nearby. Arya spun and met the woman’s gaze. Her ruby necklace was glowing like a red hot coal. She held a dagger of black steel in her hand as she paced forward toward the two Starks. Arya readied herself to strike.

“Nor will you,” a voice said. Davos, beaten and bloodied, rose up behind the Red Woman. Before she could turn, he drove a broken spear point into her back. Melisandre gasped, her blue eyes wide with shock. Then she crumpled to the forest floor.

Arya nodded wordlessly at Davos. Their eyes met for a moment before turning back to the clattering of steel and shouts of pain. Arya looked around. Brienne emerged from her mismatched duel, her armor dented and her sword dripping with blood. The bodies of her enemies lay scattered about the godswood.

Davos and Gendry both rushed to free Gilly’s son. Rising flames licked at his legs and chest as he screamed and writhed. Gendry got there first, pulling and hacking away at the coarse ropes binding the boy. Arya leapt over Melisandre’s body and ran to help him.

“They’re too thick! Use that!” he said through gritted teeth, jerking his chin at her left hand. Arya brandished the blade and cut away the ropes. Gendry pulled the boy from the fire. Davos snatched him up and carried him away from the tree.

Yet as Arya turned back toward the archway, a flash of blue caught her eye. A slain spearman, his throat as red as his robes, regained his feet. His eyes burned with that terrible, icy cold blue. Twenty of his fallen brothers rose in unison.

More awful shrieks filled the grove. Wights rushed in from the stone archway. _The gates_, she thought with a rush of dread. _We’ve lost the gates…_ The dead had taken the walls and the yard. They had taken Winterfell.

With a shout, Brienne charged to meet the enemy before they poured forth into the grove. Steel met rotten flesh as she hacked apart the dead men and held the entrance. Podrick joined her.

As Arya made to rejoin the fight, there was a flash of crimson to her right. Melisandre rose up and slashed at Gendry’s leg. Her black dagger opened a gaping wound. Blood flowed down his leg and spilled into the fire. He clutched at his leg and fell sideways to the ground, crying out in pain.

Pure, angry rage filled her. She stormed forth and grabbed a handful of the woman’s hair. Yanking
it back, she cut the ruby necklace away with a flick of her dagger. Melisandre struggled to fight off Arya, but she held her grip firm and brought her dagger to the woman’s throat.

“Finish it” she rasped, reaching out to the fires with one withering hand.

“Valar morghulis,” Arya whispered. Then she drew her steel across her enemy’s throat and kicked her body forward into the flames.

She jumped back in shock as the fires shot upwards into the burning canopy. Flames filled the grove. The carved face of the weirwood seemed to cry out in agony as the fires rose up and consumed him.

The colors were brilliant – a dozen shades of dragonfire. They swirled in the cold storm winds and rose higher into the sky. Yet the calls of the wights rose about the roaring fire.

Without a second thought, she spun to face her oncoming foes. Brienne had fallen back from the arch. Hundreds of dead men poured through the opening, uttering their awful cries and regarding the grove’s defenders with icy blue stares.

Arya stepped to Gendry’s side and raised her weapon, ready to defend them both. If she was going to die here, better to have it be with him and right here – in her home and defending her brother.

Behind her, an intense wave of heat rose up and washed over her like a dragon’s breath. A deep, unknowable voice whispered something in her ear. The wights surged forward – just as Bran’s awful scream echoed across the grove.

Chapter End Notes

Well, by now some of you might be able to guess what's about to happen. It's like the first thing I thought of when I went through how I wanted this battle to go. It'll be pretty clear next chapter, but there are hints going back to last September.

I'll try to get an update out before next Tuesday, because after that I need to take a few days to purge Azeroth of those filthy Horde mongrels.
The Three-Eyed Raven left his body behind as the battle began in earnest.

He stood in the center of the yard and saw it all with his many eyes. Tyrion Lannister commanded the archers on the western walls while his brother led the northern forces on the eastern ramparts. The mass of wights pressed against his mind even as they pressed against the walls and gates of the castle.

Something else weighed heavier on him still. *Everything that has happened has led to this moment. Here. Now.* Visions of the past or of faraway places would do him little good now. Now it was time to act.

He moved first to the western walls to stand beside his sister. She fired dragonglass tipped arrows as Gendry hurled jagged rocks down onto the dead. He whispered a word, but she could not hear it as the battle erupted in chaotic shouts and guttural cries all around them.

There were many other sounds, too. The winds howled in fury about the towers and high walls of the keep. Men shouted in fear and rage and panic. Bowstrings drawn and arrows loosed produced an odd rhythm, amplified by the steady beat of dragons wings somewhere in those swirling clouds.

He watched as the bodies began to pile high against the walls – and as Ser Davos set them afire with the rest of Winterfell’s pitch. He felt the pounding of the giants’ heavy fists against the gates. They fell, but still more giants and great, wooly mammoths with ruined hides mustered in the fields beyond, readying themselves for fresh assault.

As the Three-Eyed Raven watched, a voice inside him urged action. *We have to help,* the boy said. *Warg them, fight them. Do something!* For once, the memories of who he had been and what he was merged into a clear sense of purpose. He closed his two eyes and opened a thousand – opened himself to the press of the dead men’s minds against his own.

And they opened to him. With a quick mental thrust, he forced himself inside the mind of the closest giant. The world flashed white for the briefest of heartbeats. He felt massive hands not his own bashing against the splintering wood of the gate. Yet as he made to pull the wight away, a terrible force slammed against his thoughts, shattering his grip on the giant and forcing him from it. His enemy would not so easily relinquish his control over the hordes of dead.

The Three-Eyed Raven breathed deeply and gathered his strength. He watched as Arya fired arrow after arrow into the oncoming waves of wights. He heard Samwell whisper nervously in the distance, the cry out in shock and pain. He felt Daenerys and her child somewhere in the clouds above.

Then he forced himself back into the fray.

A mammoth lowered its head and broken tusks and began to charge the gates. The men of the wall shouted in panic. The world flashed white again as he seized control of the corpse, brushing aside the wisps of thought that occupied its dead flesh.

At once, he turned the mammoth away from the gates, swinging its head side to side to knock scores of wights aside and gore dozens more. His eyes flashed blue again as the enemy grappled to
regain control of his thrall, but this time the Three-Eyed Raven was ready. He held firm as he guided the mammoth along the base of the wall, shattering the frail bodies of the dead men before him.

A sharp pain drove him from the thing’s mind. He watched in his ethereal form as an arrow pierced the mammoth’s eye. The body collapses against the side of the wall, truly dead. Wights began to swarm up its side in a renewed bid to capture the walls. He made ready to stop them.

Other thoughts assaulted his mind. He felt Drogon’s fiery rage and Davos’ relief, but beyond them he felt Jon’s breath catch in a moment of terror. He reached out to his cousin and saw, from a distance, what Jon did. A White Walker was raising a crystalline spear skyward. It drew the weapon back as its cold, blue eyes found Drogon’s black form among the clouds.

He threw himself against the other’s cold, hungry mind… but was rebuffed. His eyes stung and cold, burning pain wracked his body. Still, he persisted, find those thin threads that tethered the dead together.

He seized the wights around the walker instead, and felt little resistance this time. Scores of blue eyes turned white as new fallen snow as the Three-Eyed Raven turned the dead men against the White Walker. Arms and teeth and rusted steel broke against its frozen flesh. He felt each cold blow as the enemy dispatched the wights with its spear, but its moment had passed. Drogon was gone – out of range.

At once, his enemy found the flaw in his defense. His mind burned as the Night King regained control of the dead and cast the Three-Eyed Raven once more into the cold, swirling darkness.

He struggled to open his many eyes and find his cousin and the dragons once more. Heat caressed his face and bid him return to the discomfort of his physical form. Screams and cries for aid and mercy echoed at the edges of his thoughts.

For a moment, he glimpsed a glowing ring of flames around the godswood’s heart tree – and heard the familiar cries of a terrified child. No. He could not return now. He had to keep fighting.

And he did. He warged still more wights outside the walls and on them, forcing them to jump off the battlements or turn their weapons against the others. He saw Jaime fighting for his life atop a tower on the eastern ramparts. Three wights attacked him and drove him to edge. Yet before they could force him off, the Three-Eyed Raven seized their minds and forced them from the tower instead. Their bodies shattered on the cold earth below as Unsullied drove spears into their skulls.

Each time he forced himself into a wight’s mind, it became more difficult to hold his ground. The Night King’s grasp on his army was firmly bound in cold thought. As the gates broke open and wights swarmed into the yard, he tried to hold them back. Twice he succeeded in turning a dozen wights against the others, but on the third attempt he was rebuffed, his thoughts slamming into a barrier as formidable and cold as the Wall itself.

*The Night King*. He could do more good here when the enemy still lived. He had to be killed, destroyed, or else his army would destroy the defenders of Winterfell and sweep over the rest of the world. Find him.

It was not difficult to do. He pursued that cold, foreign presence through space and time and thought. He saw Drogon rip Viserion’s wing from his flesh and watched the black dragon break his brother’s body against the earth.

He watched as Jon set Rhaegal down among the wights. The dragon’s clawed legs crushed the
dead men as it landed. Its fiery breath consumed dozens more. His cousin clambered down from the beast’s side and drew his Valyrian steel sword, cutting down charging wights with swift blows.

Daenerys flew overheard, her dragon’s jets of flame consuming the dead before withering away in the unnatural cold. Rhaegal launched himself into the air once more. The two dragons circled in the sky, burning the dead and keeping them from Jon as best they could.

The Three-Eyed Raven watched Jon draw up his blade and charge their enemy, but he never reached the Night King. Wights rushed forward, throwing themselves at Jon. He kept fought them off, yelling in rage with each swing of his sword. Yet still more came.

*We need to aid him*, the boy insisted. *We need to help, like we did before.* The Three-Eyed Raven gathered what strength he had left and forced himself forward into the sunken minds of the dead men. A dozen blue eyes flashed white.

As he forced the bodies away from his cousin, another force drove a spike of pure ice into his mind. It burned. It made him want to scream, but still he clung to consciousness and to his connections with the wights.

Through one eye, he glimpsed Jon cut down a wight and regain his position. The Night King made no move to attack, nor did he seek to retreat. He simply looked at Jon as even more dead men found gaps in the flames and rushed forth to overpower the lone living soldier. He did not have the strength to hold back so many.

*Bran! Bran! Wake up!* He heard that familiar voice echo across the sky. *Bran!* It was his sister Arya. She sounded panicked, fearful even. He felt heat where there should not have been any. *Bran! Help!*

Then the scene before him dissolved into a cloud of smoke and darkness. Jon and the wights and the Night King were gone. He was back in the godswood. Before him stood Arya, Gendry and the Red Woman’s body on the ground. Davos held the little boy in his arms. The heart tree was on fire.

He saw his own limp, weak body seated in the chair. He saw the lady Brienne and her squire fall back from the stone archway that guarded the entrance to the grove. Dozens of wights poured forth from the gap. More – recently slain eastern soldiers – rose up from the forest floor, their eyes cold and blue.

The Three-Eyed Raven looked to his sister and then to Sam, bloodied and unconscious on the ground. *We have to help,* Bran whispered from the recessed of his mind. His eyes found the crumpled body of Melisandre on the ground. It lurched upward.

The Red Woman lashed out with her blade, slicing through Gendry’s leg and opening a weeping gash on his thigh. He cried out in pain and clutched at the wound as thick droplets of blood fell into the fire.

Arya rushed forward and grabbed the woman’s hair. Whispering a word, she opened Melisandre’s throat and spilled her life’s blood onto the growing fire. The flames shot upwards into the night sky. Tongues of crimson and amber flame licked at the highest branches of the weirwood, setting the rest of blood red leaves alight.

He spoke to his sister as she turned away to face the dead, whispering her name. Around him, the fires burned… and so did something with him. It was foreign, yet familiar. An odd, coppery taste filled his mouth. Heat filled his chest. Fire rushed along his veins. He felt strong, stronger than he had in months.
A thousand eyes saw everything, everywhere. He watched Jon struggle to hold off the wights and saw Daenerys on dragonback, yelling words that Jon could never hear. He saw Jaime Lannister and Sandor Clegane fighting desperately on the western walls. He felt Sansa’s fear as she and the others huddled together deep below the battle. And he felt the wights – all of them – surrounding him like so many specks of ice in a storm.

*Help them,* the boy insisted again. *Do it!* He did. Like before, he reached out to the closest corpse. Coldness gripped its mind and limbs, forcing it forward towards his sister and the others.

Another’s presence was there, cold and terrible and hungering, but he swept it aside. The world flashed white for a moment. Then he was within the wight and without. He felt its cold, dead hands and ruined body as the inferno in his chest burned upwards, racing along his veins to consume his heart and lungs.

He was drawn into another wight then – and then another. Eyes flashed white, then blue, then white again as he forced the others’ to recede before him… even as he was forced forward. One became two and two became ten. He held the wights in check as he raced forward along those subtle strands of thought that bound the dead together.

He warged the wights in the godswood, hundreds or more, and forced them to stop their advance. Yet he himself could not stop. Fires raged around his body and inside his mind. A thousand eyes burned in smoke unseen. The inferno raced up his neck and reached his mind. He screamed in pain…

And felt himself pulled forward into the battle in the yard. Visions of chaos danced before him as he seized wight after wight from the others. Their cold presences receded before his own.

It did not stop there and he could not stop it. He swept over the endless hordes of dead men like a tempest wind over a field of ripened wheat, ripping the enemy’s presence from their empty minds and holding them firm. Their burning blue eyes flashed white as he seized control.

He was on the walls now, then outside the castle. He was within each body, and everywhere at once. A thousand eyes became ten thousand, and the ten thousand more. The battlefield fell silent as their guttural cries ceased to be heard.

He looked at his home from between the ice-bound trees of the Wolfswood and from within the yard itself. He held the dead firm, grasping their minds as firmly as a spear even as the fire grasped his. He watched Arya pause in confusion in the godswood, then rush to his side. He saw Jon raise his blade and charge the Night King.

Something slammed against him, cold and sharp and deadly. He shouted in pain as the foreign presence drove daggers of pure ice into his mind. Yet he held firm, struggling against the other for control of his army.

The Night King seized some of his soldiers back as he lashed out against Jon, but the Three-Eyed Raven pulled them back. Pain wracked his body as his thoughts were pulled in a hundred thousand directions.

*Stop!* The boy yelled from within him. He could feel his fear welling up alongside the burning fire. *We have to stop!*

He focused his thoughts on the living, on his family. On Arya and Jon and Sansa. On Daenerys and her child. On Samwell and Gilly and the boy. On Meera and the countless others to the south. *We have to hold them.*
He could not let go. With two eyes he watched Jon battle the enemy’s physical form as he grappled with his ethereal once. The pain became unbearable as the titanic yet unseen struggle continued. Pure fire seared his eyes and lungs. The mark upon his armed burned.

Then he screamed in agony as all the world turned white.

Chapter End Notes

Not gonna lie, this was a challenge to write and went through many edits. Bran’s chapters are usually more pensive and slow, but I wanted to keep the pace of the battle going in this chapter through to the next one. Hopefully you found it well-written and not super confusing (he’s fighting with his mind so maybe it was).

If you do have questions, I will happily answer them in the comments below.

Next chapter is Daenerys. It’s done and edited. Will post that in a few days to conclude this little battle at Winterfell.

I've also started a little side project titled "A Small Measure of Peace", which is unrelated to this story and takes place about 14 years after Jon and Daenerys win their wars and start a family. Feel free to check it out if its your cup of tea.
Daenerys X

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

He's going to die.

Daenerys could not drive the thought from her head. Even as she guided Drogon and Rhaegal in for another attack, wights swarmed Jon’s position. He held them off, raining down vicious blows and carving up the dead men with Longclaw in hand… but still they came.

“Dracarys!” she shouted the command above the howling winds. Drogon banked left and loosed a column of crimson fire down on the darkened fields. Scores of wights turned to ash in an instant.

Thousands more waited beyond, scurrying like ants before her dragons’ fury and trying to flank the new wall of flames. Their eyes burned with cold malice and shone with an unnatural hunger that all the life in the North – in Westeros – could not sate.

Below her, Jon stumbled, then swiftly regained his feet with a blow that cut two shambling skeletons in four pieces. More wights rushed forward. He was surrounded. Not with ten dragons could she help him now, for dragonfire would surely consume him as it did the dead.

She could see the Night King standing a spear’s throw away from her husband. He seemed utterly content to let his army destroy the one challenge to his impending victory – the one thing standing between him and the thousands of innocents behind Winterfell’s walls and the millions far beyond them.

“Jon!” she cried out to him. He looked up. Their eyes met for but a moment. She saw his lips move, whispering something she could not hear above the winds and the awful shrieks of the dead. A dozen more wights charged at him. The sheer weight of the assault sent him sprawling backwards under a mass of rotten flesh, steel, and bone. No…

The world went silent. All she could hear were the deep thrums of her dragons’ wingbeats in the freezing night air. The sounds of battle faded away. The winds died. And below her…

The dead froze in their advance. Waves of pure white swept over the endless hordes of dead like a swift sunrise over some dark country. The wights eyes flashed white, then blue, then white again. All of them.

She held her breath as the army halted in utter silence, her eyes focused on where Jon should be. He emerged from a pile of limp corpses, lashing out with his sword and gasping for air. Rhaegal roared in triumph and bathed another group of dead in flames. The Night King turned and looked at her, hefted his great scythe, then took a step forward toward his foe.

Jon gave a shout of anger and charged. In a few quick movements, he stood across from the enemy, Longclaw raised high and ready to strike. With an odd, shrill sound, the two blades met.

Jon spun away and swung low, lashing out at the enemy’s leg. The Night King lowered his own weapon and parried the blow before bringing it around in a great, sweeping arc that barely missed Jon’s head.

Daenerys held her breath. One blow, it will only take one, she knew. Jon had told her as much. Yet the Night King’s weapon could surely rend flesh just as easily as Valyrian steel could shatter his
own body. It was a duel to the death. Neither could afford a single misstep.

Around them, the wights began to stir. Their eyes turned blue for a moment, then lapsed back into that pale white – as cold and distant as a winter’s full moon. They seemed locked in some titanic struggle, pacified by some force unseen. For now.

She could not take any chances. As Jon and the Night King traded blows, she guided Drogon around once more, turning hundreds of wights to ash in another attack.

All the while, she kept her eyes on Jon. He was being driven back, losing ground with every block and parry. The Night King’s strength was too great, his skill far superior to that of her husband’s.

With growing dread, she watched the Night King press his advantage, forcing Jon to retreat across the battlefield under a series of terrible blows that made his sword sing. Worse still, Daenerys could see what Jon could not: Viserion’s eyes – once white like the rest of the dead – had flashed back to that awful blue.

Even with his ruined body, the dragon was still a threat. He began to thrash about and spew cold fire aimlessly. His tail whipped about the frozen earth, shattering wights and sending bits of bone and body flying in every direction.

Jon had noticed too, and in the split second he took his eyes off his foe the Night King struck, bring down his scythe in an attack that sent Jon sprawling backwards into the dirt – right next to the enraged dragon.

It cannot end like this. It won’t. She could do no more up here on dragonback. The dead’s advance had come to a halt. Winterfell had no need of her. Jon did.

“Down! Now!” she shouted to Drogon. He tucked his wings and dove, spreading them and slowing his fall just above the earth. Daenerys hastily climbed down his side and ran for her husband, pulling the long dragonglass dagger from within her armor as she rushed forward.

The Night King turned to regard her with a cold, expressionless gaze. His eyes met hers first, then dropped to her navel. He hefted his weapon and took a step in her direction. She raised her own pitiful dagger in defense, but her eyes searched for Jon.

He rose up from amidst the motionless dead, Longclaw in hand. Behind him, Viserion writhed about in furious agony. Jon gave a shout, but charged not toward the Night King, but the wounded dragon. With one swift movement, he plunged the entire length of the blade into the beast’s glowing blue eye. The ruined white body fell limp and silent – her child was truly dead.

As Jon withdrew his blade, it came alive with fire, blue and white flames dancing along the length of the rippled Valyrian steel. He held it away at first, in shock at the sudden eruption, but then his eyes found hers and his face contorted in rage. He raised the flaming weapon and moved to strike their enemy.

The Night King turned away from Daenerys. His movements seemed slower, less focused, like he was here and somewhere else altogether. She watched him bring up his great ice weapon to meet Jon’s renewed assault… and she saw the gaps in his black armor.

But as she rushed forth on a moment’s whim, she stumbled. A hand had clutched at her ankle. It held her in place. The field around her came alive with low growls and shrieks once more. She turned and saw a group of dead men shambling toward her.

Then they froze again, their eyes flashing white. All around her it was the same. Like a sky filled
with twinkling stars, the eyes of the dead flashed between the two colors. In one moment, they 
advanced. In the next, they were halted – pacified and laid low by some invisible force. It was a 
mesmerizing sight.

Daenerys did not look long. She drove the dagger in the wight holding her leg and regained her 
feet, rushing toward Jon with all the strength she could muster.

His flaming toward was like a beacon. With a fearsome yell, Jon renewed his attacks on the Night 
King, landing blow after blow on the enemy’s ice blade. The battlefield echoed with each strike of 
flaming steel on ice.

And with every strike, Jon drove the Night King back. His parries were swifter, his blows stronger 
than before. He fought with a cold fury that might have matched even Drogo. He slashed from the 
left, then brought the fiery blade around his head in a great arc. The Night King parried the blow – 
barely.

Daenerys stood motionless, unsure what to do. The dagger in her hand felt as heavy as a war 
hammer. Her hands were like cold iron. Her heart pounded against her chest.

Then Jon gave a shout of anger and brought his sword down onto the flat of the enemy’s blade. 
The ice shattered.

The force of the blow sent both fighters to the ground. Daenerys rushed forward to aid Jon.

“No!” he shouted as he regained his feet, holding out his arm to bid her stay away from the fight. 
He advanced on the Night King with blade in hand. The enemy was weaponless. Defenseless. 
Trapped.

Jon charged him and lashed out with Longclaw. The blade cut a burning arc in front of him… but 
the Night King swiftly stepped aside – then lunged forward. Like some beast, he slashed at Jon 
with his hand.

Where a mortal man’s strike might have broken against Jon’s armor, the Night King’s cut through 
it like thin silk. Jon’s grey eyes went wide in shock. He dropped Longclaw and crumpled to the 
ground. She screamed.

Drogon and Rhaegal joined in her lament. They roared and circled around, drawing up on either 
side of the enemy. Fire roiled in their maws.

As the Night King turned and moved toward her, they unleashed a stream of hellish fire. Amber 
and crimson flame combined into a swirling fireball that lit the night like a new sun. Slowly, the 
fires faded away as clouds of black smoke and grey ash rose upwards into the sky.

The Night King emerged unharmed from the inferno. His eyes were still fixed firmly on Daenerys. 
He moved forward without a weapon in hand.

Her thought turned to her husband, lying somewhere among the bodies. *And our child. I cannot fail 
him. our family will survive.* She held out the dragonglass dagger at arm’s length, trying to ward off 
the enemy’s advance. It did not work.

Daenerys stepped backwards and fell amidst the broken bodies and discarded weapons. The 
dragons shrieked in fear and flew in harried circles. The Night King’s pale blue form loomed over 
here. His eyes met her. She braced herself for the end.

Flames erupted from his chest. The gleaming point of a sword had been driven clean through his
black armor. His eyes went wide in shock.

His icy flesh began to shift in color. Cracks appeared alone his arms, hands, fingers, and face. The pale blueish white seemed to burn like Viserion’s fire – white veins burned their way through his body. Then the fissures in his flesh burst apart.

A tempest wind rushed forth from where the Night King had stood a moment before. It knocked her back into a pile of rotten corpses. All around her, the white-eyed dead collapsed.

And there, right there, she saw Jon. His armor was rent and bloodied. He looked at her. He whispered her name. Then he fell back onto the ground.

“Jon!” she shouted, her voice cracking in panic. She could see him clearly now. His armor was in tatters and covered in muck and blood. Longclaw lay discarded by his side, still burning with Viserion’s fire. She ran to his side. Kneeling in the blood-soaked slush beside his broken body, Daenerys cradled Jon’s head in her arms.

“Jon…” she whispered his name, her breath misting in the frozen air as she begged the bitter wind for her husband’s life. “Please…”

Then he coughed, a wet sputtering sound that covered half her face in blood and spittle. He’s alive. And there, yes, she could see it now; the subtle movements of his light, pained breathing. “Dany,” he choked out low gasp.

“I’m here, Jon. I’m right here,” she felt hot tears beginning to well in her eyes. She sat motionless for a moment, joy and relief mixing with her own terror. He closed his eyes and coughed again. “No,” she forced a hint of authority into her tone, “open your eyes. Look at me.”

Holding him still, she looked around frantically for help. She cried out for aid and, for the first time, took in the scene before her. The stench was overwhelming: acrid burning flesh; ash and smoke; mud and blood. It took all her control not to retch. Please, I need help.

“Help!” she cried out again, hoping someone would recognize her silver hair or Jon’s broken body. A fresh sense of dread set in as she realized they were but two bodies in a sea of thousands. Even if they ride from Winterfell, there won’t be time...

No. I cannot think like that. Dany looked at Jon again. He’s still breathing. Good. She took one shaking hand and, grasping at a frayed edge of her riding dress, wiped the grime and blood from his face. “Jon,” she said his name again. One grey eye fluttered open and a soft half smile broke across his face. She reached down and gave his hand a tight squeeze, though her gripped slipped for a moment on his blood slick fingers.

“Daenerys…” he whispered her name again while managing to grip her hand weakly. “I…” the rest of his words were lost as mist on the air. His eyes shut again.

“Jon,” she sobbed out a forceful order. “I – I command you to look at me, Jon Snow.” The tears were falling freely now, landing on Jon’s face and mixing with the bits of mud and blood she had not wiped off. Stay with me. Jon. His name became a mantra in her mind, driving all other thoughts before it.

He was dying in her arms, she knew that. She could feel it. His breathing had already slowed. There was nothing she could do here to mend his broken body. Not even a queen could halt death.

She took his bloodied hand and pressed it to her navel. “That’s your daughter, Jon. Your little girl.” You have to live. For her. For me. Hold on.
... She pleaded with some higher power. *Just a moment longer. Let me be with him.* Jon drew another ragged gasp. She held him close as the winds swirled around them.

Then she felt a hand on her shoulder, pulling her away from his body. More hands joined the first. She twisted as they pulled her back, fighting to return to Jon’s side, but they were too strong. Tears blurred her vision and sobs choked her words. *No. I cannot leave him.*

“Get him back to the keep,” a gruff voice issued a command. Dany turned to see Sandor Clegane, his dented armor spattered with gore, commanding a troop of men. Three soldiers attended Jon, gingerly lifting his body and placing it gently upon length of hide bound on either end to long poles of wood. She watched as one man apiece grasped the handles on either end, lifting her love above the ground and making for Winterfell in the distance.

Daenerys met Clegane’s gaze for a moment. Grim determination was written upon his scarred face but pity showed in his eyes. She wanted to ask him to stay. To command him to stay and escort her back beside Jon. Under normal circumstances she might have. She was his queen. Yet right now her only thought was of the body the soldiers were carrying across the battlefield. She made to follow them.

... "He’ll live,” the maester sighed as he stood up straight and set his various poultices and bandages aside. “The wounds seemed to have sealed themselves, though I daresay there will be more scaring.”

She let out a heavy breath and almost laughed in sheer relief, then she steadied herself. “Thank you, my friend,” she said wearily.

“Of course, Your Grace. Now if I might look after you,” Wolkan gestured at her own tattered dress, covered in ash and mud and blood.

“No,” she shook her head, feeling the strain of tired muscles. “There are others. Many others. See to them.” And there were. She had seen the carnage of the battle while hurrying back to the keep. Hundreds were dead, maybe thousands. Hundred more might yet die if their wounds were not tended to.

“Your Grace…” Wolkan insisted.

“Go,” she said more forcefully. He did, leaving her alone with Jon. She wanted to curl up beside him and drive out the horrors of that night and the hundred nights before it. She wanted to forget the screams of the people of White Harbor, the feeling of Viserion’s breaking bones, and the burning blue eyes of the Night King – dead at last.

Yet she would not rest now. She could not. She would hold vigil here, watching over Jon just as she had when he survived the ordeal north of the Wall. His bandaged chest rose slowly, then fell again. Each breath felt like a blessing.

Her own breaths were ragged and slow. Her eyes stung from the smoke and she struggled to keep her heavy eyelids open… but the fire was warm and the room just dark enough.

Daenerys reached out and grasped Jon’s hand in hers as her head began to tilt to the side. As her eyes slowly closed, Daenerys thought she saw a brilliant ray of white sunlight break through the grey storm clouds.
Well, here we are. I wrote than post-battle scene last October while re-watching Stranger Things S1 (that scene where they find Will's "body") - feels good to get it out. I also added on that little extra scene at the end because I felt like if I left you guys on another cliff's edge you'd toss me off it.

For those of you confused about what happened last chapter, Gendry's and Mel's blood in the sacrificial fire gave Bran a boost that he couldn't quite control and his warg powers went to ludicrous speed.

Updates may slow for a bit while I re-organize the next section of story. Also college football returns soon so that generally takes up some free time.
The entire keep smelled of smoke – all of Winterfell, really. It swirled about the towers and the walls. It clung to Sansa’s furs and wools, too, so fiercely that none of her remedies had managed to drive out the horrid scent.

The fires had burned for three days now. Three days, she thought, has it only been that long? The host of dead men had fallen upon Winterfell three days ago – and broken upon its ancient walls. There had been no great victory cheer nor feast to honor the victorious dead. No. Now the survivors labored to bury the fallen and burn the countless corpses whose eyes had once burned that horrid blue.

And white, I’m told, Sansa recalled the whispers of the northmen as she swept down the corridor. Jon and Daenerys might have battled the Night King and his risen dragon, but some said it had been some other force who silenced his armies – froze them in place with eyes full of pure white light.

Jon and Bran, she knew. Her older brother had been wounded in his battle with the Night King, his chest boasting fresh scars to match his more gruesome wounds from years past. Yet he had survived. And he’s awake and growing stronger. The same could not be said for Bran.

She arrived at the entrance to his chambers a moment later and hesitated at the door before entering. A fire burned in the hearth, casting the room’s sole conscious occupant in a fitting shadow.

“You’re still here,” Sansa addressed her sister. Arya’s grey eyes found hers.

“He’s not getting better,” she said grimly.

“Maester Wolkan says-”

“What you want to hear,” Arya cut her off. “I’ve been here watching him. He’s not getting better.”

Sansa turned to look over Bran in full. His pale white face looked gaunt and withered, even in the warm firelight. His body shook as if shivering from a cold wind, even though thick furs had been heaped high upon his bed. And his eyes… Though the boy slept, his eyes were wide open and burned white as if in one of his visions. He had been this way – unchanging – for three days.

“Sometimes he shouts,” Arya rose from her perch by the window as she broke the grim silence. “Other times, it’s just the shaking…” She moved to the bedside. “He saved us, you know, in the battle.” Her glare was odd – half accusatory and half mournful. Sansa struggled to ignore it.

“I know,” she responded.

“And now he’s like this… because of the Red Woman.” Because of you. That accusation went
unsaid, but Sansa knew her sister concealed it as poorly as she did that dagger at her side.

It was a foolish argument, truly. *If I had turned Melisandre away, she’d be no better than Bran is now. Worse still, we might not have had the men to hold the walls as long as we did.* Sansa did not seek an argument with her sister just now – not when the wounds of their experiences were so fresh. Nor she think think Arya truly blamed her for this. *We all make our choices and we live with them.* She turned to leave.

“Let me know if anything changes, if…” she offered a hopeful glance toward the bed. Arya only nodded before returning to her seat.

The halls were emptier than before. Some of Winterfell’s occupants had perished in the fight – others found room to pitch new camps outside the walls. The winter storm had broken. A pale sun was shining through the windows. The days were still short, of course, but the air did not sting with every breath.

Yet Sansa did not make for the inner yard and its open air. She did not want to speak with anyone else right now. She thought to visit Jon in his chambers, but decided against it. Daenerys would be there, seeing over his treatment and wounds. She had been halfway between enraged and empty when Sansa had seen her after the battle, but her eyes had betrayed an emotion Sansa knew well. *Fear.*

*She’s lost much as well,* Sansa knew. *A husband and a child and a dragon.* The pair deserved a moment of peace and happiness, even if it came with Jon wrapped in fresh linens. Perhaps she would not bother her brother and his new wife just now. She made for her little corner of the keep instead.

Her chambers were well-lit and warm. A fire burned in the hearth and someone had lit two candles beside both her windows. One burned lower than the other. Its half-melted wax reminded her of the castle’s old broken tower. It was warm here, perhaps too warm. Sansa removed her fur cloak and pulled at the collar of her dress.

Making herself comfortable, she sat down at the edge of her bed and stared into the dancing flames. Moments passed silently. The wind whipped about the walls outside, but it did not howl as in months past. At times, it seemed in rhythm with her own breathing. *Like all the North is breathing in relief.* Then came a soft knock at the door.

“Enter,” Sansa called out without looking up. Someone did.

Scents of meat stew filled her nostrils as an elderly woman paced inward holding a wooden bowl in both hands. A hunk of bread was tucked underneath one thin arm. She silently set the meal down on a low table and backed away, ever the courteous servant.

“Thank you,” Sansa said wearily.

“Thank you, my lady,” the older woman said. Sansa turned away from the fire and looked into the woman’s tired eyes. They were grey, like her hair, and filled with emotion. “You’ve given your people hope.”

Sansa almost laughed. *I didn’t fight. I didn’t do anything.* Her answer was more measured. “Have I?

“In the crypts,” the woman’s voice shook with the unspoken memories of loss. “You gave us comfort during the battle – you gave us strength with your prayers and your words. Even a touch
on the arm was enough to steady these old bones.” She sighed. “These years have been hard. After your lord father and King Robb, after Theon and the Boltons and these dead men…” her voice trailed off.

It dawned on Sansa then that her personal struggles were not all her own. Her people had suffered as much as she had, perhaps more – for they did not have the name Stark to protect them. And it’s still winter. There would be more suffering ahead, she knew. Dread and doubt filled her in equal measure, sapping the fire of its warmth.

“Forgive me,” the old woman said, seemingly having read the grim expression on Sansa’s face. “I should not have disturbed you. You must have much on your mind.” She turned to leave.

“No, wait,” Sansa said, a bit too forcefully. “Stay, would you?” She broke off a hunk of bread and held it in an outstretched hand. The woman smiled and walked away from the door. She made to sit on a low wooden stool, but Sansa made room for her on the edge of the bed.

They ate in silence for a time, Sansa slowly eating the stew and the woman nibbling on the hard bread. It was good to enjoy another’s company, free of lords’ politics and battle plans and scheming. It felt honest. It felt right.

After the sparse meal, they spoke openly of days past – not the recent past, but of the North as it had been decades before. The woman, Mora was her name, had been born beneath the walls of Winterfell in the time of Sansa’s grandfather. She had even known Lord Edwyle Stark, though only as a common girl might know a lord. That is, from a distance. She had married an Umber guardsman and resettled in Last Hearth, bearing her husband three sons. Sansa’s heart fell when she learned all four men had perished, one in a wildling raid and three with Robb in the South.

It seemed so odd to hear of a life lived in full, through winter and summer and winter again. Through war and worse. Perhaps it was possible to keep living – to make life anew where so much had gone wrong.

Their happy conversation subsided with the flames and Mora stood to leave. “I fear I still have duties to attend to, my lady,” she said with a smile, revealing her missing teeth.

“As do I,” Sansa smiled back. As do we all. “But I hope to see you again soon.” She smiled back, a genuine smile. A happy smile.

Mora hobbled toward the door. “Forgive me for saying this, my lady,” she paused. “You look so very much like your mother, but it’s your father’s heart you have.” And with that, she left and shut the door quietly behind her.

Her parting words left an odd feeling in Sansa’s chest. I am the Lady of Winterfell. These are my people. It did not good to idle in her chambers when there was work to be done – walls and spirits to be mended. She rose from her seat and wrapped her cloak around her shoulder once more before leaving her chambers behind.

She paced down the halls and out into the yard. Soldiers, northmen mostly, bowed and murmured greetings as she passed. Sansa crossed the yard on its perimeter, staying close to the keep itself and away from the godswood. Where Bran was when it happened.

Though she had not seen it herself, the great heart tree of her family had turned to stone – as thick and solid as the keep’s own walls. Its last leaves had fallen upon the forest floor, still blood red. Perhaps they might cover the bodies.
Sansa walked away from that stone archway and instead up toward the western ramparts, where she might look out over her family’s lands. She stood alone there. The soldiers and common folk had cleared away the corpses, but the ancient stones still bore the scars of battle. A breeze swept across the walls, carrying with it the acrid scents of black smoke and burning flesh. Sansa turned her face away from the wind, but remained where she was, watching the awful aftermath of the battle unfold on the fields below.

The smoldering piles were like small, smoking mountains. Thick plumes of smoke darkened the sky and blotted out the pale sun at times. Sansa silently wished for another winter storm, pure and cold, to wash all this away – to bury the memories of this awful war beneath layers of crisp white snow.

The creak of iron hinges cut through her trance. She shook her head and righted herself, turning to see Tyrion pacing from the tower door toward her position.

He said not a word for the length of his short walk, but joined in her silent vigil atop the battlement. For a time, they simply watched over the fields, forests, and people.

Tension grew in her chest, like a dress made too small and drawn to tight. What does he want? For if she knew anything, it was that a man like Tyrion cared little for idle conversation. There was always something to be learned, something to be gained. That was the way of things in the south. Finally, she broke the silence, offering a simple statement to ease her thoughts.

“It’s done.”

Tyrion raised an eyebrow ponderously. “Is it?”

“What do you mean?” Sansa’s heart sunk in her chest. She already knew the answer.

“My sister still rules in the south. She’ll never rest so long as Daenerys is alive. And if word reaches her of the child…”

“The south,” Sansa’s swift and biting laugh cut through the still air. “How many northerners died so that the people of the south might live? Do they even know what happened here?” She thought of Mora and her family as she spoke. Tyrion shifted his feet awkwardly and looked away. “What?” She questioned him.

“Nothing,” he replied. “Perhaps they won’t know. But the queen marched north to save it, not to rule it. She won’t linger long when half of the realm is still trapped under Cersei’s heel.”

They’re leaving, she knew. And Jon will ride with them. It was a fool’s errand. How many men had they lost in this war? How many enemies awaited them below the Neck? Starks did not fare well in the south. And yet… He’s not a Stark, not in full.

“How long will you stay?”

Tyrion shrugged. “Days? Weeks? Hard to say. As long as it takes for the wounded to heal. Your people will fare better with fewer mouths to feed, as will the queen’s forces.” Hard to argue with that.

Still, his answer produced still more questions. Would the northern lords march south as well? Would Arya? Sansa’s chest tightened as the answer presented itself, clear as the sky above. Yes.

If her sister’s desire for vengeance did not send her southward, her love for Jon would. And for Gendry, Sansa noted. I’ll be left alone once more. It was an uncomfortable thought, but not
unwelcome.

“You’re welcome to join us,” Tyrion said with a wry smile. Sansa laughed – genuinely laughed – at that. It was some old, if morbid, jest between the two of them. A smile broke across her face. It felt like a crack in a layer of thick ice.

She shook her head slowly and Tyrion nodded as if in agreement. “This is my home.”

“Yes, it is.”

A comfortable silence settled in between the two as they stared out across the fields and into the forest beyond. *Home.* The word had more meaning now. It meant safety and comfort. It meant life – her life and the lives of her people.

She doubted she would ride past that far tree line ever again – and she knew she would never go south. Tyrion understood that. Jon would as well. This terrible storm had passed and still the storm clouds gathered to the south, but her place was here. Bran needed her here. Her people needed her here. Winterfell was her home, and she swore to the gods old and new and altogether foreign that there would always be a Stark in it.

Chapter End Notes

In all seriousness, sorry for the wait. I took a few weeks off and ended up majorly distracted.

This chapter is short and should be read as more of a transition. It's also the final Sansa chapter, in case that was not clear. Between my long held ideas and newly drafted outline, I've got a solid idea of where I want and need to go. I've also got something of a deadline given that we're looking at April 2019 or so for Season 8 (thank God).

Anyway, I'm still alive. Let me know if you are.
His chest hurt. Every breath brought stabbing pains atop scars old and new, even as he lay abed. Closing his eyes, Jon let loose a long pent-up breath and sat back against the firm pillow. Visions danced in the darkness. Steel dirks glinting in the torchlight. Fires raged atop high stone walls.

Eyes stared back into his closed ones – some welcome, others not. Arya’s and Eddard’s grey eyes, Ser Alliser Thorne’s hard black ones. Sansa’s cool blue eyes, the same as her lady mother’s. Ghost’s blood red eyes and Daenerys’ violet ones, calming as a summer sunset. And blue eyes – burning blue – they shone through the darkness like some great beacon.

*He’s gone, now. Dead. And I’m alive.* That fact always shocked him. Every battle had brought him close to the edge. Once, he had fallen over it. *Only to be brought back.*

The door creaked open across the room. Jon opened his eyes as Daenerys entered, Ghost padding along behind her.

“You’re up.” Her voice was calm, soft and measured. Her lips were frozen in a frown and her violet eyes bespoke another long night of worry. *For me.*

“Aye,” he said, the words sounding hoarse as they caught in his throat.

“And your wounds? Are they…?” her gaze dropped to his chest, where he knew faded blue streaks had mingled with frozen blood and torn flesh to form a gruesome reminder of the battle. Maester Wolkan had said it was only the extreme cold of the other’s flesh that had staunched the bleeding. Daenerys had watched over his healing day after day and night after night – just as she had done on the ship.

“More scars for you to kiss,” he ventured a smile. She smiled back and walked toward him, sitting beside him on the bed and pacing a hand on his. Her skin felt soft and warm.

They sat in blissful silence for a moment, listening to the crackling fire and Ghost’s even snores. She squeezed his hand and he returned the gesture. Then she spoke aloud what he had been thinking.

“It’s over, Jon.”

Hope and dread filled him in equal measure. So many months ago this moment had been the horizon he could not have seen beyond. He had gone south for aid and returned with Daenerys and her forces. His task was complete and his people alive. The Night King was gone – defeated. The dead were true to their name once more.

Yet they were not safe. *We are not safe.* Cersei, who had murdered Lord Eddard and betrayed their trust and cause, still ruled in the south. Sooner or later she would seek to reclaim the northern half...
of her kingdom. *Else Daenerys will march south to take the throne.* That had been the reason she sailed to Westeros after all, he recalled. How long until the desire to reclaim her family’s lands and legacy reared its head once more?

*My family,* he corrected himself. *I have the blood of the dragon same as she does. As will our child.* Fresh waves of dread washed over him as he thought of the babe his wife carried. The child would never be safe – here in the North or far across the Narrow Sea – if Cersei still ruled the Seven Kingdoms.

He sighed and sat up straighter and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze to ease the impact of his words. “No, it’s not.”

He saw her swallow hard and nod slowly. Their eyes met and in that instant he knew his wife shared his concerns. There would be more war and hardship - more death – before even a small measure of peace could be achieved.

All emotion slid from her face like snowpack from a slanted roof. She was regal and distant, for herself more so than for him. “We’ll need to move south sooner rather than later,” she said. “Winterfell doesn’t have the resources to support so many for the rest of the winter.”

Jon tried to count just how many men they might march south with. *A few thousand Unsullied and Dothraki?* That would not be enough to overcome a mass of southern armies. *Two dragons would, though.* The thought of riding Rhaegal into battle against the *living* gave him pause. *Are we to slaughter the husbands, fathers and sons of those whom we would rule?*

“No, it doesn’t,” he finally agreed with her. “When the wounded are healed, we should march south.”

“Tyrion is already making the necessary preparations,” Daenerys continued. Something else weighed on her, a lingering thought that grew like a cancer. She turned to look into his eyes as she spoke. “Will the northern lords join us?”

“You brought your dragons and armies north to fight for them,” he said. The words felt hollow. Daenerys’ eyes narrow imperceptibly. *I came north for you.* She did not speak the shared thought aloud.

They would need the northern lords to march south with them if they were to stand any chance of winning the throne from Cersei. That gave Jon pause. He had asked much of his people – as Robb had before him. Was it right to ask still more of them? Would Lord Glover or even young Lord Umber order their levies to the slaughter once more?

He exhaled as he sat back, wishing the pressures of ruling would disappear even for an evening. The gesture did not go unnoticed.

“I should let you rest,” Daenerys said, making to stand and leave. He reached for her hand and held her firm.

“No,” he said. “Stay.” She did, moving from the edge of the bed and laying down beside him. He pulled her closer to him, her warmth easing the pain in his chest.

“I thought I’d lost you...” she whispered after a moment’s silence. “In the battle, when he struck you. I thought...” Perhaps the thought itself was too terrible an idea to give voice to.

“I’m still here,” he assured her as he pulled her closer still.
“I know,” she melted into his embrace, content to abandon all trappings of royalty and simply play the role of a loving wife and companion. And it wasn’t me who stopped the dead, not truly. He could still remember the sight of the endless hordes of dead men stopping, silently swaying back and forth in the storm wind, their eyes flickering between that burning blue and brilliant white.

“How is Bran?” he asked. Daenerys sat up at the mention of his brother. Her face fell.

“Not well,” she admitted. “Your sisters look over him and the maester attends to him every morning and evening, but he’s still…” she did not have the words to express the boy’s condition. No one did.

Bran was alive, but trapped in some vision. He stirred and shouted and shook at all hours of the night, but did not wake. It was his sacrifice that saved us, whatever he did, Jon knew. He would visit his brother’s chambers when his wounds allowed him if not sooner.

Yet now was not then. Jon contented himself to find simple comfort beside his wife and, slowly, he drifted off to an uneasy sleep.

...

The days of rest and recovery passed slowly. His wounds mended, revealing old bruises and fresh scars. Yet he grew stronger, too. By some accounts, game had returned to the Wolfswood and fish to the rivers and streams. Life goes on, he had noted with some hope after a particularly delicious cut of venison – his first hot meal in weeks.

The food gave him strength. He could feel the vigor return to his chest, legs, and arms. And as his body changed, so did his wife’s. She concealed it well under those thick northern furs, but his keen ranger’s eyes could see the slight curve of her womb. Our daughter.

The thought brought a smile to his face just now as he stood beside the window, the cool air brushing over his bare skin. Then it faded away like some weak fire before a winter storm. She told Daenerys that. The Red Woman.

His heartbeat quickened in anger at the thought of her. Betraying us. Burning a child. Burning half the godwood. And she was gone now, her body consumed by her own fires. He would have liked to see her hang.

Jon swallowed his rising anger and brushed the thought aside. He had duties to attend to and people with whom he must speak. Samwell, one victim of Melisandre’s plots, had healed well enough. Gendry has suffered wounds in the godwood too, but the Baratheon’s bastard’s strength had him back on his feet days before Jon had managed a walk around the keep.

Perhaps that’s just what I need right now, he thought as he clothed himself in warm garments, wrapped his cloak about him, and reached for his sword. Longclaw… He could still feel the heat of the fire that had burned along its length. He could hear the odd hiss and crack of the steel’s contact with the enemy’s weapon… and his icy flesh.

They think me a hero, Jon knew. Already lords and smallfolk alike had come to bid him well at his bedside – when Daenerys permitted it. It had been his sword that had ended the Night King’s reign… only because I was not buried beneath wights before I could reach him.

He sheathed the blade, pulled on his boots, and left the room behind. Each step was measured and slow, for if he came down to hard it sent a painful jolt through his ribs. Nonetheless, he carried onward, down the well-lit halls toward his destination: the room where the true hero of the battle
lay in silent pain.

Even with the fire lit, Bran’s room felt cold. The candles by the window burned low, long lines of melted wax crept down the lower wall like some odd, white vines.

Bran himself lay abed, unmoving and uncaring of his brother’s presence. His eyes were open and white, but unseeing. They almost shone with some eerie light.

Jon watched his brother’s chest rise and fall ever so slowly. He’s alive. That was all that mattered. Bran had been bed-ridden before, asleep and unknowing. It had been that way when Jon had said goodbye before he left for the Wall so many years ago. Perhaps I’ll do the same soon, and find a healthy Bran greeting me at the gates some months hence.

His thoughts were interrupted by a scream. His right hand shot to Longclaw’s worn grip. The blade was halfway drawn before he realized it was not some wight or wounded soldier who had cried out in agony. It was Bran. The boy writhed around in pain under the furs, like some wounded animal caught in a trap. His eyes remained white, but his limbs and back writhed and twisted – all whilst he screamed as if... the screams reminded Jon of Mance Rayder’s fate. As if he were burning.

“He does this almost every day,” a familiar voice said from the other side of the room.

This time, Jon drew his sword’s entire length. The steel’s glint caught his eye as he looked around, only to find Arya step forward from where she had stood concealed in the shadows. She stepped into the firelight as Bran’s screaming ceased.

“I didn’t see you,” Jon said, feeling ill at ease.

“That was the point,” Arya said, a brief smile flashing across her face. Her grey eyes, same as his own, settled on their brother.

“How long has he been like this?”

“Ever since the battle. He shouts like he did just now, but he doesn’t speak. Doesn’t wake. His eyes are always white.” Jon pulled a stool toward him and sat. Arya mirrored his motions across the way. “I don’t know what’s he’s seeing. All I know is that he’s in pain…”

Jon thought about his brother, trapped in some vision. What is he seeing, if he’s seeing anything at all? Perhaps Bran’s white eyes saw only blackness… as I did when I... He felt a twinge of pain on his chest. Ignoring the old ache, he looked back at Arya.

“And what about you?” he asked her.

“What about me?” she raised an eyebrow in challenge.

“Are you well?”

“Gendry and I are – I am fine,” she finished, her words blunt as a mace blow.

“You fought the Red Woman in the godswood, though,” Jon pressed her. “During the battle.”

“I killed her,” Arya said in that same tone. I know. Jon thought. Davos had told him the story: how Melisandre had tried to burn Gilly’s son – to use his blood in some sacrifice to her Red God. King’s blood, only of a different sort. But there were things he and Davos – nor even Varys – did not understand.
“And when you killed her,” Jon looked from Arya to Bran.

“He screamed,” Arya said softly. “Like he did a moment ago. “He sounded like…” she struggled to find her voice. “Like he was in pain. On fire, maybe…” Jon felt his breath catch at the description – just what he had been thinking a moment before.

He stood and, ignoring the painful protests of his wounds, walked over to Arya and placed a hand on her shoulder. “He’ll get better. He’s done it before.” Jon tried to smile. Arya’s response was genuine. She stood and hugged him, pressing herself against him. For a moment they might have been children again, he a young bastard and she a little lady in a mud-spattered dress. He tousled her hair affectionately.

Suddenly, she jumped back and looked from his chest to his face. “Sorry!” she gasped. “You’re hurt too. I’d forgot.” Jon laughed, each half-breath causing fresh aches.

“It’s nothing,” he said. “I’m standing, aren’t I?” Arya shrugged. Jon looked into her grey eyes. They were like a thick fog, concealing nearly everything from view. Yet, if you knew the path by heart…

“How are Gendry’s wounds?”

Color crept up her neck. She imperceptibly narrowed her stance and looked away at Bran, pointedly so. “He’s fine. I’ve been… helping him recover.”

“Good,” Jon smiled. “He’ll need to be healthy.”

“For when you ride south,” Arya finished his thought.

“Aye, for that.”

“When are you going?” she asked.

“Soon enough. When the wounded are healed and supplies readied. It won’t be an easy march,” he said.

“I’m coming too,” she looked up at him, he left hand thumbing the hilt of her blade. That pronouncement did not surprise him in the slightest. She’s not going to leave him.

“I thought you might say that,” he replied.

“You’ll need me.”

“I thought you might say that too,” Jon laughed quietly. Arya did not.

“I know the Riverlands. I know King’s Landing. I know the queen! You need me.”

Jon raised a hand to cut her off. Her words were true, of course, but she was not the only one with knowledge of the enemy or the land she ruled. Arya had other motives. And she won’t reveal them here.

“I had hoped you might stay here to watch over Bran and Sansa but-”

“Sansa can watch over herself,” Arya said.

“She can,” he agreed. Sansa had once been naïve – as he had been. The years had hardened her, turned her into someone he could trust with command. The last year alone had proved that much.
“And Bran?”

His sister frowned and looked back to their brother, once again still and silent in his bed. “He’s…” she shook her head slightly. “It’s like you said. He’ll get better…” she sounded uncertain.

“Aye,” Jon offered a reassuring smile. She did not smile back. *The godswood, the battle, the Red Woman, it’s all still troubling her, sitting in her mind while she’s sitting in this room. He reached for the door. We should walk outside, hmmm? It’s a bit better now, without so much smoke.*

She nodded wordlessly and, with one last glance toward the bed, followed him out of Bran’s chambers.

They walked within the halls of the keep for a time before emerging from a tower door out onto the walls. It was Jon’s first time in the open air since the battle. It felt far warmer than before, the cool winter breeze caressed his face and pulled at his air.

He looked over the wall. The winter town was a ruin and the walls in dire need of repair. *But it’s still standing,* he thought to himself, *it’s all still here.* The North could be rebuilt, its people made stronger and whole once more. Perhaps, if they triumphed in the south and took the kingdoms, he might one day fly northward and find Winterfell rebuilt with Sansa looking over the Stark lands.

*She won’t go south,* he knew. That was for certain. She had suffered enough outside these walls. Home was a place for her, a keep with towers and banners fluttering in the wind. Yet Winterfell had never been his home, not truly. *No…* Home was someone.

He turned to look toward the tower where Daenerys and he slept each night, but something else caught his eye. A worn piece of cloth atop a pole. Men gathered around it, wearing steel and mail, wool and fur and leather. *Soldiers mustering in the yard?* He moved to the stairs to get a better look.

The banner, though torn and dirtied, was clear enough to eyes than had seen it fluttering wildly in the chaos of battle. The mailed fist of House Glover stood above the worn spear tips and dented helms of their lord’s remaining levies. The half-a-hundred remaining Glover men looked as sorry as their armaments, with tattered cloaks wrapped about their withered bodies.

Jon hastened down the last few steps and crossed into the yard, making for the assembly. The levies parted as he approached and Lord Glover himself stepped forth.

“Your Grace,” he grunted the honorific, but his eyes showed no malice.


“Leaving. Aye,” his response was curt and without courtesy. “My men and I long for our own halls – if they still stand.”

“You’re not marching south?” Arya’s question cut through the dim noise in the yard. Lord Glover’s eyes widened.

“South?” the man struggled to hold back his obvious distain and anger. “And why would I order my men south? The war is over.”
“This war is,” Arya replied. “The Lannisters still hold the south.”

“And we hold two of the Lannisters,” Lord Glover’s humorless laugh echoed off the ruined walls of the castle. “Let the bitch rule the south. Let her rot in that damned keep. I’ll fight no more wars.”

Arya stepped forward, her smaller form radiating anger as a dragon’s body radiated heat. Jon stepped forward too, cutting off his sister’s assault with a nod and raised hand.

He had known this would happen, but hoped he still had days if not weeks to face his northern brethren. They’re tired. They’re frightened. Jon looked over the group. They’re done with all this. Yet he had to try.

“My Lord,” he began. “Queen Daenerys rode north to save the north. Her forces died defending our people.” The implied debt went unmentioned.

“Aye, she did and they did,” Glover said. “For that your queen will always have my thanks, but I swore no oaths. I never bent my knee to her. We fought to defend our home and we did.”

“You bent your knee to me,” Jon replied. The words sounded foreign… I sound like Daenerys did, once. Was this what his future held? Arguments and squabbles with lords, about taxes and titles if not oaths?

“I did,” the older man said gruffly. He paused and turned to look at the remains of his house’s forces, then met Jon’s gaze again. “You were our best hope. My house fought beside your father years ago. My brother died with your brother. My people suffered under the Greyjoys and fought with you against the Boltons. We battled dead men and worse to save our homes. Now you’ll order us to abandon them and march south once more?”

“I’ve order nothing,” Jon’s tone became cooler, more measured. I cannot ask these men for more than they have already given, but if they leave... The rest of the northern lords would follow suit, sapping their forces of much of their strength. He could not permit that to happen either. “Stay, my lord,” he said. “Only for a night.”

Lord Glover raised a grey eyebrow. “A night?”

“Aye,” Jon said. “And in the morning, we’ll gather in the hall. I ask that you listen. I cannot ask anymore of you.”

“That is...” the words whipped up a fury of thought in the old lord’s mind. His brow furrowed. “Aye. One night. Then we march. My men long for home.”

Jon sighed and studied himself as Lord Glover paced away and commanded his men to disperse. The Glover banner came down amidst the clattering of spears and swishing of cloaks. One more day. We must convince him to stay. Losing Glover might mean losing the other lords too.

He felt odd, torn between his own promises to his wife and unborn child and those to his people. If the northern houses marched south again, scores – if not hundreds – of men would never return to what was left of their homes, hearths, and families... And if they do not join us we may not have the numbers to overcome Cersei’s armies.

He needed to convince them. He needed help. Samwell or Davos or, gods, even Tyrion would know how to sway him. He would visit each in turn tonight, rest be damned.

“I could convince him,” Arya muttered as brother and sister walked away from the Glover men.
Jon laughed at that. “I don’t doubt it,” he said, looking down at her. She flashed a sharp smile that turned to a mock scowl as he mussed her hair. “But it’s not words of fear they need to hear, Arya. There’s been enough of that for now.”

Chapter End Notes

So the one thing I try to avoid doing is unpacking the emotional results of everything at once. Jon has been battling the NK for years and having finally defeated him would certainly leave some marks. We can explore the length and breath of what the end of this fight means for him in multiple chapters and from multiple POVs.

The overall tone is supposed to be a bit muted. Not too mournful since it’s a victory, not too happy since it was a slaughter. Think Frodo just kind of sighing "it's over, it's done" in RotK.

Anyway, there's the sprinklings of plot in here too and I'll be moving things forward in the next few updates. Comments always appreciated.
The days after the battle rolled on just as they had before it, only with a bit more smoke and a bit less fear of certain death and undeath at the hands of ice demons. Tyrion had not been seriously wounded during the battle on the walls nor in the yard. He had his fair share of bruises and cuts, of course, but he had suffered worse.

Those with more grievous wounds had either passed or healed by now. And, though he should not have had such thoughts, Tyrion could not help but counting their number. *How many men will have with us when we reach the Riverlands? And how many will join us once we the south?*

Though the greater threat has perished outside Winterfell’s walls, Tyrion found himself casting his gaze southward. He knew his sister – or thought he did – but he had had no word of her doings for months now. *She still has the Golden Company, he knew, but how many lords have joined her? Would the Unsullied and Dothraki be enough, even with the remnants of the Fiery Hand to bolster their ranks?*

He looked down from his tower chambers onto the southern ramparts. A familiar glint – golden in the day’s last rays of sunlight - caught his eye. *Ah, another with his eyes toward the south.* Of all the lords and swordsmen that might join their campaign, Tyrion was only truly worried about one. *We need to talk.* He hurried down to the walls to speak with his brother.

“Back on your feet, then?” he asked as he approached Jaime standing sentry on the southern walls. He half-turned to look at him, his golden hand still resting on a worn and cracked crenel. He too had suffered wounds in the battle, but had healed quickly enough in the aftermath.

“And I still have two of them,” his stern visage split in a wry smile. Tyrion smiled back.

“I’m told you slew one of the White Walkers in the battle,” he said. Jaime raised an eyebrow.

Many a story had been told about the battle, first in whispered words between survivors at meals, then in small groups in the yard and halls. All the keep knew that Jon had ridden Rhaegal against the enemy – as Daenerys had Drogon – and cut the enemy down. Some had learned of the battle in the godswood and the death of the Red Woman. Yet it was Jaime’s tale that interested him just now.

“I parried a blow from one,” he said. “It was Clegane that split the thing in two – not even that. It was like glass, broken and shattering…” He looked back off toward the southern horizon. *He’s thinking of her – and of home.*

“Yes, so I’ve heard, though I only saw the things from a distance.” Then he cut to the heart of the matter.

“Our sister’s forces won’t shatter so easily.” Jaime remained resolute, not turning to meet Tyrion’s knowing gaze.

“No… perhaps they won’t.”

“And they’ll be fresh. Strong. Well-supplied and well fed,” Tyrion added. He did not need to mention Cersei’s betrayal directly; his brother was smart enough to see the point. “With mounted
knights, and elephants… mayhaps even another one of those dreadful scorpions we saw on the Blackwater… Mayhaps even wildfire…”

Jaime whirled. “Are you finished?”

Tyrion might have leapt backwards off the wall if he was not expecting it. *No, dear brother, this is a conversation we must have.* “No,” he said simply.

The spark of anger in Jaime’s eyes burned away, replaced by some distant sadness. “You were on the Blackwater same as I,” he said, turn once more to look to the south. “You saw what one dragon did to my men – our family’s men. It won’t matter how well-fed they are. And those elephants might as well be rats with two dragons in the sky.” *And the capital so much kindling. No. It will take more than a victory in the field to win the throne.*

“Dragons might win in the field, but I doubt our king and queen will turn those beasts loose on King’s Landing,” he replied. Jaime’s head dipped imperceptibly in a nod of agreement.

*Not after White Harbor.* Daenerys had mentioned that ill-fated venture only once, but Tyrion could see the pain in her eyes anytime the city’s name was mentioned or young Wylla Manderly supped with them in the hall. *And that had been to save those people from a far worse fate.* No… Daenerys was not the same women he had met in Meereen. She would not set the Red Keep ablaze nor risk innocent lives simply to seize her birthright.

Jaime sighed. “What is it you want from me, then?”

“I want to know whose side you’re on,” Tyrion stated. “Now that this northern war is done.”

“I rode north to fight for the living,” his brother replied.

“And now you’ll ride south to…” he raised his hands and shrugged. “What? Rejoin the sister who betrayed you? Who sent assassins north to hunt you? Do you truly think the realm is better off with Cersei as queen?”

Jaime did not respond immediately. Tyrion could almost hear his brother’s tormented thoughts swirling inside his head. Then he cut to the heart of the matter. “She’s carrying my child.”

“A child that will soon be born, if I’m not mistaken,” Tyrion said.

“You’re not.” Finally, Jaime ripped his gaze away from the southern sky and looked down at Tyrion. The look in his eyes was odd, foreign. Tyrion had never seen it before. *He’s always been impulsive. Swift to act. Thrust his sword into his king’s back or thrusting into his king’s wife. He’s never wrestled with a choice like this.*

“You mean to kill her, don’t you?” he asked, his voice dead and lifeless.

“She is my sister same as yours, Jaime,” he said. “But the choice is not mine to make. If she refuses to yield-”

“She’ll never yield,” Jaime cut across him.

“She might, if you convince her,” he suggested.

Jaime’s laugh was cold and humorless. “So I’ll simply walk into the royal apartments after riding north? Tell her to abandon her throne and titles and flee?”
“We could come to an arrangement.”

“This is Cersei. There will be no arrangements.”

“No?” Tyrion pressed his brother.

“No. You ask too much. For me to fight against the men I commanded, the lords I befriended, the child I fathered!” he found his anger again. “I’ll ride south with you. I couldn’t stay here anyway. But I cannot fight with you.”

“We needn’t fight our men. A victory against the sellswords or Greyjoys might-”

“You don’t understand,” Jaime hissed. “You and your schemes. Your words. You have no children. All you’re fighting for is that damned hand pinned on your breast.”

Tyrion did not respond at once. He breathed in the winter air – let it cool his rising temper. “Jon and Daenerys mean to assemble the northern lords on the morrow. A war council. Join me there. Ride south with us. We’ll discuss the matter further once we’ve left passed the Neck.”

Jaime dipped his head in agreement as Tyrion turned and walked away. *I regret the children’s deaths as much as you,* he told himself. But was that right? Joffrey and Myrcella had died in Jaime’s arms. He had not even seen Tommen’s body before Cersei burned it. *Even the thought of another child has him hoping beyond hope. It’s given him something to fight for – perhaps it already has.*

He felt empty as he walked back into the keep and slowly made his way to chambers. Jaime’s words gnawed at his thoughts. *No, brother, I don’t have children. I need not to fight for a better world.*

Tyrion reached his own room a few moment later. As he opened the door, the sudden rush of heat from the fire made his head spin. He sat on a nearby stool as the door swung closed. *It is rather pleasant in here,* he thought – and for a moment all his troubles floated away like puffs of smoke from a dragon’s maw.

*Quite comfortable, if a bit hot.* He slipped out of his boots. Then his breeches. Then he reached down and made to removed his tunic. His hand brushed against the silver badge of office… and a flood of irrational, cold anger rushed over him once more.

Yet it was not anger at his brother. *It was the truth…* Should they take the capital and the throne, Daenerys would have Jon and her babe. *And I’ll have this badge.*

His life had always been one of solitude, of comfortable isolation in emotion if not in distance. Now he felt the sharp pangs of loneliness – that hunger for company and companionship and love. It kept him awake all night.

…

When he entered the great hall early the next morning, it was half-empty of lords and levies alike. The interest in this assembly had drawn many a prying eye as well. *Or perhaps it’s just a distraction from the cold and horrors of this winter.*

He found a seat near enough the high table and soon found himself with a pewter plate piled high with various bits of bread, fish, and meat so dried and salted he had to steal another man’s cup of water to wash out the taste. The water was cold, perhaps too cold for it stung his teeth and sent tendrils of ice into his mind, yet it gave him strength too after such a restless night.
He watched from his seat as lords and attendants filtered through the oaken doors of the great hall. The men looked as battered as the doors did, their sunken expressions matching their drab and dirty outfits. The ensconced torches on the walls highlighted the dark circles under their tired eyes.

The diminished northern host found seats along the lower tables. The screeching of wood on stone echoed through the halls for moment, soon replaced by the sound of the great hearth’s crackling fire. Tyrion watched the flames consume the topmost log… just as they had consumed countless bodies of the dead and slain outside the castle’s walls.

Then, Jon and Daenerys stood as one. The young king surveyed the room, then opened his mouth to address his people. “You know why we’ve gathered you here,” he began. The hall remained silent to hear his words.

“You all fought bravely in the battles against the dead,” Daenerys said. “And you triumphed. We triumphed.” *Then why does it feel like we’re at a funeral?*

“Aye,” Jon agreed with a quick glance at his wife, “The Night King is gone, but the North is not safe.” Tyrion could hear his measured breathing. “To the south there is another who would visit the same sorrow on our people. We cannot allow Cersei Lannister to rule the realm.” Tyrion cast a glance toward his brother, who pointedly looked away.

Lord Glover rose from his seat – a perch on the long bench nearest the high table – and turned to address the hall. “So we must ride south again? To fight the Lannister woman for her keep and throne? How many more of us must die before we can truly be free?” Some of the men nodded in agreement, a rare fire lit in their eyes. “No, Your Graces. Let her come to us if she dares.”

“She will, in time,” Tyrion raised his voice as he raised his head.


“I know what many of you think of me. Many of you might still hate me, despite our fighting on the walls together,” He earned a weak, reluctant laugh at that. “But I assure you my sister’s hatred tower over your own. She sent assassins across the Narrow Sea to bring her my head. Should you refuse her demands to bend your knees, she shall send far worse after you.”

“Let them come, then,” Lord Cerwyn rose to join his older companion. “The North has driven off southerners time and time again.”

“If Cersei rallies the south against us, the North will not survive. We have lost too much,” Jon said.

“Aye, we have,” Lord Glover responded.

“That is why we must strike *now,*” Tyrion emphasized the need for haste. “She is weak too. Divided. Distracted. We must march south together and seize the throne.”

As soon as that word left his lips, he knew it had been precisely the wrong thing to say.

“Throne?” Glover raised a grey eyebrow. “Are we fighting for freedom or a throne?”

“They are the same,” Daenerys’ voice cut through the growing rumble of discontent. “We must take the capital to safeguard the realm.” Her sigh was audible too. “I once fought for only the throne, but I turned my armies northward to defend your homes and your families. Many of my men died for you.”

Lord Glover had no response to that, but he did not relinquish his position at the center of the hall.
“You… you shall always have our thanks for that, Daenerys of House Targaryen. But this is a battle I cannot fight.”

Jon took a half-step forward. “Some of you rode south with my – with Lord Eddard, once. Many of you answered the call to drive out the Boltons. All of you fought to defeat the dead. I cannot command you to ride with us. I will not. I can only ask it of you.”

“Our king is right,” little Lady Mormont stood now. “We must fight for the North.”

“Half the North is gone,” Lord Glover said. “Last Hearth and Karhold, the Wall and White Harbor, and I’ve no word from Deepwood Motte nor have I ravens to send mine own.” There were murmurs of agreement from around the room. Tyrion looked away pointedly. Those ravens might yet save your cold northern hide, ser.

“Our people still live,” Lady Mormont rose to meet him, her eyes hard like ice.

“Perhaps yours, my lady,” Glover said, his own eyes shone with a dull and weary sorrow. He might have kept his body, but his spirit is spent, Tyrion thought at the sight. “On Bear Island. But my keep and people? Or those sorry fools who huddled in crofters’ hovels in this fight? What of them? How many other dead men ravaged our homeland while we fought here at Winterfell?”

Silence fell upon the assembly for no one had an answer. How many passed the Neck?

“I do not know,” Jon said. The only one who does is trapped in bed, his eyes white as new fallen snow. Tyrion had only visited the boy’s chambers once… only to be greeted by Bran’s awful shout. Like his pale flesh was being pierced by hot irons.

Silence settled in among the gathered lords once more. Then came an uncertain voice from the back of the hall. “I – I shall ride with you.” A thin boy wrapped in a worn cloak walked into the center of the room, his legs shaking with each step he took.

“Lord Umber,” Jon inclined his head.

“I pledge my house’s swords as well,” Alys Karstark rose to join the lording.

“And you shall always command the loyalty of House Mormont,” Lady Lyanna said. All twenty men… She turned to look at Lord Glover. He seemed as resolute as the wall.

“I…” Or perhaps not? “No.” He frowned as he announced his decision. “I cannot. My people have bled enough. I promised you one more day, Your Grace. I can give you nothing more.” Other lords muttered their agreements.

“I’ve no lands nor men to pledge to you,” another thin woman stood toward the back of the room. Wylla of White Harbor, Tyrion recognized her. Heir to a graveyard. “But I shall ride south all the same, if you’ll have me.”

“You are most welcome,” Daenerys answered warmly from the high table.

Jon looked at the queen then back into the great hall. “In ten days, we march. If you’ll join us, stay and be welcome in this keep.” He met Lord Glover’s gaze. “Those who would not fight, gather your men and go when you choose. We shall give you provisions for the road. No man shall stop you.”

Jon turned away without another word, waiting for Daenerys to ready herself before both king and queen left the assembly through the passageway that would bring them to their chambers. Tyrion
sat back and sighed.

Chapter End Notes

It's a short one. More of a set-up for later stuff, but I also played with and thoroughly edited the Tyrion/Jaime conversation to have some more weight. Arya is up next in a chapter I've been excited to write.
Chapter Summary

Arya says goodbye.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Greycap, no... well, maybe. Nightshade? That might be useful. Arya took the vial and tucked it away. Maester Wolkan’s stores were much depleted after so many months of war, sickness, and isolation, but he still had plenty of poisons to pick from. Poisons could be useful in a war against the living. Arya took what she needed.

And there were many things she needed. Who knows what Cersei has in the south. Who knows what I’ll need. She remembered her training in Braavos... and remembered that cold satisfaction she felt when she poisoned the Freys’ wine. Neither Greycap nor Nightshade could accomplish anything of that scale, but enough of either could kill a man quickly enough.

She plucked a half-full vial from the topmost shelf. She uncorked it and smelled the liquid within. Nothing. There’s nothing else here. Of course, Wolkam would not have kept anything too rare or too deadly. This was Winterfell, not King’s Landing. I can get more in the south, in other castles, when we take them, she thought.

They would be there soon enough. Eight days had passed in a whirl of activity as Jon and Daenerys prepared to move south. The remnants of the dead had been burned and the queen’s fallen dragon buried – for dragonbone did not burn at all. Some northern lords had left, just as they said they would. Lord Glover’s remaining levies marched for Deepwood Motte only a few hours after that meeting in the hall. The war, in the North at least, was over.

She left the maester’s tower as quickly as she had come, carefully closing the door behind her as she made her way across the ramparts and into the interior of the keep. Yet she did not make for her own chambers. Arya hastened down a side corridor and found the small room at its end. She did not bother knocking.

Gendry stood across the way, wearing nothing but woolen breeches. He faced away from the door, toward the bed where his few belongings were laid out like a blacksmith’s tools. Arya looked over his body, his scars and bruises and powerful muscles. Her face felt hot, flushed. Too warm in here, she shot a glance at the flames in the hearth.

Gendry did not look up. “Davos, I told you I’m-” he stopped talking as he stood up straight and faced the door. “Oh,” he said, a grin breaking across his face.

“It’s not that warm in the south, you know,” Arya playfully regained her composure.

Gendry’s blue eyes narrowed, but the smile never left his face. “It’ll be warmer than here, during the day at least. At night...” his grinned widened. “Well I hope I can find a way to keep warm.” Arya scowled even as she failed to hide the color creeping from her neck to her cheeks.
Between the battle on the walls and the fight in the godswood, Gendry’s wounds had been more severe than her own. She had taken to spending time in his chambers and keeping him company when she was not watching over Bran. Some nights, she had even slept in his bed. It had not been like that, but it had not been nothing.

She closed the door and walked into the room as Gendry donned proper clothing. She looked over the items scattered across the furs on his bed. A polished sword way lying next to an oil cloth and plain leather scabbard. No hammer, she remembered. It had shattered in the battle.

“Are you going to make another?” she asked

“Another what?” Gendry replied as he pulled on his left boot.

“A hammer.”

“If I get the chance. That other hammer would be useless now anyway – half of it was dragonglass,” he shrugged. Arya felt the slight weight of the ornate dagger at her side. I can’t have another Needle made, but this will do.

“You should,” she said.

“Oh?” Gendry cocked his head sideways playfully. “And why’s that?”

“Your father used a hammer.”

“Aye, he did,” Gendry laughed. “Doubt he made it himself, though.” He looked at her again and gestured at the leather sack hanging at her side. “What’s that, then?”

Arya pushed the satchel so that it rested against her back instead of at her side. “Just some… things I needed for the march.”

“What things?” he asked.

“Why do you want to know?”

Gendry threw up his calloused hands and laughed. “Beg your pardon, m’lady. I was only asking a question.” She stepped forward and shoved him – perhaps a bit too forcefully. Gendry stumbled back over his right boot and fell onto the furs, next to the sword.

“Careful!” he said, his concerned tone stifling his laughter for just a moment.

“Sorry!” Arya said. She had not meant to hurt him. Sometimes it just seems like he can’t get hurt. It was an odd thought, for her she knew that anyone could be hurt… and that anyone can be killed. But Gendry never seemed to stay down. He suffered cuts and bruises and deep wounds – like that blow from the Night King – but he always recovered.

“How’s your leg?” she nodded at his knee, taking care not to look any higher than that.

“Which one?” Gendry asked as he sat back up.

“The one she cut,” Arya clarified, avoiding mention of the Red Woman by name.

“Oh,” Gendry exhaled. “It’s fine. The maester saw to it quickly enough.”

They both fell silent for a moment – both trapped in their memories of that battle in the godswood.
She had not fully understood what had happened, but Gendry and Davos had both spent enough time with the witch to know why she did what she did. Blood magic... she wanted his blood and the little boy's. That's why she took Gendry away in the first place. But Melisandre was gone now, dead at Arya's own hand. She could still feel the rush of heat as she kicked the woman's body into the fires.

“So,” Gendry said. “We leave tomorrow, hmm?”

“We do,” Arya replied, looking away from her friend and out the small window. South... The word held such much... what? Danger? Hope? The prospect of returning to the Riverlands and the capital excited and terrified her in equal measure. Cersei's there, she knew, in King's Landing. That's where this will end. She hoped that she would be the one to end it.

Winterfell was where it had all began, though, and Arya was reluctant to leave Sansa and Bran behind in the North during this terrible winter. But we have to go south. I have to go south.

“Got a horse? Or are you going to ride along with me?” Gendry smiled, returning some warmth to their conversation and levity to her thoughts.

“I've seen you ride,” she said. “You'll need to ride along with me.” That made him laugh – a strong, booming sound that seemed to shake the stone walls of the room.

“Are there even enough horses for the march?” he asked. Maybe not. The Dothraki had killed, eaten or burned many of their mounts. The Queen had a few hundred mounted riders left, at best. The others would have to walk and hope that they could seize fresh horses in the south. They lacked other animals, too. Oxen to haul supplies and livestock to eat on the journey. But we have the dragons. The only beasts we need.

“We’ll find what we need,” she replied, thinking not of horses but of the pilfered poisons resting in the satchel at her side.

“I suppose we will,” Gendry shrugged as he regained his feet, retrieved his boot, and slipped it on. He looked her over with an odd expression. “You’re about to leave your home.”

“And?” she shot back, perhaps a bit too harshly.

“Are you not going to walk around? See everything one last time?”

“No.”

Gendry cocked his head again, his gaze demanding a proper answer.

Arya sighed. “I don’t want to. There’s nothing else I want to see.” There were someones, of course. She had to say goodbye to Sansa and Bran and the others who would be staying behind. But the castle itself? It carried as many unhappy memories as happy ones, and she had been only a little girl when she first traveled south with her father. Much had changed. Maybe it was not home anymore, not truly. “We’re going to your home,” she continued.

Gendry laughed. “Guess we are. Back to Fleabottom and the Street of Steel.”

“Do you miss it?”

“King’s Landing? Not really,” he said. She nodded in agreement. She hated the capital, too. “Besides, if I have to go back to making spear points and swords after fighting alongside a Targaryen queen,” he smiled and turned up his palms as if to show the breadth of possibility that
spanned out before him – and show how disappoint it would be only to find himself as a blacksmith once this war was done.

“What would you want to do?” she asked. Oddly, her heartbeat quickened.

Once more, Gendry cocked his head and looked at her with and, well, an odd glance. It made her uncomfortable… and it made that heat return to her cheeks. He took a step toward her.

“I should… I need to pack,” she fumbled for her words and turned toward the door.

“Right,” Gendry said, looking crestfallen.

She left him to his preparations and made for another part of the keep. *That was a lie,* she berated herself for acting so foolish, so idiotic. *So girly.* She did not need to pack. She had everything she needed for the march.

*I should’ve stayed,* she thought. *I should have kissed him again.* They had never really talked about that first time properly. Of course, they had kissed since – alone in his room or hers – but they had never talked about it. She never wanted to talk about it. What was the point of talking about it if you could just do it?

She left those thoughts behind as she wandered. Down to the kitchens and up to the rookery. Around the ruined walls and into the crypts to see her father’s tomb and through the silent smithy where she had spent so many afternoons with Gendry as he worked. There were memories here – all around her. Some she would take with her, others she would leave where they lay.

Soon enough, the pale winter sun cast long shadows across the castle as it sank in the western sky. Day was quickly turning to night. *My last night here.* There was one more place she wanted to see. She had not been certain she wanted to before, but the coming darkness had changed her mind. There would not be another chance. She left the smithy and made for the godswood.

She walked through the archway, old snow and ice crunching under her feet. What she saw took her breath away – and when she found it again the smell of old smoke and death overwhelmed her senses.

The godswood was a ruin. Grey ash covered the forest floor where moss and wildflowers had grown in her youth. The oaks, maples and pines that rimmed the grove were dead, their bark blackened by fire and their branches bare. The black pools, steaming in the cold, were stained grey with ash too.

Arya brought her sleeve to her mouth and coughed. The sound echoed through the godswood. There had never been echoes before. She started forward toward the center and, as she rounded the dead trunk of a thick oak, she saw in. The heart tree had survived, but perhaps it would have been kinder to burn it in full.

The base of the weirwood was black, burnt and cracked. The color turned greyer the higher you looked. Arya could not see a single spot of the pure white she was used to. Half its leaves had fallen way. Worse yet, deep red sap seeped through the deep cracks all along the tree, drying on the wood or slowly dripping down to pool around the roots.

*It looks like it’s bleeding,* she thought as she circled around the trunk. Anger swelled in her chest as she saw the broken and melted remains of a golden necklace. *Her necklace. She did this.* The sacred grove where she had spent so many summer afternoons, where her father had prayed, where her brother had been married. It was gone now, replaced a dead scar.
Then she saw the worst part. The weirwood’s carved face, ever stoic in life, now looking to be screaming in silent agony. Blood red sap poured from its cheeks, its nose, and its mouth. Its white eyes, stained grey by the smoke, bored into her own. It’s suffering. It can’t live like this. She felt her hand slip toward her dagger’s hilt. Remember where the heart is…

Arya took a step back and shook herself from her trancelike state. It’s a tree. You can’t do anything about it. Yet it was more than that. It was a monument to her memories, to her family. It was part of her home. It deserved the gift of mercy.

Even as she turned and left the ruined grove, Arya could not shake the image of those eyes, crying tears of blood and crying out for aid. She saw the fires in her mind, heard the Red Woman’s words… and the pained screams of her little brother. And when she closed her own eyes to sleep that night – the last night in her childhood bed – the eyes stared back at her from the darkness.

She did not sleep well. She tossed and turned for hours on end. Memories of the battle flashed by her – memories of fighting the dead and the White Walkers. She slipped into older dreams still, days spent as a blind beggar on the streets of Braavos. Being in the wolf in the south by the river. Then, once again, she found herself staring across a river at that wolf; that awful cold creeping from her heart to her limbs. She woke with a start.

Just a dream, she told herself. Nothing more. They’re gone now. But it had felt real. All of it. She looked around her room. The fire and candles had gone out. She was no stranger to darkness for it had often been her ally, but now she felt alone, trapped, and perhaps even frightened. She grabbed the dagger from her bedside table and left her chambers behind.

The keep was dead silent at night. Arya had only the odd snore or whisper of wind to remind her that this was not a dream. Mind racing, she quickened her pace as she rounded a corner and took the next set of steps two at a time. Then, she was there.

Once more, she did not bother to knock. The room was dark, but Gendry sat up at once and immediately reached for his sword.

“What’s going on?” he stared into the darkness.

“It’s me,” she said.

A moment of silence followed. It felt like she was waiting to hear her fate.

“Oh,” Gendry said sleepily.

“Can I stay with you?”

She saw him nod and sit back in bed. Without a second thought, she joined him. Gendry, though still half-asleep, made room for her as he had countless times before.

As she pulled the furs back over the two of them, he wrapped an arm around her and pulled her closer to his chest. It felt warm. It felt right. And slowly, ever so slowly, she drifted off to a more peaceful sleep.

…

When she woke, she found Gendry already awake and propped up on one elbow.

“You’re up,” he said, surveying her with one blue eye.
“I couldn’t sleep last night,” she admitted.

“She slept well enough here,” he smiled. She smiled back. Then she leaned in and kissed him. It was light and quick, but pleasant too. Gendry looked shocked for a brief moment, then he snaked a muscled arm around her waist and drew her in for a deeper kiss.

She pressed herself against him, letting go of any inhibitions. The wars past and wars to come were held at bay by the chamber’s walls, if only for one sweet moment.

Then horns sounded in the yard below. They broke apart.

“It’s – I – how long was I asleep?” Arya gasped as she pulled back. Were they about to march already?

Gendry did not respond, at least not with words. He leapt from under the furs and started to dress. Arya joined him.

The rest of the morning was a blur of activity. She dressed and ate quickly before going down to the stables to find a horse for the journey. The one she had brought north so many months ago was gone, but the grooms in the stable found her a grey gelding and helped her saddle him soon enough.

When Gendry joined her, they found him a larger mount of his own. The horse was massive, with a black man to match Gendry’s own hair. Around the stables and across the castle, others readied their horses, stacked supplies on the few remaining wagons, and otherwise readied themselves for the march.

The Unsullied within the walls stood in tight formations, their gleaming spear tips black iron once more. Arya knew that the remaining Dothraki were mounted and ready to ride outside the castle. As she looked skyward, she saw Drogon and Rhaegal circling high overheard, sunlight glinted off their scales. It was almost time.

She saw Jon and Daenerys just outside the entrance of the great hall, surrounded by lords, attendants, and advisors. I’ll speak with him later, she decided. There would be time enough on the King’s Road for that. But I haven’t seen Sansa and I need to see Bran… to say goodbye.

With a nod to Gendry, she crossed the yard and entered the keep, making for Bran’s chambers. She found him abed and unmoving, just as he always was – save the screams and writhing. The fire crackled merrily in the hearth and sunlight streamed through the room’s windows. The light cast an odd glow on Bran’s pale skin.

She moved to the edge of the bed and sat, placing a hand on his. He’s cold, she realized at once. His eyes were white, just as they always were. He can’t feel me. He can’t see me… but maybe he could hear me?

“I’m going south again,” she said, her tone soft and low as if she were whispering some secret. “I’ll be with Jon. With Gendry. With Daenerys and all the others. I...” He showed no signs of having heard her. “I’m sorry for what happened to you. In the godswood with the Red Woman. I wish I could help. I wish...” She did not have the right words nor could she find them.

Guilt weighed heavy on her as she stood and moved toward the door. She did not want to leave him or Sansa. The pack survives, she told herself. But the danger isn’t here anymore. It’s in the south. Sansa would look after Bran. Sansa would look after all of Winterfell and all the North. Sansa would -

“I thought I might find you here,” Sansa said from doorway.
Arya spun and look at her sister. She was garbed her usual black woolen dress and black furs. “I wanted to say goodbye.”

“I know,” Sansa said as she entered the room and shut the door behind her. Her eyes lingered on Bran’s motionless form. “Maester Wolkan will look after him. And I’ll send you a raven when he wakes.”

Arya could hear the uncertainty in her sister’s tone. She knew it was a lie, but kept her mouth shut. Neither knew if they would ever speak with their younger brother again.

“And I’ll send you one when we, well…”

“Take the capital?” Sansa finished her thought.

“I suppose.”

She laughed rather harshly. “Good luck. Cersei will never give up the throne.”

Hearing the name sent a jolt of anger through Arya’s body. Cersei… The last one on her list of names. “Well, if she won’t give it up…”

Sansa’s eyes widened a bit. “You’re going to kill her?”

“If I get the chance.”

To her credit, she only nodded in acceptance of the statement. “And then you’ll come home?” Arya looked to Bran then back at her sister. She slowly shook her head. “Then where will you go?”

“Somewhere else,” she said.

“Somewhere with Gendry?”

“Maybe.”

“You could always go to his home,” Sansa said with the hint of a smile.

“He’s from King’s Landing,” Arya responded, surprised her sister would forget such a simple fact.

“He is,” she said. “But he’s King Robert’s son. The only living Baratheon. If Jon and Daenerys legitimized him…”

*Storm’s End.* How had she forgotten that? She did not care about Gendry’s blood or station. She did not care about keeps and castles or lands and titles. *But he might. I’ve never asked him.*

The fantasy faded to nothing as quickly as it had sprung up. *No.* She did not want to be some high lord’s lady, nor did she think Gendry would agree to becoming ‘Lord Baratheon’. But she could see the great keep’s outline against the eastern sky, even though she had never seen the place. It loomed in front of her mind’s eye, just like the towers of the Red Keep did.

Horns blared in the yard below. Both Stark sisters looked to the window.

“It’s almost time,” Sansa said. “I should go say farewell to Jon.” Arya nodded as her sister began to reach for the door.

“Wait.” Sansa paused and turned back.
“I’m…” she struggled to turn her scattered thoughts into words. “I’m going to miss you.”

Sansa responded with a kind, sad smile. Then she rushed for and hugged Arya, wrapping her arms around her and pulling her in tightly. “I’m going to miss you, too.”

How long they remained that way, Arya could not say. Yet when they broke apart she felt herself filled with a sense of purpose. “I’ll see you in the yard,” Sansa said softly. She turned, opened the door and left.

And then she was alone. Sansa’s footsteps echoed from the hall, fading away amidst the sound of horns outside the walls and the distant thunder of a dragon’s wingbeats. The rhythm lured her into a sort of trance – a moment of tranquility here in her brother’s room.

The fire crackled. The wind blew against the keep’s walls. Arya paced around the room in small circles, simply thinking. Twice she thought she saw Bran move, but when she raised her gaze to his still form she saw nothing. His rest rose and fell slowly – the only sign of life.

Long minutes passed in near silence. She shut down the sound of the horns and the dragons and the wind, listening only to the sounds of her brother’s breathing.

Then, an awful sound rent the air. Bran screamed. It was just like before; just like every other time. She rushed to his side as he writhed in unseen pain, his white eyes opened wide, but unseeing. She looking down at his chest, rising and falling quickly with hurried, labored breaths.

A hand closed around her wrist.

“Arya,” her brother rasped. She looked up. His face was pale and gaunt, his hair disheveled. His eyes were blue. He’s awake.

“Arya!” she shouted. She brought her free hand to his, feeling his cold fingers. “Bran I-”

“Arya…” he said her name again. He sounded exhausted and distant. He sounded scared. He gritted his teeth as he struggled to suck in air. His frail limbs shook with some unseen burden.

“Arya. No more. Please...” His eyes found to the dagger at her side.

Then they flashed back to white – as cold and pure as snow. His grip on her wrist slackened, then failed. He screamed again and writhed around in pain for another moment.

“Bran? Bran!” she shouted. She looked around the chambers, then out the window. “Help! Someone! Get a maester!” Horns and trumpets blared again. A dragon roared. Yet no one came to her aid. No one could hear her.

She looked at her little brother’s silent torment… and remembered the godswood and the dying weirwood’s carved face. Cold dread filled her.

“…Bran?” she whispered his name, hoping he would awaken once more – if only for a moment. He did not answer. She felt the weight of the dagger at her side. I can’t, she told herself at once. No. Yet there was nothing she could do. The Wulkan and Sam had tried to heal her brother and both men had failed. She did not have a healer’s skills. She did not have that gift. There was only one gift she could give him now.

She drew the dagger from her hip. It had always been light and balanced in her grip. Now it felt as heavy as a war hammer. She looked at Bran’s body, her gaze traveling from his white eyes down his neck to where his heart was. I can’t, she thought once more. Not like this.
She looked around the room, hoping some miracle would present itself in the old stones of the keep’s inner walls. Her eyes found her satchel.

Tears welling in her eyes, she walked over and retrieved the vial she had taken yesterday. She removed the stopper and, taking care, coated her blade in Nightshade, using far more than she needed. The steel glinted in the firelight.

It would work slowly, she knew. It would bring an end to his restless sleep. Nothing she told herself dulled the pain of what she had to do.

Arya turned back to her brother. Her steps felt heavy, but she made sure they were silent. Calm as still water. The old words sprang unbidden into her thoughts as she pulled back the furs and woven blankets. Quiet as shadow. She grasped his wrist and pulled his arm toward her, the faded blue mark on his arm still easy to see. He did not move.

But she did. Her left hand was shaking as she raised the dagger. Calm as still water. Quiet as shadow. Quick as a snake. Her tears fell freely now as she put the steel to his pale skin – to the enemy’s mark – and drew the blade across it. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.

Blood seeped from the wound like the sap from the tree. Her brother’s body shook, but he made no noise. She pressed the flat of the blade against the cut to make certain the poison would take.

Soon enough, Bran’s breathing slowed. His eyelids fluttered, but did not close. He stared sightless into the room before him, his eyes that same, awful white. Arya sheathed the dagger and, hands trembling, pulled the furs back over her work. She turned and picked up her satchel.

Then she ran from the room.

Chapter End Notes

Well, there's that!

I’m aware some of you don’t like my Arya or think she’s too soft or out of character. I prefer to write about a girl who has been through some shit but has regained some of her humanity through family and friends. That’s the way the cookie crumbles, in this case. I don’t feel like writing about the T-1000. The romance though? Eh. Not my strong suite.

As for Bran, well, this was long planned and crammed full of parallels.
The scene was oddly familiar, like a half-remembered dream. A column of riders and footmen wound its way across a vast, flat countryside. She was with child, just as she had been before. Her husband rode some distance ahead while Jorah rode at her side. But this is not the Dothraki Sea, though, she told herself. And this is not summer.

The march had not been easy. They had had no snows nor distant, threatening thunder on this march, but it was cold. Biting winds swept across the northern flats from the low hills on the western horizon. The White Walkers may have been defeated, but winter itself still reigned over the land.

Daenerys watched the banners snap back and forth in the driving wind. The faded sigils of Stark, Umber, Karstark, Mormont and half a dozen other northern houses flew above the host. Greater in number were the banner of House Targaryen: a blood red, three-headed dragon on a pitch-black field.

Some of her banners were old and worn, sewn by freed slaves in Meereen. Others – those made on Dragonstone – had bolder colors. The people are sewing dragon banners in secret. The thought made her smile, if only for a moment.

She looked over the men carrying those banners: Northerners who had pledged themselves to her cause even after years of suffering in the North; Unsullied who had sworn their lives to her; Dothraki whom she had led across the sea; and the freed men of the Fiery Hand whom she had taken into her service after the death of the red witch. A few thousand at best…

“Will it be enough?” she wondered aloud.

“Your Grace?” Jorah turned in his saddle and met her gaze. She repeated the question.

Jorah looked away toward the southern sky. “Hard to say, my queen,” he said.

“But if you had to,” Daenerys pressed him, hoping for some reassurance.

“Your soldiers fight for you. They’ve pledged their lives to you. They love you,” he said, his tone low and gaze distant. “And you have two dragons.”

Where I once had three… She thought of Viserion. She would carry that guilt with her until her dying breath. He had been always the smallest of her three dragons, the most in need of care and affection. And I brought him beyond the Wall to die. She had held back her tears upon seeing his broken body after the battle. A dead dragon was a terrible sight, especially for its mother.

But there had been no other way. I had to save them. She cast a glance toward Jorah. Of course, many had not survived the war in the North. The man Beric had perished by the river and Tormund Giantsbane had fallen at Winterfell. His countrymen had found his body amidst the carnage and burned him before leaving the Stark lands. Her eyes found Jon riding some distance ahead. I had to save him.

The sound of tearing fabric shook her from her thoughts. A fierce gust of wind ripped a faded Targaryen banner from its standard as carried it eastward where it fell onto the ground. A single
black clad Unsullied soldier went to retrieve the banner. Her eyes followed his movements, then remained fixed on the eastern sky even as he returned to the column.

“You would have me use Drogon and Rhaegal against the Lannisters?” she asked Jorah.

“You must, if you hope to win the throne,” he replied.

Must I? The prospect of righteous revenge against the House that had ruined her own might have seemed sweet to the queen that had sailed to Westeros from the far side of the world, but it was a bitter thought to the one who had given so much to save the realm from certain death.

Jorah sensed her hesitation. “Forgive me, Daenerys,” he sighed. She took note of his using her name. “But if you hope to claim your family’s thrones, you must, else you must order more of your people to the slaughter.”

“They are my people, Ser.” she responded, her tone as bitter and cold as the wind. Or they will be. What sort of queen would burn innocents forced to take up arms against her?

She looked off toward the east. White Harbor lay somewhere over that horizon, she knew. The ruins of that city would scar the North for years to come... just as the screams of those doomed thousands scarred her dreams. She had burned Masters and Lannisters and dead men in her anger, but to turn her dragons against the living... Would she have to do it once more in the south? At King’s Landing? I cannot do that again.

“So, yes,” Jorah said. “Cersei has hired sellswords too. The Golden Company among them, led by a brute. Varys says they have already ravaged the Stormlands while the Iron Fleet raids the banks of the Mander. Would you spare those who would not spare you?”

“I... I will do what I must.”

Jorah smiled sadly. “You have a good heart, Your Grace, but this war will see more dead men before it is over.”

Daenerys did not respond. She could not. Kicking her heels, she urged her mount forward and rode to join Tyrion, hoping for a moment of warmth and levity in his company to help her escape her thoughts.

…

They made camp that night beside a frozen creek. Scouts and hunters had scoured the land for game, but brought back little. Some of the northmen had managed to pull fish from the ice, though, so that was what she and Jon ate in their tent before falling asleep side by side.

Two more days passed with the same fierce winds and biting colds, but by the third day the air grew warmer. It carried scents of rot and death, but not the kind she had come to know in the north. The southern sky lay concealed in a shroud of mist, but Daenerys could make out the crumbling towers of Moat Cailin rising up in the distance. The south, she thought at her first glance, or the Neck, at least.

With each passing moment and mile down the causeway, the old castle lost ever more of the grandeur Daenerys had painted in her mind’s eye. The castle where the First Men held back the Andals, she recalled from the histories and songs. Yet it seemed nothing of the sort.

“A ruin,” she said to Jon, whom she had joined in riding earlier that day.
“Aye,” he said.

“I was expecting…” her words failed her.

“Winterfell?” he asked with a smile. The sight made her smile, too.

The air grew warmer as the column approached. The winds died down, then ceased entirely. Drogon soared overhead, the steady thrumming of his wing beats mixing in with plodding of her horse’s hooves.

“Wait,” Jon held up a gloved hand and brought his mount to a halt. Daenerys did likewise. Behind them, the long column came to a halt.

“What?” she asked.

Jon’s grey eyes found hers before glancing back toward the castle. “Look,” he said.

She did. Her eyes scanned the mossy ramp and slick, uneven walls. Look for what? There was nothing to see - no crimson banners bearing that proud golden lion nor a sigil of any other kind.

“What is it?” she asked again. Behind her, the Dothraki riders began to mutter amongst themselves. To a foreign ear, it might have sounded brutish and guttural, but she understood their tones for what they truly were. They’re frightened.

Jon stepped closer to her and gently raised her right arm to point toward the tallest and most distant tower. “There,” he said.

Her breath caught. A single, tattered, banner fluttered feebly in the dying breeze, it’s light blue hues blending in with the sky beyond. Yet, keen eyes like Jon’s could make out the cream colored moon and falcon standing proud above the northern ruins. They left weeks ago, maybe months. Why would they stop here?

“Do you think…” Daenerys did not finish the question.

Jon nodded, then looked back through the ranks. Two riders emerged from the crowd and rode swiftly to the king and queen’s position. One brought a weathered northern horn and, with Jon’s command, announced the army’s arrival with a long, low blast.

The moist marsh air swallowed the sound. The man blew the horn again. No response came from the ruins.

“We should send scouts, Your Grace,” one of the riders said.

“No,” Jon replied. She shot him a concerned glance, but it not prevent him from urging his grey mount forward down the causeway to the crooked gates of the ancient keep. She followed close behind him. Her guards and attendants, Jorah among them, yelled out their cautions as they rode to keep pace with the pair.

Soon, Moat Cailin loomed large above them, it’s rotting wooden ramparts and stone towers impressive despite the states of ruin. Dying moss clung to the stone walls in place while thickets of reeds grew at their base.

She and Jon rode under the ruined gatehouse together and entered into the narrow, broad and muddy yard of the ancient castle. The sight made her hold her breath in shock.
Armor and arms lay scattered about the yard. Broken spears protruded from piles of old snow and thick pools of dirty water. Shredded cream-colored cloaks covered the ground like some child’s attempt at a tapestry. Swords lay discarded around the walls and shields bearing the proud moon and falcon of the Arryn’s were split in two, battered in and forgotten. And yet…

“Where are they?” Daenerys asked, even though she knew the dreadful answer.

Without saying a word, Jon climbed down from his horse and made for a pile of ruined steel. He bent and picked up an oddly shaped object.

“A breastplate,” Jorah murmured from behind her. Daenerys could see it now, too. The steel had been cut, leaving only half the enameled armor intact.

“Aye,” Jon said. “Cut clean in two.” He traced a gloved finger along the smooth line of the cut before placing the piece back on the ground. “Only one sort of weapon could make a cut like that.”

They all took the meaning of his words. *We’ll find no bodies here.* The thought sent a jolt of raw fear down her spine. *The knights of the Vale had continued south... but not of their own accord.*

A sudden movement caught her eye. Jon whirled as he drew his sword. Jorah rushed to Daenerys’ side. The other men in the yard rounded their mounts, the beasts’ hooves pounding into the mud.

A hawk landed atop a cracked crenel on the closest wall. Its feathers were smooth and grey. Its talons glinted in the pale sunlight. It regarded the riders in the yard for a moment before spreading its wings and swooping low over them. As it banked around a tower, Daenerys thought she saw its eyes flash… *white?* A pure white, like snow. *Like Bran’s.* The bird circled around the tower once more, then was gone.

Jon sheathed Longclaw and paced to her her side. “At least there’s some life left. We should make camp here tonight,” he said, eyeing the gates where the head of the column was just now entering the yard. “We’ll need to be well rested to march through the Neck.”

“Here?” Tyrion asked a bit too loudly as he guided his smaller horse toward the pair. “In this ruin?” Around them, riders and soldiers muttered in agreement. Daenerys heard the Dothraki whispering among themselves. She caught only a few words, but heard enough. *They think it’s cursed.*

“Better than the marshlands to the south,” Jon replied.

“Aye,” Jorah agreed. Tyrion opened his mouth to offer some retort, then shrugged. “I’ll have the men make one of the towers fit for you, Your Grace,” her friend continued.

“Thank you, Ser,” Daenerys said.

“I suppose I’ll stake out a claim as well,” Tyrion mused.

Jorah gave him a withering look then pointed at the largest of the towers, a moss-covered ruin listing westward toward the sinking sun. “They call it the drunkard’s tower, Lannister,” he said. “You might find it fitting.”

“If the First Men left any good reds to age, perhaps I might,” Tyrion replied with a wry smile.

“We can set you in that tower there, my queen, Jorah ignored the Hand as he continued plotting out the camp. “I’ll have the men prepare it for you. We’ll set guards around the base and archers on any stable bits of wall we can find.”
Daenerys nodded her head in agreement. *We don’t know what Cersei has or what she might send against us.* The woman had sent assassins some months earlier. Surely, she would try some other deception to weaken their army before they could reach the Riverlands.

They spent the rest of the afternoon turning the ruins into an encampment. Most of their number slept within the castle itself, but some Dothraki preferred to set their tents along the raised road instead. The remnants of the Valemen’s battle were cleared away and the tattered banner removed, though Daenerys saw more than a few of the northmen inspecting the abandoned steel and discarding their own worn swords in favor of their new prizes.

She spent some time on a sturdy section of the western wall – a part that had yet to sink into the swamplands – and watched the sun slowly descend westward. Its golden rays glinted off Drogon’s scales as he soared overhead. Rhaegal followed after his brother, his deep green color blending in with the thick canopies of the marsh.

When at last the sun set, she made her way down into the yard and to the tower Jorah had marked as hers. It was an odd sort of scene. Her Unsullied had pitched her tent within the old stone walls so that a silken canopy hung overhead while the walls themselves remained bare and cold. They had found a brazier and lit a fire that warmed the makeshift chambers.

Jon stood across the way, shorn of his padded armor, sword and other trappings of travel. His scarred chest was bare. Her eyes traced his mortal wounds, just as they always did when she saw him like this. It was a powerful reminder than all this could end at any time. *Do I need reminders?* She had almost lost him beyond the Wall, then again at Winterfell.

He turned and greeted her with a smile. “How are you?” he asked.

“Tired,” she said, stifling a yawn as she walked toward him.

“I know. We’ve not had a proper chance to rest.” He closed the distance between them and took her hands in his. *A soldier’s hands.* They were rough and calloused, but their warmth was calming. He placed a kiss on her brow, then looked down at her. “And how is…?” His eyes fell to her swollen womb.

“We are fine,” she laughed softly.

“We could stay here for a day or two,” Jon said. “Regain our strength. Let you rest.”

“I rode Drogon in battle against the dead. Is the next stretch of road more treacherous than that?”

Jon laughed too and raised one hand to scratch the back of his head. “No, I suppose it’s not.” *Other things are, though.*

She reached up and took his free hand in hers. Then, she guided it downward and pressed it against her navel. “Do you remember the day we first met?”

“Hard to forget,” Jon smiled sheepishly.

“You and Ser Davos stood before me and told me of the Night King and his army – and how you, well…” she reached up and traced the faded red scar over his heart.

“He’s gone, Daenerys.”

“He is,” she agreed. “We did it. Together. But this is not over.” Jon’s grey eyes met hers, but he did not speak. “The realm needs a king now, Jon. Not a hero-”
“Daenerys, I—"

“And not a martyr,” she finished, thinking of how he had gone to fight the Night King in that ill-fated duel. *Had it not been for Bran...* Well, she could not risk him being so foolish. It was selfish, of course. She could not ask her men to die for her if she was unwilling to fight beside them. *But we’re so close now.* Perhaps it had simply been seeing this ruined keep – the marker between north and south – that had brought these thoughts to the forefront of her mind.

Everything she had wanted – everything she had dreamed of – was almost in reach. The Iron Throne, the Red Keep, the Seven Kingdoms. All lay a few hundred leagues to the south. But it was the man in front of her and the child inside her that filled her heart with hope. *My family... I cannot lose them now.*

She carried their child – their future – with her, but she carried something else too. Fear. Not of death, not hers. *We have already faced death.* No. But his death? Or her daughter’s? Their lives were more important than her own. She would trade a thousand kingdoms and a thousand lifetimes to safeguard them.

“Promise me,” she said, voice barely a whisper.

“We have two dragons and—”

“Promise me,” she said again. “For your daughter. For your sisters. For your family. Promise me you won’t do anything...”

“Stupid?” he suggested a word with an uncertain smile.

She leaned forward and placed a kiss on his lips. Then she took his hands in hers again and looked up into his eyes. “Yes.”

“Aye,” he sighed. “I promise.”

Chapter End Notes

A short one while I get some other drafts going. This was originally a longer piece but I rewrote quite a bit, took out some stuff, and punting some more for later. But we’re moving south. Wooo boy if you guys enjoyed the northern war this next part is going to be fun.

The little conversation at the end has a bigger point to it, but it also needed to be written once. Let be said that I will avoid Jon and Daenerys conversations arguing about it being too dangerous for the other to go into battle for here on out.

Anyway, comments are always appreciated. In fact, I'd encourage you to go read some of the stuff other folks are publishing here too, especially some of the newer writers and stories. This was my first story and if I had not gotten positive feedback that made me feel like this was worthwhile, I probably would have let chapter 1 sail off into the sunset. So go on, do your duty.
The path forward was dark. Great trees grew from scum-slick pools on either side of the low road down which the army traveled. Their roots were exposed. They seemed to him ribcages – or else boney hands gripping the marsh with so many crooked fingers. Their trunks were choked with thick, brown vines and their canopies kept out the pale winter sunlight. Winter has come, thought Jaime. Everywhere but here.

They had spent five days on this road since leaving Moat Cailin. How the Andals failed to take that ruin I’ll never know. Four times he had ridden through it: twice with King Robert, once by himself, and now southward once more with this Targaryen host.

Despite the greenery, that host was the only life he had spotted on this march. No insects hummed in the marshes, nor did birds sing in the trees. There had not even been another sighting of the Valemen’s armaments. All was silent, save of course the plodding of hooves and stamp of Unsullied boots on the uneven road.

Yet, Jaime could not help the feeling he was being watched. It was a familiar sensation – the eyes on the back of his neck. I’ve spent the past half a year surrounded by those who would have killed me, were it not for the greater threat. The northern lords, Stark sisters, and common folk had all greeted him with that same icy stare. The time of their mistrust – or at least their open hostility – had passed. He had fought beside them, after all. Bonds of friendship forged in battle were not so easily shattered. Still, he could not rid himself of the sensation. It’s not that, he told himself. It’s this place.

He was no maester. Gods take me if that ever changes. But still he knew all this was so... unnatural. The greenery in the depths of the worst winter in the thousand years. Some magic clung to this place, buried as deep as the roots of these trees, clinging to the land like the vines. He suppressed the familiar urge to spur his horse onward and be well rid of it all far sooner.

He rode on in sullen silence for most of the afternoon. His brother with chatted Podrick, his old squire, a few paces ahead of him. Jon and Daenerys rode some distance ahead of them. Behind him, the boy Gendry and Arya Stark had fallen in together. And behind them? Some thousands of Unsullied, northmen, odd easterners and Dothraki followed their queen.

That night they camped on the road itself, though a few brave souls ventured off the paths to stake their tents on what might have been good ground. Jaime peered into the darkness of the Neck, unable to shake that peculiar feeling.

Then, something drew his attention away. He heard it at first, a faint wing beat. One of the dragons? No, too soft. He turned his head westward and saw a flash of grey in the gloom. A heart’s beat later, a large grey hawk landed on a thick branch hanging overhead. It leered down at him.

“Ah, how curious,” a voice said from beside him. The suddenness of the interruption almost made Jaime jump out of his armor. He turned to see a bald head protruding from thick, fur-lined robes.

“Varys,” Jaime greeted his most unwelcomed companion.

“Did you see, just there, that hawk?” Varys said as though one of Daenerys’ dragons had perched
“As a matter of fact, I did,” Jaime replied, his tone cooling the air around them. “I lost a hand, not an eye.”

Varys hummed pensively. “Lost parts are such a tragedy. Even so, we must carry on.”

Jaime ignored him and looked back up at the hawk. It regarded him with a cocked head before flying off into the night. “Tell me, was that one your little birds?”

Varys laughed politely. “Oh no. I’ve not had word from my little birds in the south for some months now – not since your lord brother’s commandeering of the ravens.”

“And what exactly did he do with them?” Jaime asked. He was genuinely curious. For every brilliant idea Tyrion had, he had one equally as foolish. It had been that way since they were children.

Varys feigned a frown. “I fear I know little of the matter. Perhaps you might ask him?”

“Perhaps I will,” Jaime said stiffly, hoping his tone would encourage the eunuch to follow the hawk into the Neck. Varys stayed by his side.

“Of course, the last reports I received from the south were quite, well, gruesome,” Varys continued. “Your royal sister had set the Golden Company to terrorizing rebellious fiefs while the Iron Fleet ravaged Dorne and the coasts of the Reach.”

“So Tyrion told me,” Jaime said. “But that was months ago.”

“It was. And just think of the horrors she has unleashed on her own people in those months… if she’s still living,” Varys said.

If… “She’s alive.” He was not sure how he knew it, but he did. For all her faults, Cersei was proud. She would not have yielded the capital, even to dead men. Or would she have? The last words they had spoken to each other had been in anger. She had professed her fear at seeing a single wight and her own desire to flee with the child growing inside her. Perhaps the only honest words she’s ever spoken. Perhaps not.

“Oh, I don’t doubt that,” Varys said. “Even a million dead men would have trouble taking King’s Landing.”

Jaime sighed, his breath still misting in the cool evening air. “You think they made it that far?”

Varys answered with a noncommittal shrug. “Difficult to say, my lord. I’m no battle commander… but if the dead made for White Harbor’s one hundred thousand, surely they’d do the same in the south?” Jaime felt his heart plummets to his navel. “It is as I said,” Varys continued, seemingly reading the look on his weathered face. “The capital’s walls are strong. Without the dragon, the dead could not have breached the gates.”

Jaime’s thoughts raced far ahead of him, southward along the muddy road, through the Riverlands and to the capital itself. He could see the towers of the Red Keep rising in the distance… and the pillars of black smoke snaking upwards from the burning ruins of the great sept. “Will we?” He had not meant to ask that question aloud.

“We?” Varys whispered conspiratorially.
“We,” Jaime stated. “Or have you forgotten I rode north to fight alongside you?”

“Forgive me, my lord, I have not. Though I might note you arrived without the promised reinforcements.” He held up a single finger before Jaime could respond. “Yet surely you understand this host moves south to seize your sister’s throne?”

“I’d got that impression, yes,” Jaime replied. The implication went unsaid, but only for a moment.

“The realm cannot have two queens, I fear.” It had five kings, once. “Nor can it have two heirs.”

It took a moment for the gravity of Varys’ words to hit him. He knows… How? He turned slowly to face the spymaster, careful to keep his annoyance from turning to outright anger.

“Tyrion put you up to this?”

“Your brother’s concerns are mine as well,” Varys said.

Jaime turned away again, his anger rising in his chest. Varys had always annoyed him, slipping in and out of the shadows of the Red Keep, that knowing look painted on his powdered face. This interrogation after a day’s ride was unwelcome. His anger got the better of him just now.

“How deep do you think these pools are?” he asked.

“My lord?”

“I mean, if I were to throw you into the swamp, would you sink? Or simply get stuck in the mud?” he ceased his efforts to hide the malice in his tone. Varys remained silent. “Or perhaps some poisonous beast would find you.”

“Poison, hmm,” Varys hummed. “A terrible way to die, though perhaps you know its effects better than I.” With that, the spymaster turned and walked away into the night.

Poison… He knew what Varys had meant. His parting words echoed in his thoughts, but it was not the Spider’s voice he heard in the deepening darkness. Tell Cersei, I want her to know it was me.

Jaime clenched his fist. He had watched his firstborn die by Olenna’s poison. Joffrey had clawed at his throat, his red eyes finding his father’s, then his mother’s before staring lifeless into the mocking blue sky. And Myrcella… Sweet, innocent Myrcella had been poisoned by those damned Dornish snakes.

He had not even gotten to see Tommen. Cersei had burnt their youngest’s body before he had returned from Riverrun. And now she’s with child. Perhaps she’s even birthed the baby be now. How long has it been? Days and weeks had melded together in the cold and dark of the North. Long enough, he decided.

My child… His son or daughter, one he would not have to lie to remain distant from. I can be a father, a true father. He might hold his infant child in his arms, mayhaps teach it to ride and spar and even read. The thought was almost too good to be true.

Then a cold wave of dread washed over him as he considered Varys’ words and the truth of it all. Daenerys and Jon were marching south to take King’s Landing. Cersei will never give up the capital. He would need to make her see reason.

That seemed one impossible task among many, now. Soon enough they would face his countrymen in the field. And they will face two dragons. Guilt clutched at him, its icy fingers constricting
around his heart. He remembered the screams of his soldiers as Drogon’s fiery breath consumed them. He could still taste the hot ash in his mouth. *I cannot condemn those men to that fate.*

He had sworn his sword to Daenerys and Jon. *But for a war that is already won.* Now he would march against his men? His family? His child? No. He could not let that happen.

…

As fate would have it, he found himself riding beside Jon and Daenerys the next day. Jon had approached him as they broke camp early in the morning. It was some odd tradition of his, asking the high born and low to accompany the king and queen for a day’s ride. The scenes were always odd – like that thin armed Unsullied lieutenant who had to learn to sit a horse on the march.

Yet the host itself was grand, even in the dreary light of the marshlands. Proud Targaryen banners flew from sturdy poles, dipping every so often to avoid low-hanging branches and brambles. Guards marched in lockstep around the royal pair and their chosen guest, the sounds of their marching muffled by the damp, muddy ground.

Jaime looked to his left where Daenerys sat atop her horse, her condition was beginning to show even through her fur-lined riding dress. His thoughts from the night before returned to him in a welcome rush of bitterness. It was so simple for some. *Victory and safety are the same thing for her, for both of them,* he thought as he cast an eye to where Jon rode beside the queen.

He failed to hide the emotions from his face, for Daenerys turned to him and frowned slightly upon seeing his lips turned downward in a troubled frown.

“Is some amiss, Ser?” she asked.

“Ah, no. Not all Your Grace,” he replied. “This air disagrees with me, that’s all.”

She nodded in agreement. “I’d read about the Neck, but I never thought it’d be so… vast.” *No wonder the Andals never conquered the North. Perhaps they saw this muck and simply turned back to Highgarden and the Vale.*

“House Reed’s holdings are vast,” Jaime said. The queen laughed politely.

He wondered why the crannogmen had not marched north to answer their liege lord’s call for aid, but he dare not give voice to his questions. It was best to avoid discussions of warfare and politics just now.

The question of what would happen to him – to all of them – had stalked him all along this march. It rode beside him now, a fourth horseman on this narrow, raised path. Part of him wanted to drive his heels into his horse and spur it forward, away from this Targaryen host and toward home. Another part wanted to wheel his mount around and ride back the other way.

He felt like a prisoner. Trapped between his past oaths and future decisions, between the family that had been and the one that might yet be. It was too much just now, to wrestle with his thoughts and make polite conversation with the other two. He feigned discomfort and began to fiddle with his golden hand.

Daenerys glanced at the gilded steel. “Is it troubling you?”

“A bit,” he hissed in mock pain. “Begging your pardon, Your Grace, but I might take a moment.” He raised his right arm as he spoke, hoping she would accept the excuse.
“Of course,” she smiled kindly. “I could send for a healer?”

“No, thank you,” Jaime said. With a nod, Daenerys guided her mount onward while he fell behind. A line of Unsullied marched past him on the road, then a group of fur-clad northmen. Varys rode by, then Tyrion with Podrick at his side. Both waved but neither stopped. That suited him just fine. He let another group of soldiers pass before rejoining the march.

Yet even as he guided his horse back onto the raised road, the column shuddered to a halt. Jaime looked peered into the hazy air before him, through the lifeless banners and forest of spearheads to where road sloped downward and flattened out. The track was pockmarked with deep puddles and covered in old leaves and gnarled roots. The trees gave way to thin underbrush and beyond that… a village.

A dozen small, squat houses had been raised up above the marsh on thick wooden poles. A few small boats floated nearby, their prows tethered to the houses. Yet no smoke rose from the packed clay chimneys, nor were there any other signs of life.

He spurred his horse forward along the side of the road, clumps of mud flinging up behind him as he made for the front of the column where others were beginning to gather. The details of the village were clearer now. *Trampled reeds and broken walls and churned mud. And no corpses.*

Jaime swallowed hard. It was just like Moat Cailin. *The dead passed this way too.* Would the entire march be this way? Abandoned hovels and holdfasts with no bodies in sight? *And when we find the dead? What then?* Surely the wights in the south had perished with their king…

He imagined a mountain of bodies piled against the gates of the Red Keep as and the rest of the column resumed their sluggish pace. He became so lost in his own thoughts that at first he did not see the lone figure emerge from the closest house.

Others had. The rasp of steel on leather echoed through the clearing as hundreds of men drew their swords. The Unsullied raised their shields in unison. The northmen pointed toward the figure as it stepped into the dim light. It was not armed or armored, nor were its eyes blue. It was thin, small, and staggering forward. *A child,* Jaime realized with a pang of pity.

Time seemed to slow as the child stumbled forward from the hut. The men around him lowered their weapons and began to whisper. The shadowy outline of the child wavered as it walked… and then fell forward off the raised platform into a muck-covered pool below with a faint *plop.* Jaime leapt down from his horse and ran forward even as a dozen others did likewise.

Yet it was the queen who, despite her condition, arrived first. She paid no mind to the others as she rushed forward, wading into the mud and muck and pulling the child to the safety of the raised path. Jon and Jorah rushed to her aid.

Jaime looked on from a few paces away. Daeneries cradled the child, a girl no older that seven, in her arms. She looked around frantically. “Water,” she called out. “Get me water.” Jorah handed her his own water skin and she held it to the child’s blue, trembling lips. He saw pale, gaunt hands reach up to grasp the crinkled skin.

“Fetch wood for a fire. Food and furs, too,” Jon turned and issued the command. “And find a healer.”

“Aye, Your Grace,” two Stark bannerman hurried away. Jaime watched them go.

“Ser Jorah, have the men set up camp. I’ll gather a party and search for other survivors,” Jon
continued. Jaime glanced around the dead village once again, knowing better. *They would have come out by now.*

Yet as he watched the men disperse in a dozen directions, he saw one sign of life. A grey hawk sitting opposite the clearing… its eyes fixed not on him, but the silver-haired women kneeling in the mud a few paces away.

Chapter End Notes

I wasted a bit of time deciding what I wanted to do in some not strictly necessary but interesting parts of the story going forward. This chapter was supposed to be like 7,000 words, but much of that has been re-assigned.

Also the first Jaime chapter in a while. Not particularly exciting, but hell maybe it's important to figure out where he stands before moving forward. Speaking of, we're moving things along and I'm getting a clearer and more detailed road map going forward.

And it's Alabama v. Clemson take 4! I'm definitely feeling a terrible sickness coming in around midday January 7th... Will certainly need to stay out of the office.
He rolled onto his back, letting the peaceful bliss of the moment consume him entirely. His breathing calmed and steadied, as did his wife’s. He could feel her warmth beside him – a welcome sensation amidst the cold air of the command tent.

Jon had been hesitant this time, just as he had every time before. Not for fear of getting his wife with child, of course. Those fears had been burned away. He had no bastard blood, even though he had kept a bastard’s name.

No, it was precisely because Daenerys was with child that he silently scolded himself even as he fumbled with the laces on her clothing. He was not about to ask Sam whether it was healthy, but Daenerys assured him it was. *She’s more eager now than ever before,* he reflected. *Perhaps that’s what they mean by Blood of the Dragon.* He had it too, but perhaps his wife’s ran a bit hotter than his own.

After a moment, he turned on his side and looked at her. Her cheeks and neck were still flushed with pleasure. Her chest rose and fell and rose again. She looked at him with those beautiful violet eyes and sighed – a sound that was half a pleasant laugh in truth.

“That was…” she placed her head on the pillow as she struggled to find the right words. What she could not express in speech she did with simple gestures. She drew herself closer to him – as much as her swollen belly would allow – and placed a hand on his chest, her fingers idly tracing the scars.

“You like doing that, don’t you?” he laughed softly, shivering slightly at her touch. Daenerys hummed in agreement as she continued her idle work. Then, she jumped slightly and her eyes widened. Her hand flew down to her womb as a soft gasp escaped her lips.

Jon sat up. “Are you all right?”

She laughed, a light and happy sound that seemed to fill the tent. “Here,” she said, taking his hand and guiding it to her bare skin. It was hot to the touch. Jon raised an eyebrow and met his wife’s intent gaze.

He felt it then, a slight sensation but an unmistakable one. He looked down at his hand then back to Daenerys. “Was that…?”

“Yes.” She smiled. Her eyes were alight with happiness. “That was your daughter.”

“Yes.” She smiled. Her eyes were alight with happiness. “That was your daughter.”

“Does it hurt?” The words escaped his lips before he could even rein in the thought. He winced. *Are you a man or foolish boy?*

Daenerys’ laughter grew in volume and mirth. “No,” she struggled to even say the word. She sat back and steadied herself over the course of a few deep breaths. “It does not hurt, Jon. And even if it did, it would be a small burden to bring our child into the world.”

*Our child.* Every mention of the babe – every moment like this with his wife – felt like a dream. So much so that he half-expected to open his eyes and find himself asleep in a cold, uncomfortable bunk in Castle Black, Ser Alliser staring down at him menacingly.
But no, that is the dream now. They are gone. All of them. Dreams and dust. Wind and words and memory. It was his old life, one visited only in dreams and stories told with friends. This, here with her, was his true purpose.

He glanced down at where he had felt the child’s movements. “It’s a girl?” He had asked the question a dozen times and the answer was always the same. It always brought a smile to his face.

“She is,” Daenerys replied.

“And have you thought of a name?” His own doubts assailed him at once. Perhaps it is too soon. To give the child a name meant more than either knew. It meant they expected to survive this war and emerge victorious. And nothing is certain...

“Rhaella, I thought, for my mother. Or Lyanna for yours,” she looked with such a genuine, loving expression that his doubts melted away like snowpack in spring.

Lyanna... He had thought of his mother as much as he had his father ever since Bran and Sam had told him the truth of his blood and parentage. He had learned of Rhaegar through songs and stories even as a boy. But of his mother he knew next to nothing, for neither Eddard nor Uncle Benjen had ever spoken of her. Nor can I ask Bran to gaze into the past, even if I were to return to Winterfell.

What history had forgotten Jon created for himself. He imagined a woman – not much older than Daenerys – with dark hair and grey eyes like his or Arya’s. And she was like Arya in other ways too, full of life and laughter. Wild, father sometime said. Perhaps his daughter would be the same.

“Rhaella is a good name. Though, Lyanna is too. Perhaps we’ll have to make another daughter,” he smiled as he spoke.

Daenerys gasped and feigned offense, but drew herself closer. “Perhaps we will,” she whispered.

He wrapped his arms around her and held her close. Her skin was soft and warm against his own. Her hair smelled sweet even after days in the saddle. They lay there for a while, each wrapped in the other’s embrace.

There were the moments he cherished most – the ones that seemed the most dreamlike. As a boy, he had harbored fantasies of being a legendary knight or battle commander or even a Targaryen prince. Those fantasies had been realized in one way or another, but they were nothing compared to the quiet, blissful moments beside his wife.

He muttered a curse under his breath as horns sounded outside, muffled as they were by the tent fabric and the odd weight of the swamp air. If only these moments were more than that. There was still a war to fight... and after that a realm to rule, people to feed, and seven kingdoms to rebuild.

Daenerys sighed and rose from the bed just as he did. They dressed quickly enough, each helping the other as they had nearly every morning. Save for her hair, of course. He had never harbored fantasies of becoming a queen’s handmaiden, nor did he think his wife would trust him with that particular task. Besides, he enjoyed the way her silver locks fell around her face even if she preferred the tight riding braids her Dothraki favored.

Jon paced once around the tent before stopping beside the command table. He straightened out the maps and adjusted the wooden figurines to their proper positions. Little horses, dire wolves and dragons formed a thin line through the faded grey area labeled “The Neck”.

“We’ll reach the Riverlands soon,” Daenerys said as she joined him beside the table, looking down at the largest map.
“By this evening, I’d guess,” Jon replied, though he had never ridden this way before.

“It will be good for the men to have a proper camp,” Daenerys said. “And room for the horses to graze.”

“Aye,” Jon agreed. The march through the northern swamps had not been as difficult as he had thought. No one had contested their approach and the air had been cool and made warmer still by the lack of biting winds.

Yet the Riverlands held the promise of war, too. Cersei’s forces would most assuredly be massing against them somewhere to the south. If they’re alive. Soon enough, battle would be joined.

He had played over the war to come a thousand times in his thoughts. How best to deploy the men and what ground would give them the advantage against the seasoned sellswords of the Golden Company. And the dragons…

He picked up one of the carved wooden dragons as he considered the horrid truth: if they were to secure a future for their family and their people, more living men must burn. Better sellswords that sworn swords, he thought grimly. Still, the notion made him uneasy. He could still remember the screams of the doomed innocents at White Harbor…

“Young Grace,” voice came from outside the tent.

“Enter, Ser,” Daenerys called out. Jorah entered, already armed and armored for the day’s ride. He nodded at Jon, but his eyes lingered on the queen.

“We should break camp soon. The sooner we reach the open air, the better.”

“Very well,” Daenerys replied, her eyes still fixed on the map. “How long until we leave the swamps?”

Jorah shrugged. “Half a day’s ride, perhaps less.”

“Good. Summon the others. I think it best to meet before we rush southward.”

“At once, Your Grace,” Jorah gave a short bow and turned to leave.

“Wait,” Daenerys called out. Both Jorah and Jon turned to look at her. “The child, the girl from that village, how is she?”

The old knight’s face fell. He drew in a deep breath before responding. “Not well, my queen. She’s weak – too weak to even speak her own name.”

“Ensure she grows no weaker,” Daenerys responded. Jorah nodded and swept from the tent.

“We’ll be able to better care for her once we’re out of the marshes,” Jon tried to offer some comfort.

“Perhaps,” Daenerys sighed.

He did not need to hear her tone to tell she was troubled. She always was, somehow. Troubles stalked them both, hiding in the shadows or else circling above like carrion crows. Perhaps this is what it means to be a king, he thought grimly. Finding those moments amidst all the rest.

His wife seemed to be thinking the same. “I thought it would be different.”
“What do you mean?” he asked.

“With the White Walkers gone. With winter gone.”

He thought he knew what she meant – or at least what she expected. Daenerys might have birthed dragons, sacked slaver cities and won over a horde of Dothraki, but she had never seen true winter before sailing to Westeros. And I traveled beyond the Wall for months on end.

“Winter is still here,” he reminded her. “And we’ll see our people through it.”

She looked up at him and smiled – a sad smile, but tinged with hints of amusement. “I admire your confidence.”

“Stubbornness, you called it once,” he smiled back. That got her to laugh, if only for a moment.

“I call it that still, Jon Snow,” she said, raising herself up on her toes to plant a quick kiss on his lips. He reached around and held her firm, deepening the kiss.

They broke apart at the sound of footsteps – many of them. Both assumed their royal bearings as friends and advisors entered the tent.

Tyrion, Varys, Jorah, Missandei, Davos, Brienne, and Jaime entered and took up places around the table.

“Well,” Tyrion began when no one else offered a word. “I suppose we’ll be out of this swamp by midday if the roads stay dry.”

“And if not?” Daenerys asked.

“Later than midday?” Tyrion shrugged. “Whenever we reach the Riverlands, one thing is certain: we’ll be in my sister’s country. There’s no telling where the Golden Company is at the moment. We should send scouts. The Dothraki are the best riders.”

“The Dothraki don’t know this land,” Davos said.

“Nor do we,” Tyrion replied. “Hence the scouts.” Davos shot him a queer look.

“Pardon, Your Grace, but is it wise to send Dothraki into the Riverlands unaccompanied? If the smallfolk see foreign warriors riding down the kingsroad—”

“Then no doubt they will rejoice to something living marching southward,” Tyrion said.

“Forty riders will do,” Daenerys said, her fatigue with the matter evident to all assembled. “Make sure they’re well provisioned.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” Tyrion replied.

“We’ll need ravens too,” Davos said, an edge to his voice. “Seeing as the birds from Winterfell were all sent away.” He eyed Tyrion. Jon did too.

“Yes…” Daenerys narrowed her gaze as she looked at her Hand. “And why was that again?”

“Letting the realm know of the threat that was assuredly coming toward them,” Tyrion replied without missing a step. “Surely you wouldn’t call that folly?”

“I suppose not,” Daenerys replied and looked around the table. Tyrion met her gaze. Varys
coughed into his sleeve.

“Ravens,” Davos began again. “We need to rally the lords of Westeros against Cersei.”

“And which lords would we summon?” Jon asked the council. “We’ve no knowledge of how far south the dead marched nor which houses have pledged their swords to the Iron Throne.”

“Dorne seems a wise choice,” Varys said. “As does the Reach. Both fought fiercely for your own father, my queen,” he inclined his head toward Daenerys but cast a glance toward Jon. *Does he…? Perhaps….* They had taken care not to speak too openly of his true parentage, yet if Varys was all the others said he was, then Jon felt he might know what he should not.

“Forgive me,” Missandei began hesitantly. “But has the other queen not slain the rulers of Dorne and the Reach?”

“Houses Tyrell and Martell,” Varys said.

“Others will claim their lordships and lands,” Jaime said.

“And those with a queen’s support will have the stronger claim,” Tyrion continued after his brother. “We’ll send word to Sunspear and Highgarden, Yronwood and Kingsgrave, Oldtown and Ashford. Perhaps even your friend Samwell could bring Horn Hill into the fold.”

“And which queen’s support will give that strong claim?” Davos asked with a raised eyebrow.

“The one that wins the battle to come,” Jaime answered the question. The tent fell silent for a moment. Jon looked to Daenerys. The pair came to a silent understanding.

“Then we best ride for good ground before that battle is joined,” Jon said. “Ser Davos, might you join the queen and I at the head of the column?”

“I’d be honored, Your Grace,” the older man said. Jon smiled. It would be an easy ride with Davos and Daenerys at his side, regardless of what lay ahead of them.

“Good,” Daenerys finished. “Send the scouts ahead of us and prepare to march.” The others around the table all bowed slightly and filed out of the tent. Only, one figure lingered just inside the tent flap, the faint rays of the morning sun glinting off his golden hand.

“Ser Jaime?” Daenerys looked up at him.

“Your Grace,” he inclined his head. “I… might I have a word with Jon?” *What does he want to talk about?* Jon could think of a dozen different things, but none seemed to fit just now.

“With Jon?” Daenerys repeated his request.

“Eh, yes,” Jaime grimaced. “Man to man, if you will.”

He did not even need to look at Daenerys. “You can speak to us together,” Jon replied.

“Very well,” Jaime grimaced as he turned away from the entrance. “Together, then.”

Jon took a step closer to his wife as Jaime Lannister resumed his spot at the command table. *He’s a good man,* Jon thought. *He did not have to ride north to aid us.* Yet now Jon sensed something was amiss.

“Perhaps it’s better that you remain here too, Your Grace,” he nodded at Daenerys, though his eyes
fell upon the carved wooden dragons on the map below. “You’ll recall we met beside the Blackwater Rush some time ago.”


“My family’s men were little more than kindling for your dragon. They won’t fair any better this time. Nor will my sister’s sellswords. Gold melts as easily as flesh in dragon flame,” he said. Jon heard a hint of bitterness in his voice.

And here he is, speaking with the only two people who’ve both fought and ridden dragons. Jon had faced Viserion in the skies atop Rhaegal and watched the fallen dragon incinerate their forces on the ground and upon the walls of Winterfell. It was a terrible thing that they had to consider – that they had to do. But is there another way?

“I understand your position,” Daenerys replied, keeping her tone cool and even. “But you cannot ask me to sacrifice my men’s lives for the benefit of my enemies. This is war, Ser.”

“I’m not asking for that,” he sighed. “Not in full, anyway. Burn every damned sellsword and Greyjoy ship you like.”

“Then what?” Daenerys asked.

“She’s…” he looked away. “She’s with child. My child”

“Cersei? With child?” Daenerys asked again. She looked toward Jon, seeking some assurance he could not give her.

“Yes,” Jaime sighed. “She told me just after the battle.”

“After the battle? Then she’ll be…”

“Close, aye,” Jon finished his wife’s thought.

“Aye, she will be,” Jaime agreed. The child might have already been born.

This complicated matters. He did not want to strike down an expecting mother or a new one, even if it was the queen who had lied and abandoned their cause – who had caused so much destruction and despair in a world already torn apart by war and winter. He could see Daenerys was thinking the same, though her violet eyes successfully hid whatever she was feeling. She did not respond immediately. Instead, she looked away, then to Jon. “I’m – we’re not marching south to slay your sister, Ser,” she finally replied. “We’re going to help the people of the Seven Kingdoms, lord and newborn babe alike. If Cersei surrenders without bloodshed, she has nothing to fear.”

“Perhaps,” Jaime grimaced. “You both met her once. Cersei’s not the forgiving type. Nor will she surrender the throne.”

“My family’s throne.” Jon could sense his wife’s rising frustration. Yet he could also sense her doubt; her misgivings. He could hear it in her voice. She was with child, too. Could she truly condemn another mother to death? Could she slay or orphan some innocent babe even if its mother had betrayed them?

“Someone’s throne by the end of all this,” Jaime said. “But as I have said, I have little doubt you’ll win it back for House Targaryen. I’m asking for a measure of restraint.”

“Restraint?” her tone was harsher now. The warmer southern air was beginning to open the old
wounds the northern winter had frozen. “Did you sister show restraint when she sent assassins to kill me and my child?”

“You'll recall I helped see to those men-

“-Did your father show restraint when he ordered the slaughter of my brother’s children and his wife? When Lannister men slaughtered half the city and burned the other half?”

“No more than your father showed when he gave the command to burn all of it,” Jaime replied coolly.

“What do you mean?” Daenerys pressed him. The cryptic comment had succeeded in stalling her assault.

Jaime looked away. “No doubt you’ve heard of wildfire?”

“What your sister used to destroy the sept?” Jon asked.

“The very same substance,” he replied. “Of course, Cersei did not put it there. She only found it. That cache had been laid there decades earlier by King Aerys, the Second of His Name.”

“I don’t-”

“-he laid it all over the city. Under taverns and septs, brothels and barracks. He even placed a cache under the Red Keep itself. Not all of it stayed there, of course. He burned Rickard and Brandon Stark with the stuff, if I recall. Still, when the end was near he gave the command to his pyromancer. The command to burn them all.”

“My father was an evil man,” Daenerys said. Neither she nor Jon knew what to make of this information. Was it even true? And if it was, did Cersei possess even more of the substance?

“As was mine, in some ways. But why talk of our fathers? Hmm? Their crimes can rest with them in the dirt. It’s just us now. The three of us and our children after us, provided we don't tear each other to pieces. I ask you for restraint, Your Grace. If you’re not your father, no doubt you’ll understand the meaning of the word.”

“Neither of us can offer you promises before battle,” Jon said.

“I’m not asking for promises when it comes to battle. Gods old and new, I’ll fight with you against these sellswords and the Greyjoy cunts. All I ask is mercy when the time come, for my men and for my unborn child.”

Jon looked at Daenerys and she at him. It was an easy, unspoken decision.

“Very well,” his wife said in a measured tone. “No doubt we’ll treat with your sister’s armies soon enough. I leave it to you to convince the Lannister bannermen to consider their position and lay down their arms, but I will not trade my people’s lives for my enemies’.”

Jaime nodded, seeming to understand the offer. “And the child?”

“We’ll do what we can,” Jon added.

Jaime looked surprised. “Thank you, Your Grace.” He gave a slight bow and turned to leave the tent. The flap fluttered closed behind him.

“Is that true?” she asked in a voice barely above a whisper.
“Why would he lie?”

“For the same reasons Cersei did, I expect,” she said. Then she winced and her hand flew to her navel. Jon took a step toward her, reaching out to offer support as she leaned against the table. She waived him away. “I’m fine.”

“Are you?” he asked, truly meaning it. “For a moment there, you sounded as if you were meeting me for the first time.” Daenerys almost cracked a smile.

“He’s asking the impossible. How can I ask my men to hold back against an army and a queen that would see them all dead? Shall we command Drogon and Rhaegal to burn the horses but spare the riders?”

“I don’t know,” Jon said solemnly. And yet we’ve just said we’ll do what we can.

“Nor do I.”

…

Marshland slowly gave way to low, rolling hills as they traveled south that day. Gone were the gnarled trees and choking vines and thick, windless air. By mid-afternoon, the Riverlands lay before them, ruined by years of war and famine. And now winter and worse.

No smoke rose up from where villages or holdfasts might be. There’s no life here, Jon knew. Others had sense it too.

Onward they rode, passing burned out ruins and abandoned camps. Here and there golden lion banners and iron-tipped spears had been cast aside, but still there were no signs of any battle – and no bodies to be found.

The column wound its way down a long slope into a small valley with a frozen stream at its nadir. Even here, no birds sang. The only living things in the sky were Drogon and Rhaegal, circling lazily high above the army. Jon looked up at the green dragon, wishing for a moment he could see the whole countryside from dragon back.

They stopped to rest and water the horses for an hour or so before continuing, keeping a steady pace up the other side of the valley. It was slow going, for where the ground was not frozen hard it was mucked and muddied. Years of neglect had left the kingsroad little more than a track in these parts. Still, they marched onward and crosswise up the hill – Jon and Daenerys leading the column as they so often did.

When at last they crested the far side of the valley, Jon held his breath and reached at once for Longclaw. The way was blocked.

His eyes took in the ranks of men first – some hundreds arrayed across the road. They looked downtrodden and weak, but not weary. They stood armored in leather and some bits of old mail, wielding clubs and maces, spears and bows and other armaments carved of wood.

Shouts rang out behind him – Dothraki stirring their brothers for battle and the Unsullied preparing to form up. He held up a hand to signal a halt to such activities. These men were not enemies. The black lizard-lions on the dozen fluttering grey-green banners told him as much.

With an assuring nod toward Daenerys, he spurred his mount forward toward the men’s formation. As they approached, the ranks broke apart to reveal a small man with a narrow frame. His hair was grey and his face wrinkled and weathered. He wore faded green leather the color of moss and
clutched a three-pronged spear in his hand, those he handed it to another soldier as he paced forward out of the crowd.

“Jon,” he said as if recognizing an old friend. “Jon Snow.”

“And you are, Ser?” Daenerys assumed her regal mask and tone, sitting up her saddle as she asked the question.

“This is Lord Howland Reed,” Jon answered at once, guiding his horse a bit closer. Daenerys drew up beside him. It has to be. Who else could march with three hundred men carrying Reed banners? Branch had told him of his travels beyond the Wall with the two Reed children – and House Reed had always been fiercely loyal to the Starks of Winterfell. He’s a friend now, Jon knew.

“This is,” the man agreed. “I thought to lay my own eyes on you again.”

…What? Jon furrowed his brow in confusion, but did not respond. It was often said the Reeds and crannogmen of the Neck were peculiar folk. Still, this was an odd greeting. With three hundred men and outside his own lands.

“Have you met this man before?” Daenerys whispered. He shook his head.

“He would not remember it,” Lord Reed overheard and answered the queen’s question.

Both Jon and Daenerys dismounted so as to great this newcomer on equal footing. Around them, the crannogmen and Unsullied drew up an uneven circle – each group eyeing the other warily.

“Perhaps not,” Jon said diplomatically. “Though you knew my father, no?”

“In a way,” Lord Reed responded. “That is why I have come.”

“Lord Eddard always spoke highly of you,” Jon said. Of course, that was half a lie itself. Eddard Stark had spoken little of Robert’s Rebellion. And I now know why. He recalled what Bran had told him. He must have been with Eddard when I was born.

“And I of him,” Lord Reed smiled back. “But it’s not for his sake that I’ve rallied the men of the Neck to join you.” As he spoke, he looked upward to where the dragons circled overhead. Both were closer than before, perhaps sensing their mother was in some peril.

“You’ve come to aid us?” Daenerys asked.

Her question hung in the air. They could ill afford to refuse three hundred fighters, but why now? Why not months ago when the North was under attack?

“That and more,” Lord Reed said. “But I think it best to speak in private, Queen Daenerys.”

“We can speak here and now,” Daenerys replied. “If you know who we are, why wait until we left the Neck to join us? Why forsake your oaths to the North when the dead marched on Winterfell?”

“I’ve sworn more than one oath, my queen. As for the dead…” he looked around at his men. “By the time we knew of the Wall and the dragon, we would have only bolstered their ranks if we had tried to march northward. Worse, we would have left the North unguarded. It was King Robb who bade me keep watch on these lands.”

If he stayed here, then perhaps he’ll have some answers. “The dead passed this way,” Jon cut to the point that had been simmering in his own thoughts.
“They did, just after those Arryn men rode into our lands,” Lord Reed agreed. “My people fled and hid in the marshes. Traps and poisons do little against dead men.”

“Do you know how far they got?”

Jon’s heart sank as the old lord shook his head. “South of here, I fear.”

“So, you hid while they marched past. Why come forward now?” Daenerys resumed her own quest for answers.

“Forgive me, my queen. I know you sacrificed much in this fight, but any man or beast will fight when its life is threatened. I fought with the Starks when their lives were threatened. Fought against your father. I had to be certain.”

Of what? Jon wondered. Yet as he thought on it, he discovered he already knew, for he had sought those same certainties on Dragonstone not so long ago. Certain she was a queen worth serving. Certain she had a good head and a kind heart…

He opened his mouth to assure Lord Reed that the queen – his queen – was good and kind and selfless, but she commanded his attention.

“And you’ve gained that certainty?” Daenerys asked with a skeptical edge to her voice.

“I have,” he said. A screech rent the air, but not a dragon’s mighty roar. A flash of grey streaked low across the sky. Jon looked up to see a grey hawk circle low overhead then sweep downward, drawing itself up and perching on an unarmed man’s outstretched arm. Its eyes flashed white – like Bran’s. “For I have watched you.”

Daenerys drew in a shocked breath and looked at Jon. They both knew what that meant.

“And what did you see?” she asked, the slightest hint of nervousness creeping into her voice.

“A queen that cares for her people, that sees them sheltered and clothed and fed. A queen that would wade into the marshes to hold a sick and dying child,” Lord Reed said. “Some might call you conqueror, but I saw more than that.” He motioned to his house’s banners. “My men are yours to command.”

“And you?” Daenerys let the question stand.

“I fear I’d be of little use in foraging or battle, my queen. But I’ve come with another weapon to offer you: the truth.”

Jon’s heartbeat quickened. The truth. The word awoke memories of Bran’s revelation months ago. He knows. He was with my father – Lord Eddard. He says he’s seen me before. Jon locked eyes with Daenerys, she seemed to have reached that conclusion as well. Not here.

“Best to speak in private,” Jon replied. He looked at Daenerys, whose violet eyes and pursed lips bespoke thinly veiled concern, curiosity and amusement. If he had held a piece of mirrored glass just now, he had little doubt he would see the same look upon his own face.

Lord Reed bowed his head in agreement. “In private, then.”

The king, queen and Lord of the Neck walked together away from the gathered soldiers, up along a narrow ridge to a higher hill the overlooked the low valley and fields to the south. The wind blew harder up here, making Jon squint and pulling Daenerys’ braid to and fro. Lord Reed did not seem to mind.
As they walked, he and Daenerys shared a few knowing glances. There was a sort of growing yet glorious tension in the air. What sort of secret could Howland Reed tell Jon that would further shatter his own history? Nothing, save what I already know.

“So,” Daenerys began. “What is this truth you would tell my husband and I?”

“Husband?” Lord Reed’s deep green eyes opened wide and flitted between Jon and Daenerys. “Ah, married then, well…”

“Lord Reed,” Jon cut him off. The thin man looked up at him with a raised eyebrow. “We know.” Beside him, Daenerys smiled.

“Do you?” he croaked.


His lips parted in a grin, revealing crooked and stained teeth. Then he laughed – an odd sound not unlike a bullfrog’s croaking on some hot summer evening. “The boy told you, didn’t he? Your brother saw it. My daughter said he could.”

“He did,” Jon said.

“Then why this walk, hmm? Why this secrecy? If you say you know what your father-”

“-it was my choice,” Jon cut him off. It had been practical in the North, wise even. Yet even now he found himself questioning it. He called himself Snow and thought himself a Stark, but what did that matter now? Would the southern lords ride to the aid of ‘Aegon’? Or would they scoff and name him a pretender?

“We said our vows as Targaryen and Stark,” Daenerys added.

“I see,” Lord Reed said. “I thought that you should know, my king. But if you already know the truth of it – who your father was and who you family is – I suppose I’ve ridden here for naught.”

“You’ve ridden here with three hundred men,” Jon said.

“I have,” he agreed. “Men to guide you and hunt with you. Men to fight alongside you under the banners of Houses Reed and Stark, flying side by side as they have many times before.” Though never beside the Targaryen banners as well.

“And you have our thanks,” Jon said. “Will you not join us as well?”

He shook his head. “As I said, I am far too old for a winter war.”

“You will stay for a night at camp, of course?” Daenerys extended the royal invitation with forceful courtesy. “I’m sure there is much else you could tell us.”

“Aye, that I shall do. And perhaps I’ll start with the time your mother saved me from three brutish southern squires,” Lord Howland Reed smiled and led the way back down the ridge.

Chapter End Notes
This went through quite a few edits, but I got it to a place I thought you might enjoy.

I'll be honest. Most of the chapter isn't like crucial to the plot. I thought the story had been lacking some lighter moments and fun details, so I added them back in here. Howland Reed is more of an Easter egg I introduced for a bit of fun - he's not like crucial to the story. I'd like to get this story more or less complete by the end of March, so I can't write like 10 chapters of idle conversation like I did in the early chapters (read: pacing ability has improved). That said, there are certain details and hints here that lead into more relevant plot points... including one in Chapter 54 you're all sure to enjoy.
The countryside was a ruin. Burned husks of villages, small halls and holdfasts haunted the landscape on either side of the kingsroad. Blackened timbers stood crooked above the few inches of snow. *Undisturbed snow*, Tyrion noted as he glanced at the closest abandoned hamlet from a distance. *There must have been a storm recently. The snow fell after the dead passed...*

Death still stalked the land. Then again, it had for years. *Ever since my lord father sent Ser Gregor to burn the Riverlands.* It seemed like a lifetime ago – when the world was green and warm and full of possibilities. Since then, the realm had burned and frozen. Its people had been butchered or driven off by living and dead men alive. There was little left.

Yet not all was lost. These ruined villages still held some supplies. The Unsullied and northmen had foraged old stores of heavily salted meats and sacks of grain from hidden larders. *Dead men don’t pillage or burn. Lucky for us, I suppose.* There was still something to be found in these lands.

Howland Reed’s three hundred men proved that much. They knew how to dig up roots and unspoiled tubers from the soil or stir frightened game from hidden dens. Tyrion himself had feasted on roasted rabbit just last night. They also proved that the southern people, Tyrion’s own westermen counted among them, could flee and hide from the Others’ deadly onslaught.

It gave him hope and, perhaps more importantly, it did the same for his queen. Three hundred fighting men had come to join her army – and that only from the sparsely peopled northern swamps. *Would more come?*

*If they received the ravens... well, received them in time.* That particular gamble remained a mystery, like cast dice hanging frozen in the air. They just had to fall at the right time... and in his favor.

And so Tyrion kept his eyes fixed on the horizon and the long tack ahead, hoping to see banners of any sort fluttering in the cold winter winds. *Save my own, of course.*

The thought of his family’s proud lion banners made him wonder how Lord Tywin Lannister might have handled the Army of the Dead and the fallen Night King. *Rallied the realm? Forged weapons of dragonglass and an alliance with the dragon queen? No... his father had never been particularly superstitious. He had doubted the might of the dragons, had he not? He would have been caught flat-footed and died, I presume. He was rather skilled at it.*

“Something amusing, my lord?” Podrick asked beside him. Tyrion had not even realized the thin smile that had split his frozen face.

“No really,” he replied, shifting in his saddle to look at Podrick Payne properly. “It’s all rather grim here, don’t you think?”

“No different than when I rode this way with Brienne some time ago,” the lad responded. “Fewer people, though,” he added after a moment’s pause.

“I’d almost forgotten. You’re no stranger to traveling the Riverlands in winter.”

“Or autumn. Anytime, really, I suppose,” Podrick said. *I’d almost forgotten he had marched with...*
Podrick was a good lad – a loyal one. *I could not have asked for a more loyal squire, truly.* He had told the boy that once. He had meant it. Still, it was good for him to have a proper knight to serve. *Even if the knight herself is not all that proper.* No doubt the bravery he had shown outside the gates of the capital had been honed into something more refined and more deadly.

“A proper hedge knight,” Tyrion agreed. “Your time with the Lady Brienne has hardened you some, has it?” That brought a smile to the youth’s face.

“It has,” he inclined his head, still unable to accept a complement without all the awkwardness a lad of his age could muster.

“And I’m told you fought rather valiantly during the battle for Winterfell.” *And for our lives.*

“I’m told you did too,” Podrick replied.

“I valiantly avoided getting buried in corpses, mostly,” Tyrion japed. Podrick chuckled.

Humor was as useful a weapon as any now. They had lost so much and so many in the North. *To dwell on death and defeat now and after all that…* Why relive those horrors in your own mind when jests and smiles could ease the pain?

“Still, there won’t be many southern squires who can say they’ve fought the dead.” He paused, looked away and drew in a deep, dramatic breath. “I expect our queen might yet make you a knight in her service, with all that you’ve done.”

“And the king?” he asked.

“Yes, and the king,” Tyrion corrected himself. The boy’s eye lit up. “Perhaps they might name you to their queensguard. Then again, perhaps not.”

“Why not?” *I can almost feel his heart fluttering.*

“Oh, nothing really. I’m just not certain those vows would befit a lad of your… reputation.” Tyrion grinned. Podrick looked away blushing like a maid, yet he saw the squire smiling too.

“I’d have to stop serving Brienne first,” he admitted.

“Forgive me, but is her quest not complete? Sansa Stark is safe in Winterfell. Arya Stark is here, surrounded by thousands of trained fighter – and is a trained fighter in her own right.”

Podrick shrugged. “I’ve not asked her.”

“Perhaps you should. If Daenerys wins the throne, skilled and loyal lads like you will be valuable in the new Targaryen court… a court filled with many an eager young lady.” His eyes lit up again, but only for a moment. Some unheard thought darkened them, like rainclouds suddenly forming in the sky.

“And if she doesn’t?” he asked, voice softer and lower than before as if speaking of the possibility made it more likely to happen.

“I expect we’ll both join those dead men we fought so valiantly,” Tyrion countered with a faltering smile. Podrick looked away. *It really is that simple. Win or die.*

*I much prefer the former,* he thought. Victory against Cersei would require more of him – far more
than the northern war had. His skills had been wasted up there. *Like a dragon with no wings.* Dead men and ice demons could not be reasoned with nor betrayed.

But in the south? Cersei’s madness and stupidity had torn the realm asunder. The crisis was an opportunity. Of course, her maneuvers had torn his carefully crafted alliances asunder, too. House Tyrell had withered away and House Martell had crumbled to nothing. *There are others, though.* With a quick word and quicker raven, he could certainly rally them to the dragon standard. *With gold and promises and threats – all the Hand’s weapons.*

“*My lord?*” Podrick asked after a time.

“Podrick?”

“*Do you think we’ll see Bronn again?*” *Perhaps he has been thinking of the war to come as well.*

“I expect we shall, in one way or another,” he responded.

“I’d hate to face him across a battlefield,” Pod admitted.

“Not as much as he’d hate facing us,” Tyrion said. *He’s faced the dragon before. Now he’ll face two.* The thought lit a fire in his mind. Ideas burst forth like embers from a burning long. *Bonn!* Of course. *He would not fight The Mountain for me. He’ll take the winning side, whoever or whatever it is. If I can convince him to join us…*

Fantastic images of Bronn betraying Cersei danced before his mind’s eye, each more ridiculous than the last. *Bonn convincing the Golden Company to break its contract. Bonn leading the Lannister armies in mutiny.* On and on they went, spiraling into the nothingness where most fantasies ended up.

*If Cersei has not killed him already. She might think him too close to me or Jaime.* The grim thought sobered him up. *Then again, she has always possessed a talent for unleashing the worst in people.* He wondered if she had managed to do just that with his old friend – and wondered precisely what she had promised him.

“And the Golden Company?” Pod asked, his voice shaking only a little.

“Sellswords like any other,” Tyrion mused. “Elephants and mounted sergeants and knights too, I suppose.”

“I’ve never seen an elephant,” Pod said. Tyrion laughed.

“You’ve seen a dragon. Two, in fact,” he jutted his chin skyward to where Drogon and Rhaegal lazily circled overhead. “You’ve seen them every day. As have our men and horses. There’s no fear with familiarity, Pod. But my sister’s men? What will they think when they see those two great, fire-breathing beasts bearing down on them? What fresh panic will rush their ranks as their mounts buck and turn and flee?”

Pod pursed his lips and nodded in agreement. “Aegon Targaryen won the throne with dragons,” he said, as if the well-known fact was some secret weapon unveiled on the eve of battle.

“He forged the wretched thing with them,” Tyrion said.

“So you think.”

The lad’s next question was cut short by a horn blast. *A northern horn, I think.* The sound rang long
and low across the low hills of the Riverlands. Others soon joined in the cacophony. The scouts had found something. What now? He wondered.

“Come, Pod,” he said.

He and his old squire broke out of the column and rode forward along the side of the road. Soon enough, they reached the head of the formation. A hawk circled low overhead then swooped down, finding it’s perch on the shoulder of its… what? Partner? Whatever the proper term, the bird and crannogman were connected. A warg, he knew. And a useful scout. What the bird saw, he saw. And what was that?

Tyrion did not need to ask. His eyes caught a flash of color in the distance. Banners on the horizon…

Lannister banners. They stuck out against the pale white landscape like crooked crimson tombstones. They were not alone either. There was an entire camp set up along the western side of the road, with crimson colored tents and racks of weapons.

But no cook fires. No patrols. Just faded cloth. Tyrion already knew what he would find ahead. So did Jon Snow, for he signaled the advance without another moment’s hesitation.

As their forces drew closer, Tyrion could count the tents in their rows. How many had been here, a thousand? Fewer? It could not have been more than that. A large garrison at best.

His dread curiosity was sated as he entered the camp and saw the disturbing lack of slaughter. There were arms and pieces of enameled crimson armor scattered about the ground. Small fire pits lay cold and silent between the tents, their cooking spits left untouched. Perhaps the White Walkers resurrected the men with their meals, he thought.

Behind him, the queen’s Dothraki bloodriders muttered curses under their breath just as they had at Moat Cailin. House Reed’s men were equally disquieted by the sight. Tyrion watched one leather clad crannongman carefully push aside a tent flap with the tip of his three-prong spear – as if some risen corpse was hiding inside, waiting for just the right time to strike.

“Another victory for the dead,” Jaime said. He met Tyrion’s gaze. This was different. These were our family’s men. How many others had died? How far had the Walkers marched? All the way to The Rock? Beyond?

Every burned village and abandoned camp was beginning to make him ever more nervous. He could see the same uneasy looks on the faces of the others.

“Enough.” Tyrion heard Daenerys’ angered and impatient tone from a few tents away. He hurried to where she and Jon stood. Jorah was already at her side when he arrived.

“Your Grace?” the old knight asked.

“Every other day brings more of the same.” Her violet found Tyrion’s own mismatched pair. “Empty towns and villages.”

“There are countless leagues ahead of us, Your Grace. We don’t know how far south they march,” Tyrion counseled.

“Exactly,” she snapped. “We don’t know. Only half our scouts have returned and they report the same thing. Nothing.”
“It’s a matter of time,” Tyrion argued. “I doubt they crossed the Trident, anyway.” He had weathered his queen’s furies before, but this particular outburst came as a surprise. *Something has her on edge.*

“We’ll find out soon enough,” she looked at Jon then looked skyward. A moment later, Drogon emerged from a grey cloudbank and began to descend in wide, sweeping circles. Rhaegal followed after his brother, his still-injured wing impeding his progress some.

*Oh.* Tyrion’s heart sank – then leapt up to his throat as Drogon landed on the frozen ground with a resounding thud. Rhaegal landed beside him. One never quite gets used to a dragon.

“You can’t,” he hurried to her side. “Neither of you can. Remember what happened the last time you flew off without aid?”

Something shifted behind her eyes as she glared at him. Tyrion had meant that time on the cliffs, just after she had received that raven from the North and flown off beyond the Wall to rescue her love. That particular adventure had produced disastrous results. *But that was not the last time.* No, the last time had been to White Harbor…

And then he knew. *Moat Cailin. The child in the village. The barren countryside. This camp. She blames herself for this southern slaughter. Worse, she thinks some foolish flight will bring back the slain.*

“I flew across the Dothraki Sea far ahead of my khalassar even as the Masters attacked Meereen. Jon and I shall be fine here,” she countered, walking toward Drogon as she spoke.

“The Masters did not have weapons made for killing your dragons,” he said.

“Neither does your sister. I believe Drogon saw to that some time ago.”

“She’ll have a dozen more made by now.” *You fool.*

“What, hidden among the trees?” Daenerys asked. *Probably not.* Tyrion scrambled from some other scrap of logic.

“Perhaps only Jon – King Jon – should go then?” He winced, knowing how foolish the suggestion was. He would have better luck prying apart Jon Snow’s sword with his fingernails than he would prying apart the queen and king. *Still, she’s with child. Their heir.* This was a ridiculous venture.

He walked around to her other side and spoke to her husband instead. *Surely, he won't want to risk his wife and unborn child on some fruitless flight?*

Jon’s grey eyes met his and, for a moment, Tyrion thought the young king might agree – might speak some sense into Daenerys. He was wrong.

“We’ll fly together. We can cover more ground in half a day than a thousand men could in a week,” he said, nodding at Daenerys. *Damn you both.*

“Half a day must be it,” Tyrion said. “And no more. What will happen if my sister’s forces should fall upon us while our two leaders and two greatest weapons are away?”

To his satisfaction, Tyrion saw glimmers of doubt upon both their faces. Yet both stood beside the other and stood firm. “Half a day, then,” Jon finally agreed. “We’ll set down again before the sun does.”
Without another word, Daenerys turned and walked toward Drogon. Tyrion watched her climb up his scaled side and settle in between his great spikes. Jon made to do the same with Rhaegal, but Tyrion got to him before he could take more than a step.

“Sundown,” he said. Jon raised an eyebrow. “We must stay together.”

“Aye,” he agreed, turning to mount Rhaegal. Drogon was already rising into the air. Tyrion watched them go, thanking whatever gods would listen that at least the boy could rein in the queen – or else guide her bolder impulses.

Tyrion sighed as he walked away from the dragons and back toward where the other advisors and soldiers had gathered just outside the rows of crimson tents. He spotted Ser Jorah among the small crowd and felt a twinge of annoyance.

“Well, thank you for your assistance, Mormont,” he said coolly.

“Lannister?” Jorah grunted in reply.

“Our queen has flown off on some folly. I thought you’d try speaking some sense into her.”

“She has two dragons and Jon at her side,” Jorah replied.

“And the last time she flew off with a dragon at her side, she was captured by enemies!”

“Turned friends,” Jorah said with a raised eyebrow as he turned and looked toward a group of bloodriders. Small comfort there. “Besides, there’s nothing in the Riverlands that could harm a dragon.”

“Come, my lord,” Podrick led Tyrion’s mount forward. “Let us continue our ride and be rid of this place.”

“They’ll return by sundown, Tyrion,” Jorah continued. “Perhaps, with answers.”

“Very well,” he gritted his teeth as if the stupidity of it all caused him physical pain. Pod helped him back into the saddle and rode beside him once again, though this time conversation between them was sparse.

As he rode, he watched the dragons shrink into little more than black specks in the grey sky. He silently bid them both a safe, if brief, journey before settling back into his own thoughts.

Impulsive. Emotional. There were countless other words to describe his queen. His hands tightened around the leather reins, knuckles white. And once I thought that Jon Snow would have cooled her dragon’s blood.

That had been its own sort of wonderful, cosmic jest. The boy is a Targaryen as much as she.

That particular bit of knowledge was known only to a few. For now.

⋯

The morning proved to be the most eventful part of the day. The column continued its way down the kingsroad, now with Ser Jorah and Ser Davos at its front. A far less attractive pair.

Twice they broke formation to water the horses at frozen ponds and streams- the northmen having broken the ice with hammers, rocks and whatever else they could find. Otherwise, they made fairly good time in such grim conditions, covering several leagues.
By the time the sun was beginning to sink toward the western horizon, the Unsullied commanders were setting the tent lines and driving wooden stakes into the frozen ground. Even a single night’s camp required proper precautions and defenses now, for Cersei’s armies might steal a night’s march or surprise them. As Daenerys surprised Jaime beside the Blackwater.

Tyrion kept his eyes fixed on the darkening sky, hoping to see Drogon’s faint outline in the day’s dying light. Yet other thoughts crossed his mind. Somewhere off to the north and west lay the Twins. Where the Starks were slaughtered like the Freys after them. The pauper’s Harrenhal. Somewhere farther west and southward Tyrion knew Riverrun lay locked between the Tumblestone and the Trident. If those waters had not frozen, perhaps the dead men had not breached those walls…

He walked along the edge of the camp, passing the time as he waited and wondered. A thousand possibilities flitted through his thoughts. They’ve found something. They’ve found nothing at all. They’ve burned the Golden Company to ash. They’re lost.

So engrossed in his own imagination was he that he did not hear the buzzing Unsullied trumpets signaling someone’s arrival. When he finally made sense of the noise and ran to the camp’s southern entrance, a crowd of blackclad spearmen and cloaked advisors had already assembled, Ser Jorah and Ser Davos among them.

They’re not here. That was his first panicked thought. He saw neither Drogon nor Rhaegal on the ground or circling in the sky above. No… but we’ve collected some more men. Perhaps a few dozen men sat mounted, armed and armored as if for battle. And some more banners. He could see those clearly enough.

There were only a few of them fluttering in the late afternoon winds. A fish… the Tullys? Tyrion squinted as he walked ever closer to the growing gathering. Ah… He recognized it now. The red salmon of House Mooton was familiar enough to any man who had spent time in and around the capital. But what are they doing… did we send a raven to them?

He hurried forward as if his own thought had struck his rear. He saw the lead man of the group in conversation with Ser Jorah and forced his way through a thicket of spear ends and Unsullied legs to the front of the group.

Jorah turned to him with a curious gaze. “Tyrion,” he said with a nod. “These men have come from—”

“Maidenpool, yes,” he cut off the old northern knight.

“You’ll be Tyrion Lannister, then,” the lead mounted man said, eyeing him. “M’name’s Uther, m’lord.” He looked weary and travel worn. His grey cloak was ripped and well in need of a good patching. The others in his company had similar looks about them.

“And why come here, Uther?” Jorah asked, his voice dripping with suspicion. “The Crownlands are under the Lannister queen’s control.”

The man spat into the dirt. “Aye, she took the town and Lord William’s daughter as a hostage. He swore loyalty to her and she swore the crown’s own protection, but…” his voice cracked and broke.

“But what?” Davos asked.

“We sent a raven,” he said. “We sent a dozen. Pleading for aid. When those things came in the
night.” The other Mooton men looked around as if to make certain yet more blue-eyed wights had followed them on their ride.

“The dead?” Tyrion asked.

“Aye,” Uther said. “And the others, too.”

“ Took us by surprise, they did,” another man muttered.

“The dead made it to Maidenpool?” Jorah asked.

“ Didn’t I just say?” Uther shot Ser Jorah a scathing look.

“How did you survive, then?” Valid question.

“The screams woke us,” he said, voice trembling. “Screams like you never heard before. We thought it was you, you see. Your dragon queen attacking us, but there was no dragon. Only them.”

“And you managed to fight them?” Jorah continued his questioning.

“Fight? Aye, the brave ones did. And swords and spears and arrows didn’t do a thing. Arnold here cut one clean in two and still it came after him, screeching as you like.” Uther sighed and shook his head. “Rest of us ran. Ran right into the keep and barred the gates. Stacked stones and timbers and all Lord Mooton’s finery against the gates, high as the Wall itself. Maester sent a raven to King’s Landing like I said, and then—”

“You managed to fight them off?”

Uther shook his head again as if the motion might cast the memories from his mind. “Sun was up by the time we figured out fire could stop ‘em, but we’d only logs and torches. No oil. No dragons.” Tyrion saw the man shudder. “Saw me own sister among them. Knew it was her. No other girl in the town wore her hair like that…”

“We burned what we could,” the man Arnold picked up the story where Uther had faltered.

“Aye, we did,” Uther said, seeming to come back to himself. “Three days we did that. Dead men at our gates. No help. No word from the queen that took our lord’s daughter. No nothing.” The man looked around as the gathered crowd for a moment, then seemed to sense that they could not read his thoughts. “Then they went still and silent. Quiet, like, and quickly too. Never seen such a thing. Eyes white as new snow. Then… nothing. Nothing at all.”

Sounds familiar, Tyrion thought of his own desperate struggles during that last battle. Too familiar. Clearly, this Uther of Maidenpool was neither a fool nor liar. He has fought the dead. He could hear it in his voice. No one else could describe the fights as such.

“So, you survived,” Jorah spoke again. “And immediately rode north? Why?”

“M’lord?” Uther asked, genuine confusion writ plane in his voice.

“Why ride toward the dead after seeing so many fall?” Jorah rephrased his question.

Uther reached into his tattered cloak and retrieved and small bit of parchment. “M’lord,” he said. “We received a raven. Bearing this very scroll. We thought…’’ he could not put the rest of his thoughts to words just now. Oh, shit. Tyrion rushed forth to seize the scroll, but it had already found its way into Jorah’s hand – and from there to Ser Davos’ hand-and-a-half.
The old man’s tired eyes flitted from line to line. Lines Tyrion knew rather well – for he had written the original script before sending it forth on many a raven’s wing.

“To the High Lords and Ladies of Westeros,” Davos began to read out the scroll. *Oh come now.* “Winter has come. Queen Cersei has forsaken you. The dead have marched on your lands.”

A fearsome roar echoed across the sky. The dragons were returning, the king and queen as well. *Lovely.*

“And they have fallen. Defeated by I, Queen Daenerys Targaryen and I, King Aegon Targaryen, the Son of Rhaegar Targaryen, and who is called Jon Snow. It is we who have defeated the dead,” Davos paused and looked up at Tyrion. The mounted Mooton men shot glances around the gathering. In the sky above, the outlines of the two dragons became clearer.

“Our battle in the North is over. Now we march south to save the realm from Cersei. Ride north, my lords. Ride north and pledge your swords to our cause. Fight for your lands, families, and futures.” Davos paused from his reading and looked up again, his mouth held open in sheer awe of the words passing through it.

Still, he continued. “Any man or lord who pledges himself to our cause shall earn ranks and titles above his current station. Any man who opposes us shall learn the meaning of our family’s words. Signed, Daenerys and Aegon of House Targaryen, Queen and King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men. Rulers of the Seven Kingdoms, and Protectors of the Realm.” Davos held the scroll loosely in his hand.

The mounted men looked around as if hoping to find answers. In the distance, dragons roared. The horses whinnied and panicked at the sound, their hooves churning the sides of the road to mud.

“That’s what is says,” Davos said, handing the raven scroll to Ser Jorah. The knight read it over once, twice. *There are hundreds of others that say the same, ser.*

Jorah looked skyward toward the faint outlines of the two dragons, then to the mounted knights, then finally to Tyrion. His voice was low, measured, and seemingly calm – though Tyrion could sense the barely contained anger within. He brandished the scroll like a sword and glared at him, his eyes swirling with both fear and anger.

“Lannister…” he said. “What have you done?”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I used the name Uther. Fight me.

And now we see the beginning of Tyrion's raven scheme. Much fun ahead.

Until next time!
“I trusted you,” she began. “We trusted you.”

_How could he do this? And why this? Why now?_ A thousand questions raced through her mind as she stared at her Hand, then at her husband. Jon was silent, just as he had been since they had set Drogon and Rhaegal down beside the camp. Whatever he was feeling, he hid it well for now. Daenerys did not. She could already feel that familiar, yet altogether welcome anger swelling up from deep inside her.

“I see no reason why that must change,” Tyrion countered. He stood there, across from her in their command tent, unwavering and unapologetic. He had shone only a glimmer of fear since she and Jon had landed just outside the camp… and learned of his scheme.

“No?” she said sharply. “I trusted you with that information. We trusted you with that information.”

“And I put it to good use,” Tyrion said, his gaze faltering and falling, then sweeping across the sheepskin map on the low table in front of them. Little carved wooden dragons and wolves sat in a wavering row, their faces pointed southward on the map. _They should all be dragons. No._ She quickly brushed the thought away. Whatever her desires were, they were irrelevant. This was – or had been- Jon’s choice.

“Good use?” Jon asked, his voice cold and hard like ice.

“Yes,” Tyrion shrugged. “It was a necessary move. A strategic move.”

“Strategy?” Daenerys shot back. “What would you know of strategy? When have your strategies ever worked? Before all this, your schemes lost us our southern allies.” She felt her fingers curl into fists as she spoke. _Casterly Rock and a siege of King’s Landing and that folly with the slave masters._ No, Tyrion’s strategies were nothing of the sort.

“And this particular strategy will win more allies to your banners – the Targaryen banners,” Tyrion countered, his tone even and diplomatic.

“I’ve seen fifty knights. No, not even that. Frightened men on horses,” Daenerys said.

“Hardly Sunspear or Highgarden,” Tyrion admitted with a grimace. “But more will come.”

“Will they?” Jon asked before Daenerys could put forth the question. “A few ravens and you think you’ve won this war?”

“No, but we needed more men and we needed to take men away from Cersei. Knights and lords alike will be more amenable to the Targaryen name and-”

Jon slammed a gloved fist down upon the table. Daenerys’ eyes widened slightly as the table shook and then wooden figures wobbled on their bases and danced about the painted lower Riverlands.

“A name you had no right to use,” he snarled.

“And a name to which you have every right,” Tyrion responded without missing a step. He almost
seemed to stand taller under the angry gazes of the king and queen.

“A name I never knew. A name no one ever called me. A name no one remembers,” Jon said, a rare fire lit behind his grey eyes.

Daenerys felt her own anger subside as an older and far more familiar feeling rose upward. *It’s not right what had happened,* she knew, *but it has. Why not take your rightful name?* He was her family by blood and marriage. Perhaps it had made sense to bury old secrets under northern snows when death marched on their homes, but now? *Why reject the name our child will bear?*

“They’ll call me a liar. A pretender,” Jon argued.

Tyrion laughed – and Jon took a half-step toward the dwarf, bumping the table as he moved. The figures wobbled and danced once more. A carved dragon fell upon its side just over the painted walls of Harrenhal.

“If they see your black hair beside the black dragon banners, perhaps they will,” Tyrion said through his smile. “Once they see you on the dragon, though…” *Perhaps he’s right.* Those Mooton men had stared at them in awe – two riders on two dragons. “Only a Targaryen could command such a magnificent beast.”

Jon’s advance faltered, but did not fail. Tyrion’s words seemed to have made him reconsider. “How many of these ravens did you send?” he asked, brandishing the small scroll Ser Davos had handed them.

“Oh,” Tyrion looked away for a moment. “Perhaps two hundred or so.”

What? Daenerys doubts and concerns were burned away in a new eruption of anger. “Two hundred?”

“Or more. As many ravens as your Maester Wolkan had. One to every southern lordling I knew my sister had not pressed into her service… and a few she had,” Tyrion admitted.

“You’ve scattered this information across the realm like some crofter with spring seed,” Jon said, his eyes grey steel daggers in the flickering torchlight. “As many enemies will know as friends.”

“As like seen, some of these declarations will bear fruit in good time. Let them know,” Tyrion said. “It won’t change the truth of the matter. And by the reports of those Maidenpool riders, Cersei is well on her way to turning her own allies to enemies.”


“More danger than the child was in when Cersei sent assassins northward?” Tyrion countered. “Better two targets than one, I say.”

She felt her heart pound against her chest. A snarl spread across her face. Jon’s eyes narrowed and he took a step forward. In the dimly lit corner, Ghost snarled.

“Get out,” Daenerys commanded. That was it. She did not want to hear any more of his explanations or plots or strategies. She did not want to hear or see him at all.

Tyrion’s eyes widened, perhaps acknowledging he had taken a step too far. He held out his hands as if to hold back an advancing beast. “Your Grace, I only meant-”
“Now.”

She watched him walked out of the tent, but could not remember seeing him leave. Her thoughts were too scattered like, ravens in a windstorm. How could he say that? How could he think that? An awful thought came over her. Does he want Jon gone?

No… Tyrion was too smart for that. A queen needed a king, and a king a queen. Besides, she and Jon bound the realm together. Of course there were dangers. Of course they were ‘targets’, but that did not matter. Together, they would remove Cersei, reclaim their family’s throne and give new life to that same family name.

“I’m sorry,” she heard Jon say.

She turned to him. “You don’t need to be sorry.”

“I should not have, well,” he faltered in searching for the right words.

She moved to his side and placed a hand on his own. “You’re right to be angry,” she offered her own assurance. “Tyrion…” Tyrion has been a fool.

Jon almost laughed. Such a sudden shift caught her off guard. “What?” she pressed him for answers.

“I’m not sorry for him,” he said. “Just for all of this. Perhaps when I learned the truth – when we learned the truth – that should have been the end of it.”

Yes… she thought, but… “It doesn’t matter now.”

“No?” Jon raised an eyebrow.

“No,” she responded. “We are wed, Jon – and you are Jon, even if these raven scrolls have announced you otherwise. You are my husband. You ride a dragon alongside me. You are the father of our child,” she paused for breath. “A child – a little girl – who will bear our name. What difference do these messages make?”

“It feels like…” his words faded away. “I made my peace with it all. Who I was. What I was.”

She reached over and grasped his hand in hers. “You are a king. That means you can choose.”

Jon looked away – and in that moment a new figure pushed aside the tent flap with his only full hand.

“Ser Davos,” she greeted their friend and advisor. And what does he seek now?

“Your Graces,” the older man cut short the courtesies with an even shorter bow. Daenerys briefly smiled – and remembered why she liked the older man so much.

“Davos,” Jon turned and greeted their grey-haired advisor.

“I noticed Lord Tyrion leaving in some haste… I trust you’ve read that scroll those Mooton men brought along?” he asked, hesitating near the exit.

“We did,” Jon replied, holding up the slightly crumpled scroll between two gloved fingers.

“So I trust you understand what is says?”
“It claims credit for defeating the dead,” Daenerys interjected. “And it names Jon as Aegon Targaryen, son of my brother Rhaegar.”

“It does,” Davos agreed. “Quite a claim, if I might add,” he smiled.

“So you agree with Tyrion?” Jon asked, his eyes narrowing.

“Did you and Queen Daenerys not defeat the dead?” Davos asked.

“Not alone,” Jon replied.

“No, not alone,” Davos agreed. “But you’d be a few fingers short a hand if you held to the notion that you did not lead the charge.” He paused, looked down at the scattered figures on the map, then up at Jon once more. “You knew the threat. You led the Night’s Watch. You took back Winterfell. You sailed south to find allies,” he nodded at Daenerys. “And you found ‘em. Perhaps you even found a bit more.”

“I did,” Jon agreed. “But I don’t understand why-”

“You and Daenerys saved the realm from the dead – and from what we’ve seen and heard the dead marched further south than we’d thought.”

Perhaps too far south.

“We don’t know how far they got,” Jon admitted.

“No?” Davos seemed unnerved for half a heartbeat. “Did you not see anything from the skies?”

“Nothing,” Jon answered.

“We must have flown a hundred leagues or more, but no, nothing,” Daenerys agreed.

“Nevertheless,” the syllables ran together as he spoke them. “By these ravens or by words alone, they’ll know of what you did. What Daenerys and Aegon Targaryen did.”

“I’m not Aegon,” Jon said. “I never chose to be Aegon.”

“No?” Davos asked, a queer smile breaking across his face. “I never chose to be a crabber’s son, but here we are.”

“It’s not like that,” Jon said.

“Begging your pardon, Your Grace, but it is. No bastard could ever do what you have done.” Jon opened his mouth to speak, but Davos held up his maimed hand as if to signal a halt. “And I don’t mean the battles. You were stabbed. You were killed. And something - some power - brought you back.”

He’s right, she thought. Perhaps he just doesn’t see it. I am the Blood of the Dragon. I have done things even I cannot explain… and so has he.

“And?” Jon replied. “Beric Dondarrion was brought back as well.”

Davos dipped his head in acknowledgment. “Aye, and he died a final time so that you and the others could save that dragon – your dragon. A dragon she hatched by walking through fire,” he pointed to Daenerys. She could hear the strain in his voice, the raw emotion. The sound was almost exhilarating. “You’re not a bastard. Gods, you’re not even a Stark in truth. You’re a Targaryen. Cast aside the rest. Become who you were born to be.”
His words hung in the air. Jon looked away from the old knight and met Daenerys’ gaze. She could see his confused, swirling thoughts behind those grey eyes – eyes that fell to her swollen womb for the briefest of moments.

“Aegon Targaryen…” he whispered the name. “It doesn’t feel right. It feels wrong. It feels like a lie.”

“I know the feeling,” Davos said. “But it’d be a lie to pretend otherwise.”

“Would it?” Jon asked, his eyes flitting between his wife and his closest advisor.

Davos nodded. “Those birds have already flown, I’m afraid, and word will have spread. To anyone you meet or anyone who sees you riding that dragon, you won’t be Eddard Stark’s forgotten bastard. You’ll be a Targaryen. Aegon Targaryen.”

“The northern lords saw me ride Rhaegal,” Jon countered.

“They also saw legions of dead men march on their homes,” Davos said. “Perhaps some were suspicious, but between your smaller sister and brother, there were far stranger things to consider at Winterfell.”

“And will they follow two Targaryens?” Daenerys asked,

“Seems to me they already are,” Davos said with a crooked smile.

Jon stared into the center brazier for a long while. Daenerys gently touched his shoulder, but it did little to stir him from his thoughts. She looked at Davos, who shrugged.

“If it’s to be this way then…” Jon muttered at last. Daenerys thought she saw Davos smile.

“Ser,” she said. Davos inclined his head.

“Your Grace?”

“You seem rather, well, unsurprised by this royal revelation. Jon and I only told a few close friends,” Daenerys said.

To his credit, Davos grimaced awkwardly. “I’d rather not betray anyone’s secrets myself, Your Grace, but I think you’ll find young Lord Tarly’s control of his tongue is little better than his control of his sword arm.”

“I see,” Daenerys replied. Jon looked up.

“Sam didn’t mean any harm,” he said.

“I’m sure he didn’t,” Davos agreed.

“But Tyrion… What would you have us do with him?”

Now it was Davos who seemed lost for words. He started pacing around the tent and around the command table, his eyes drifting over the faded details of the map. He settled beside the Stormlands and leaned forward, resting his good hand upon the outline of Storm’s End itself.

“When I brought those onions past the Redwyne fleet and into Storm’s End, Lord Stannis thanked me. Damn near hugged me, in truth. Only that would not have been his way. He knighted me and raised me up, a reward far greater than the services I rendered.”
“Davos, we know-”

“Pardon again, Your Grace,” Davos cut Jon off. It was a testament to the trust her husband bore for
the older man that this was not seen as a slight or insult. “With that reward came punishment for
my past crimes, as Lord Stannis saw them.” He held up his maimed hand as proof. “He weighed
my good deeds alongside my mistakes and judged accordingly.”

“So we should forgive Tyrion?” Daenerys asked. *This seems foolish advice from a king’s advisor.*

“But not at all,” Davos said. “He betrayed you, it’s true. No doubt Lord Varys had some knowledge of
this as well.” *Of course he did.* She had to stop herself from sneering at the thought. Varys had
proved useful, if not even a touch loyal. *But he’ll always be a creature of King’s Landing. I shall
have words with him too.*

“Two betrayals, then,” Jon mused grimly.

“The man’s an oddity,” Davos shrugged. “But I don’t doubt he thought himself acting in your best
interests.”

“He could’ve used my name,” Jon said

“Aye, he could have. Though you’ll forgive me for saying even the lowest southern house would
see themselves as being above a northern bastard who called himself king. A Targaryen, though…
A name for kings, not squabbling lords or up-jumped bastards.”

The logic of Tyrion’s plan slowly unspooled itself in Daenerys’ thoughts. *He was trying to win
allies to our cause… and the messages were sent at a desperate hour.* If the dead had conquered
Winterfell, nothing would have stopped the Night King. Yet if they had won – as they did – the
realm would know who to credit for the victory.

Perhaps she should have been angry for Jon, but in truth Daenerys could not find that familiar fury
inside her. *The world will know what I know. He is the Blood of the Dragon, same as I.*

Still, Tyrion’s actions needed to be checked. His clever schemes seemed brilliant when laid out on
vellum maps and ravens’ scrolls, but few ever found success when steel met steel.

“So you’d have us do nothing?” she asked Ser Davos.

“No,” Davos began. “But in all honesty, I’m not quite certain what you should do. You can’t
banish him or execute him or lock him away. You need him. We need him.” *We do,* she thought.

Davos reached forward and picked up the fallen dragon figure. He turned it over in his hand once,
twice, three times. His eyes seemed to be admiring the craftsmanship. “Keep him close, my queen.
Him and his brother.” *I’d barely spared a thought for Ser Jaime.* “His word might count for
something if still more men ride north to join us.” *If…*

“Very well,” she replied. “We shall take your counsel into consideration.”

“Your Grace,” Davos backed away from the same and gave a shallow bow.

Jon turned to her. “I should speak with Sam.”

“You’ll have to speak with a great many people in this camp,” she said. Jon sighed, but she thought
she saw the ghost of a smile cross his face as he walked out of the tent. Ghost rose from his
makeshift den to follow Jon. Davos lingered by the exit for a moment.
“Your Grace,” he said again, dismissing himself.


“About Tyrion?”

“About Jon.”

Davos shrugged. “Only what the lad needed to hear.” The tone of his voice did not escape her. *He cares for him, truly cares.*

“He trusts you,” she said. Davos smiled.

“Perhaps he does. And perhaps he’s got more fathers than he cares to admit.”

Chapter End Notes

Ya know how in Lord of the Rings like 90% of the movie is walking? I'd like to avoid that here, if I can. Scenes like this are more interesting. Moved the latter half of this chapter into a new file so I've got a better pipeline set up. Plus it helps avoid the old writer's block to do it like this.

I swear to the Mother I'll post another by Sunday.

Also - y'all see those photos? Hype.
Cersei II

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She watched Qyburn at his work. He poked and prodded the corpse, carefully removing small bits with a small silver knife and hacking off larger pieces with a sharpened butcher’s cleaver. Every now and then he would murmur appreciatively, or gasp or mutter something under his breath. *He’s meticulous*, Cersei noted. *Almost infuriatingly so.*

She audibly cleared her throat. Qyburn carefully put his instruments aside and turned around. “Your Grace?” he asked, one bushy grey eyebrow raised.

“Have you learned anything interesting?”

“Interesting?” his voice sounded elevated.

“Useful,” she clarified.

“Ah, not yet Your Grace,” he said. “But I’m certain there is something to be learned in these corpses.” His smile was almost wistful.

“See that there is,” she ordered, turning away from her Hand and walking past half a dozen other butchered bodies heaped upon low wooden tables. There was no shortage of corpses here in the capital. Those dead men had ravaged the Riverlands and swarmed southward like maggots across carrion.

*But they did not make it here,* she thought with some satisfaction as she walked up the uneven stone steps and saw the door open before her. Two of her queensguard awaited her – along with Ser Gregor, of course. The Mountain was ever-present at her side. They all fell in behind her as she walked and thought.

*The dead...* That monstrous threat that had drawn the girl away and Jaime with her. *Months with nothing – no word at all, and then...* Cersei could recall the ravens and panicked riders, the refugees and craven lords fleeing for safety behind her walls. She had shut the gates to them and to the dead.

*And then they fell apart.* The reports had been clear. Tens of thousands of walking, blue-eyed corpses had simply fallen still and silent only hours from her city. Apparently they were still there, a river of bodies scarring the winter countryside. *Let them stay there, unless Qyburn needs more corpses for his studies.*

Of course, there were plenty of living corpses for her Hand to probe and pull apart. The streets of the capital were full of them. Just because one northern threat had been defeated did not mean winter had disappeared. The fields were still barren and fallow, the Roseroad was shut to trade, and the remaining livestock – those not turned into dead soldiers – were weak and and thin. The people of the capital were starving.

*And they’ve made that known.* Beggars littered the streets, crying out for morsels of bread. Yet still worse had happened. Thrice now Fleabottom has descended into chaos. Rioting had disturbed her peace and threatened to burn her capital to the ground. It had taken the Golden Company – then fostered behind her high walls – to sort of the rabble. *Strickland is rather efficient with such matters,* she smiled to herself as she turned to the final corridor that led to the royal apartments.
Whatever her own supply situation, she knew the northerners’ own must be far worse. Their country had been ravaged by this threat. Perhaps there was little enough country left. One quick, deadly blow could take the fire out of the dragon’s maw.

_Two dragons, I suppose,_ she snarled as she thought of that pathetic message. _Tyrion’s work. It had to be him._ Her younger brother had a certain low cunning, though he had not been cunning enough to avoid sending ravens to houses already bound to her. Perhaps he had even won some swords to his cause, but his plan for was for naught. _One Targaryen or two, it makes little difference. The realm is mine._

Still, she could not help herself. Once more she sat behind that fine desk, where Lord Tywin had sat for years, and retrieved the scroll from the pile. Her eyes rushed over the faded ink marks. She did not need to read it carefully. She already knew its absurd claims.

_To the High Lords and Ladies of Westeros,_

Winter has come. Queen Cersei has forsaken you. The dead have marched on your lands.

And they have fallen. Defeated by I, Queen Daenerys Targaryen and I, King Aegon Targaryen, the Son of Rhaegar Targaryen, and who is called Jon Snow. It is we who have defeated the dead.

Our battle in the North is over. Now we march south to save the realm from Cersei. Ride north, my lords. Ride north and pledge your swords to our cause. Fight for your lands, families, and futures.

Any man or lord who pledges himself to our cause shall earn ranks and titles above his current station. Any man who opposes us shall learn the meaning of our family’s words.

Signed,

Daenerys and Aegon of House Targaryen, Queen and King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men. Rulers of the Seven Kingdoms, and Protectors of the Realm.

She crumpled the scroll in her hand and threw it aside. _Aegon! Does he truly think giving the bastard a king’s name will make him one?_ Marriage or no, blood will always tell.

Yet doubts lingered in the recesses of her mind and crept forward in those silent hours before dawn and after dark when only she lay awake. _The boy had a certain brooding familiarity to him… and a certain bearing. Was it true?_ Rhaegar had cast aside Elia for the Stark girl, everyone knew that. _Did she bear him a child? A Targaryen heir?_

Her hand fell to her own swollen womb as she considered the claims of the letter. _The realm already has an heir._ Or at least it would soon enough. She would birth the child in a few weeks or perhaps sooner. And then…

_It will come to battle._ Her royal forces would face whatever was left of the invaders and traitors. _So close,_ she thought. _So close to victory. To peace. To this wretched war’s end._

Defeating these Targaryen pretenders in the field only once would prove the dragon queen was
weak… so long as the dragons could be dealt with. Qyburn’s war machines would prove their worth in that regard.

Cersei slowly pushed her fine cushioned chair back and stood. She walked across the chamber and out into the courtyard with that grand, painted map. Last night’s snows had been brushed aside sometime earlier, the low snowbanks formed a frame around the realm. *My realm.* As her eyes looked over the southern kingdoms, her thoughts drifted northward along the kingsroad. *They’re somewhere along there. He’s somewhere along there.*

Jaime had abandoned her to ride north and fight alongside her enemies. The memory of their final conversation always sent a surge of anger down her spine. *How could he?*

He had always been like that. Foolish, brash, impulsive Jaime. Never thinking and always first to act. Valuable traits in a warrior – less so in a ruler. *He’ll return to me now, either before the battle or after it.* She wondered if he was just now looking down that same road, trying to find some way to slip away in the night and return to her and their child.

“Wondering what kingdom to conquer next?” a most unwelcome voice called out from across the courtyard.

Ser Bronn emerged from the winter gloom of the Red Keep. He was garbed in fine but worn leather armor and had his sheathed sword hanging from his side. *Perhaps I should not allow him so armed before me,* Cersei thought. After all, the man had been close with both Jaime and Tyrion. She cast a glance to Ser Gregor. Bronn had declined to fight her champion for gold and glory once, he would not risk anything here.

*Glory…* Cersei almost laughed at her own stupidity. The man was an un-jumped cutthroat, nothing more. The promise of a castle and a woman to warm his bed was enough to earn his loyalty. She had been hesitant to keep him at first – in her city or even alive – but Bronn had proved to be loyal and useful. He would continue to be both, or else.

“The Riverlands, I’d say. Plenty of good land up there and not enough men to defend it all… now they’re all rotting in fields a few miles away,” he said, swaggering onto the map itself.

“The girl will be there,” Cersei answered at last. She never spoke the *other* queen’s name. Doing so might give credence to her claim. She was a usurper, a pretender, as was her bastard bedmate.

“Aye, I suppose she will,” Bronn shrugged. “With those dragons beside her. She won’t stay there for long, though.”

“No?” Cersei asked, a derisive bite in her tone. “And why is that?”

“They’ll come here,” he walked across the width of Westeros and planted his heel on King’s Landing. Cersei nodded in understanding. *Of course they will.* This keep had been built by the girl’s ancestors; the throne forged by her family’s dragon. *She thinks it’s hers. She’ll have to win it, first.*

“And so what would you do?” she asked the man.

“Me?” Bronn asked. “Run, most likely. I saw that dragon once. Saw it burn your family’s men to ash. All the rains in Castamere couldn’t put out those flames. I’m not too eager to see it again.” Cersei narrowed her eyes as a scowl set upon her face. “You though?” Bronn said without a hint of courtly courtesy. “You’ll have to fight.”

“Yes,” Cersei hissed. “I’d gathered that much.”
“Aye,” Bronn agreed, swaggering away from King’s Landing and off toward Harrenhal. “Thing is, best not wait for siege.”

“No?”

“No,” Bronn said. “In a siege, you’ve already lost. The people’ll start to starve. Then the soldiers will.” He jutted his jaw out toward Ser Gregor. “Maybe he can go without good grain in his belly, but the rest of your men can’t, so you can’t risk a siege.”

“The Iron Fleet will keep the harbor open,” Cersei replied.

“Iron fleet,” Bronn shrugged. “So they call it, though it seems to me those ships are made of wood same as the rest, and wood—”

“Burns, yes,” she missed. The man had a talent for making a fool of her. He doesn’t need a tongue to fight well.

“And yet you’ve just said you saw the dragon burn men to ash,” she sneered. “So I should send my armies into the field to burn?”

“Knights and archers and elephants,” Bronn shrugged. “Best have them fight out there… unless you’re planning to fling the beasts over the walls.” And you with them. His mocking grin seared itself into her memory.

“Into the field then,” she concurred. “Where?”

Bronn pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows like a scholar deep in thought. Cersei drank in every detail of the map. She saw every keep and holdfast – every lord that had bent the knee and every lordling who had defied her. Enemies. Enemies everywhere. Those who had not submitted or sent hostages to the capital would learn from their folly once the girl was dealt with.

“Here,” Bronn said, drawing his sword and pointing at old Harren’s ruined keep. Ser Gregor took a step forward. “Just outside it, really.” He offered no further explanation… and kept an eye on the silent knight.

“There,” Cersei replied. “Are you certain you’re not trying to deliver me into the hands of my enemies?”

Bronn revealed a crooked smile. “I do that, I don’t doubt you’ll have me killed before the Dragon Queen does the same to you. On the other hand, if you prevail…”

“I presume the Riverlands will need a new Lord Paramount,” Cersei said.

“That they will, Your Grace,” he said with a smile. “And I’ve just the castle in mind to rule them from.” He tapped the tip of his blade on Harrenhal.

“Very well,” she said. “Send for Lord Strickland. I’ll speak with him before further action is taken.”

“Very well,” Bronn echoed her words. He turned on his heel and left the courtyard, his footsteps echoing dully as he walked away.
The dismissal allowed her a few moments of peace, but such moments were seldom welcome. Indeed, unwelcome thoughts pressed in from all sides. *Jaime has not abandoned me. He’ll return…*

She paced off to the far north of the painted map, then back down to Dorne. It was hers. All of it. *Ours,* she thought, her hand falling to her womb again.

She did not know the child’s sex. Neither did Qyburn. Yet it did not matter. Boy or girl, the child would rule over the realm after she was gone. *Child,* the word was foolish, useless even. Her heir had a name. *Tywin,* of course, *for a boy. And for a girl… Myrcella.*

Either a little prince or princess would be born to rule over the realm their mother conquered for them. *And that shall begin once Strickland arrives.*

…

Harold Strickland, Commander of the Golden Company, arrived later in the day. The sun had already set over the capital when the man, armored in steel banded in gold, walked into her chambers and presented himself and his sword.

“I’ve been waiting here for quite some time,” she told him without getting up. Qyburn, standing in the corner, muttered something incomprehensible.

“Apologies, Your Grace,” Strickland said. He put his lips together and gave a shrill whistle. Four other men entered the room. Cersei barely recognized them. *His captains, of course,* she knew, but she had only seen them once – when the Golden Company had first arrived in the city – and then only from a distance.

The first man was by far the most imposing. He was tall with ebony skin and short-cropped white hair. His face was covered in faded scars and his left arm covered in golden bands. His right arm was bare but well-muscled, perhaps twice the size of his left.

“Black Balaq, we call him,” Strickland said. “Of the Summer Isles. He commands the Company’s archers.” Black Balaq gave a low, sweeping bow that made his various adornments jangle.

“How many?” Cersei asked.

“Six hundred,” the archer-captain answered.

“Good archers?”

“The best, Your Grace,” Strickland said, puffing out his chest as if he had taken offense to the question.

“Good enough to knock a rider from a dragon’s back?”

Black Balaq’s dark eyes met hers for a moment, then he silently nodded.

“Good,” Cersei said, standing from her chair and walking around the table to inspect the captains more closely. “And who are these other men you’ve brought with you?”

“Vhalas of Volantis, who commands our war elephants, Franklyn Flowers, who rides with our knights, and Lorimas Mudd, who commands the spears,” Strickland said. Each man bowed when he was named, but said not a word. “All capable commanders.”
“I should hope they’re rather more than that,” Cersei said. “You won’t be fighting unarmed peasants and undersupplied rebels any longer. Our enemy is marching south with a horde of savages. Northmen, Dothraki, Unsullied… and dragons.”

“If it comes to battle, we’ll break the bitch’s lines by midday,” Strickland insisted.

“Dragons,” Cersei repeated the word. “Can your elephants fly or breath fire?”

“Uh, no, Your Grace,” Strickland said, looking toward Vhalas as if the Volantene would suddenly assure him that yes, the elephants could indeed do that and more.

“I thought not,” Cersei smirked and paced around Strickland. “It just so happens that Qyburn here has developed a most ingenious solution.”

Her Hand stepped out of the corner to join the rest of them. “If you’ll follow me then, Your Grace, my lords,” he said in his odd, almost breathless voice.

The walk down to the inner courtyard was quick but silent. Qyburn led the way and Cersei followed, Ser Gregor shadowing her footsteps. The sellsword captains kept the pace and kept their distance.

They emerged into a torchlight courtyard that was empty save for two knights of the queensguard and a crimson Lannister tent – the sort one might have seen in any proper army encampment.

“Tents?” Strickland asked derisively.

“I think you’ll find what’s under the tent of more interest,” Qyburn said. “Ser Gregor, if you would.”

The massive knight silently strode forward and, drawing his sword, cut the ropes securing the tent to the ground. He reached down and ripped away the crimson cloth as if it were as light as a maiden’s silken dress, revealing a ballista similar to that which Qyburn had shown her so many months ago – and that had been lost beside the Blackwater.

“A crossbow?” Black Balaq asked.

“In a sense,” Qyburn nodded, stepping forward and putting a withered hand on the contraption. “A weapon like this injured the largest of the dragons—”

“-I’ve seen it on the walls,” Strickland interrupted the Hand of the Queen.

“Yes,” Cersei agreed. “Qyburn has set the city’s smiths to producing more of these weapons.”

“This look quite a bit smaller than the others,” Strickland grunted, frowning.

“More mobile, my lord,” Qyburn assured him. “Easier to move on winter roads and in the heat of battle. And, of course, easier to make.”

“Your archers might be able to bury an arrow in the girl’s heart, but it’s the dragons that must be slain,” Cersei said. “You will take this weapon and the others north to Harrenhal. Break the bitch’s lines, as you said, and perhaps your sigil will fly above the castle’s walls long after this war is over.”

“Harrenhal…” Strickland’s eyes glazed over with greed. “I see…” he walked back and forth around the weapon. “With this weapon…” he looked up at her. “And others, you said. “How many
do you have?”

Qyburn smiled. So did Cersei.

“Enough.”

Chapter End Notes

You: What are you doing?

Me: It's empty, Your Grace.

You: What do you mean it's empty?

Me: There's no more words.

You: Is that what empty means?!... So write MOAR!
Jon stood alone on the hillside looking over the encampment. The simple black tents of the
Unsullied stood in orderly rows before him, while further to the north the hide huts of the
remaining Dothraki sprawled out across the snow-dusted landscape like huge brown boulders
about tossed by some giant.

Would that we had one with us, Jon though. It had taken only one smashed the gates of Winterfell
open. What might ten do against some southern knights? He would never get his answer, for Wun
Weg Wun Dar Wun – the last of his kind - had fallen in taking the castle. Jon had burned his body
with the other fallen.

Looking across the campsite, he tried to find familiar figures amidst the slow churn of bodies.
None presented themselves. Surely Daenerys was down there somewhere, resting or perhaps
simply speaking with Missandei as she often did. Arya would be somewhere among the tents too,
practicing her swordplay or else looking to create a spot of trouble where none existed.

Tyrion, of course, had been confined to his own tent ever since the truth of his scheme had become
known four days past. Daenerys had posted a guard at every corner: all Dothraki bloodriders whom
Tyrion could not charm. No doubt he’s dreaming up some other plots in there, Jon knew.

Yet it was not Tyrion nor Arya nor even Daenerys upon whom his thoughts dwelled just now. It
was not even the thousands of soldiers and friends who had not known the truth but who now
looked at him so different – not longer as a friend and fighter but as a king. No, for once Jon Snow
thought of himself.

Aegon. That’s what some have taken to call me. That’s who everyone south of the Neck thinks I
am. The name sounded as strange in his head as it did when he heard it spoken aloud. Aegon was a
name for conquerors and kings, not bastards. It did not matter what Ser Davos said to the contrary.
What I was born to be is not what I am.

He had been raised the Bastard of Winterfell. Gods, he had gone for years on end without knowing
the truth. Every choice he had made, every battle he had fought had been with that title. What
would Ser Alliser have said if he had known? What about Uncle Benjen? Robb? Lady Catelyn?

He could spend weeks imagining the possibilities of days long past – days he could never revisit
save for in dreams. Still, he was Jon Snow. He had always been Jon Snow. It felt wrong to leave it
behind.

Jon wrestled with his thoughts, pacing back and forth along the long, slanting slope. He was alone
with his thoughts. Well, alone save you, he thought with a glance toward Ghost. The white direwolf
prowled around the hill, perhaps sniffing out some prey’s den or else simply seeking to mark his
latest territorial conquest.

The wolf was a reminder of what he was. I can no more become Aegon now than Ghost can change
the color of his fur. It would be foolish to pretend otherwise. And yet…

His eyes turned skyward to his other companion. Rhaegal – named for his sire – soared high above
the camp. The pale sunlight glinted off his scales, the same dark green as the soldier pines of the
Wolfswood. Drogon flew further to the west, off in the distance where the clouds looked greyer and heavier, threatening snow.

*Her children, she calls them.* Jon thought of how strange it had been to hear Daenerys use that word to describe such “magnificent beasts”. *Yet she truly cares for them.* He recalled, with a pang of regret, the tears she had shed for her fallen dragon whilst on the ship and while laying him to rest for the final time.

*Her children...* The word held new meaning for him now, too. Daenerys would soon bear him a child. *A daughter. A Targaryen princess.* Jon almost laughed. It was absurd. Once, he had sworn off children long before he could even sire his own. *I knew a bastard’s life – a life with no name or place in the world – was not fit for any innocent babe, but now...*  

His own stupidity caught him like the flat of a blade striking his chest. In all worry of secrets and names and titles he had forgotten the simplest thing: his family. His daughter would bear the name Targaryen; the house of her mother and father both. Her place in the world would be at the very center of it. There could be no secrets as to whom her father truly was, even if that secret was as simple as a name.

*For her, then, he thought.* *Must I be Aegon? Perhaps other might call me Jon as others once called Lord Eddard ‘Ned’.* It seemed a proper compromise in his own mind, yet still his thoughts swirled about him like tempest winds around Winterfell’s highest tower. The notion of casting aside his name seemed as natural as casting aside his skin.

*Cast aside the rest. Become who you were born to be.* Davos’ words rang in his ears just as they had for days on end. Now, though, they awoke some deeper, older memory... a piece of advice from an older friend. *No, he was family too.* Kill the boy, Jon Snow, Aemon Targaryen had said to him once. *Kill the boy and let the man be born.*

*Kill the boy...* Perhaps someone already had. Perhaps Jon Snow had died in the courtyard of Castle Black – and whoever the Red Woman brought back was someone different, someone fit to consort with queens and wear crowns and rule Seven Kingdoms. Some to stand here on this hillside overlooking Unsullied and Northmen and dragons. *The realm needs an Aegon,* Maester Aemon had said to his younger brother. *And it needs one now.*

Jon whistled for Ghost and began the short trek back to the tents.

...  

He kept his thoughts to himself as the Targaryen host marched southward in the following days. Part of him did not know how to announce to the lords and knights that he accepted the truth of the claims made on his behalf. Gather them around as if to deliver a speech or bit of courage before battle? Even the thought seemed odd.

*Not that an announcement of any sort would be needed,* he gritted his teeth at the thought of Tyrion’s schemes. The contents of the many messages sent forth from Winterfell had become common knowledge in the camps. It seemed everyone, spearman, squire and lord, knew the claims and threats Tyrion had sent southward some weeks ago.

To his great relief, Lady Mormont and the other northerners who had sworn their swords to this southern campaign had thought little of it. It was his deeds in the north that mattered to her, she had said, not his name. Lord Umber and Lady Karstark had told him the same, though perhaps their allegiance was born of some lingering guilt.
Daenerys’ soldiers, of course, thought little of it all. To them, Aegon and Jon might have been the same name. It was the men of the southern kingdoms to whom ‘Aegon Targaryen’ meant something. Of that Jon was certain, for every day brought more riders from the south and west.

Some were houseless, homeless and bannerless brethren come to join the Targaryen host. Some were dejected septons and faithful, angry at the queen’s destruction of the great Sept of Baelor. Some were simply starving smallfolk hopeful that an army on the march would be marching with something for them to eat.

Yet most flew the banners of proud houses. Their riders carried lances, swords, torches and painted shields. Jon had seen the green willow of House Ryger and the stallion of House Bracken on the armor of the mounted serjeants and ragged footmen. And without fail, every group came bearing one of the many scrolls Tyrion had sent forth from the North.

Every group bore the same story, too. Dreadful tales of walking corpses emerging from the woods and of the survivors fleeing behind the high stone walls of keeps and holdfasts. No one from the capital had answered their ravens, their pleas for aid, they said. No one… until a raven flew from Winterfell.

This particular morning brought some forty riders under a single banner: a white weirwood tree set upon a black field with a murder of ravens around it. Bran, Jon had thought upon seeing the odd images depicted in faded dye on old cloth. Would that he were with us now. Jon would have given up three hundred knights for the ability to glimpse across the realm through his brother’s thoughts.

Yet he did not have Bran with him now. He did have men willing to pledge their swords to his and Daenerys’ cause. The Targaryen cause. For they think me a king. An Aegon. And so he and Daenerys repeated the familiar ritual in front of these haggard knights of House Blackwood, accepting their oaths of fealty and service. Tyrion’s ploy had added more sword to their ranks.

Jon thought on that all day and, when they broke to make camp in the late afternoon, he made for Tyrion’s guarded tent. The Dothraki bloodriders, all clad in thick furs and wielding their curved arakhs, grunted and stepped as he arrived outside the tent.

Inside, he found Tyrion nibbling on a bit of bread and pouring over some small tome. The dwarf looked up and raised both eyebrows in surprise.

“Oh, is it time for my execution already?” he quipped. Jon said nothing in response. The wind outside picked up, rustling the tent flap and its sides to fill the silence between the two men. “Of course, as your Hand I’d advise you against such a move.” Jon kept his lips shut. “Or perhaps I was right in my sending those ravens and you’ve come to free me from this,” he looked around the tent, “prison.”

“Your two hundred ravens have brought no more than two hundred tired, hungry knights to our side,” Jon finally replied.

“Better than another two hundred in the service of my sister,” Tyrion said. Jon inclined his head in agreement. “Speaking of Cersei, has there been any word?”

“None.”

“I see,” the dwarf mused. “Curious though. By my count we’re a day’s ride from the Trident.”

“Your count?” Jon asked.

“I’ve been this way before,” Tyrion answered. “In fact, your own lady aunt took my prisoner at an
inn a half day’s ride from here. That little show of bravery and splendor started all this.” He held up his arms as if to show the contents of the tent and war-ravaged world just outside its thin borders.

“Aye, she did,” Jon replied simply.

“Of course, you wouldn’t be fond of her mention or memory, would you?” he quipped. “The realm’s heir under her Tully nose and she for years on end you were only a bastard.”

“I was a bastard to most until you declared me Aegon Targaryen to the realm.”

“I did,” Tyrion admitted and shrugged.

“Why?”

“Why?” His mimicked response sounded almost mocking. “That’s who you are.” There was a seriousness to his tone that took Jon by surprise. “What did I tell you once? Never forget what you are? The world will not, ‘Jon Snow’, I’ve made certain of that. You’re a Targaryen – Rhaegar’s son and heir. You’ve married another Targaryen… a peculiar trait in your family and mine, but a reality nonetheless.”

“That secret was not yours to reveal,” Jon drew himself up to loom over Tyrion.

“Wasn’t mine?” Tyrion scoffed. “You left a Valyrian steel sword sitting in the dirt. I retrieved it to wield against our enemy. My sister.”

“A what?”

“A weapon,” Tyrion said. “Your name. Targaryen. It’s a name for kings and conquerors. It’s a name people know – a name they respect and revere. Snow will win no swords to our sides. Targaryen may win kingdoms.”

“And what kingdoms would those be?”

“Dorne, for one and for certain,” he replied.

“Dorne is gone.”

“House Martell is gone,” Tyrion chided him. “Dorne remains strong. Tens of thousands of spears – each wielded by a man who so thoroughly hates my sister and my family.”

“And you sent ravens to them?” Jon asked.

“One or two, perhaps. More can be sent.”

“So you’ve won no Dornish spears to our cause.”

“Did they teach the finer points of Westerosi politics at the Wall?” Tyrion spat. “Words fly faster than ravens. We’ll win those spears yet.”

“And perhaps we won’t. I liked you Lannister,” Jon replied.

“I see no reason why that state of affairs should not continue,” Tyrion said.

“You betrayed my trust. Our trust.”
"How will I convince you that I’ve done the right thing? By victory? By ten of them? What is the point of keeping me in here? Some punishment because you fail to see the truth of it all."

*He has a point,* Jon thought. *Tyrion Lannister trapped in a tent was of no use to them.*

“What is the point of allowing you your freedom?” Jon finally responded.

“The point? To win more swords to your cause. To see your arse upon that ugly iron throne and your child’s upon it after you’re gone. Do you doubt me?” Tyrion’s face bespoke a sincerity Jon had only observed in the faces of soon-to-be-dead men.

“I don’t,” he admitted. “And I’ll let you leave this tent alongside me.”

“On the condition…” Tyrion seemed to understand the underlying message.

“That you’ll never do this again. No decision shall meet with action without meeting with Daenerys or me first,” Jon said.


“No more,” Jon agreed. "We need to work together."

“Well then,” Tyrion smiled and pulled his boots on tighter. “We’ve some other matters to discuss. Shall we take a walk?”

…

The memory of his talk with Tyrion troubled Jon throughout the night, and yet inspired hope in equal measure. Perhaps Daenerys had made him Hand for a reason… instead of taking one. Jon had accepted his apology and promise to never truly embark on such a scheme again. They needed him and he them.

The next morning saw them reach the shores of the mighty Trident. The northern banks were a ruin. Where there had once been an inn, only ash-covered ruins remained. Yet even here they found no trace of the dead men nor of Cersei’s forces.

“We’ll set camp here for the night,” Davos said, riding beside him as the column behind them fanned out across the clearings.

“Aye,” Jon agreed. “And post sentries along river.”

They went along the road for a moment longer before reaching the northern banks of the Trident itself. Far from being frozen, the river was a torrent of grey water rushing toward the sea.

Davos climbed down from his horse and continued toward the muddy bank on foot. It was a curious gesture. *It’s a river like any other, if a bit larger.* Still, Jon made to follow his friend and advisor. As he approached, Davos turned and examined Jon with a queer look in his eye. He held his gaze for a moment before turning it back to the river.

“The Ruby Ford,” he muttered as if they stood on hallowed ground. *The Ruby Ford?* He turned to look at the older man.

“Then this is where…”

“Aye,” Davos nodded, already knowing what Jon was thinking.
Where those two armies fought, he thought. Where Robert and Rhaegar clashed amidst the blood and water and chaos. Where my sire died.

He had never thought to see the place, even when he had only known himself as Jon Snow. Lord Eddard had been here – all those years ago during the battle and then again when he rode south to King’s Landing. I suppose I have been here too, he thought. Though I would not remember it.

Bran had told him Lord Eddard had taken him from that Dornish tower after burying his sister – Jon’s own mother Lyanna. His younger brother’s visions had proved almost as good as memories, even if they had been stale and dry in the retelling. Once more, Jon wondered how Bran was, whether he was awake and truly if they would ever seen each other again.

Lord Reed had stories too, he remembered from days past. Howland Reed had been something of a miracle on their march – as had his men. And while the Reed men hunted fish and frogs and fowl, Jon had feasted on the stories of his mother. He did so just now as he walked.

He walked down the slushy, muddied river bank and stood on the edge of the grey waters, watching them rush eastwards toward the distant sea. The cold waters lapped at his boots. The wind pulled at his cloak with gentle fingers. It whispered in some unknown tongue. He thought he heard a voice there, something bidding him forward, or back. He could not be certain what it was.

Yet he took a step forward anyway. The water rushed around his boot. He could feel the cold water leeching the warmth from his foot, even though he remained dry. He took another step, then another. The water was freezing. The stones were uneven. Still, he went onward.

This is where he died, Jon thought. Struck down by Robert’s war hammer. His blood leeching into the waters. He tried to imagine his father’s final moments – his final thoughts. It was not hard, for he had died once, too.

He must have been terrified. Jon could still remember those brilliant flashes of memory when he fell at Castle Black: Robb and he as boys in Winterfell, Lady Catelyn’s icy blue stare, finding Ghost for the first time, Ygritte in that cave… What had Rhaegar thought of? My mother? Me? Did he even know…?

Jon just stood there for a time, letting the waters rush around his feet and wash the past away. He thought he heard voices calling his name… and hooves pounding in the distance.

There were no memories of the past. He looked up at the northern banks at once and saw perhaps thirty Unsullied running toward him alongside a dozen mounted northmen. Some kept their eyes on him as they rushed forward, white water splashing up around them. Others looked southward. After a confused moment, Jon did too.

A line of armored horsemen sat on the southern bank. Their armor was familiar, polished and enameled crimson steel. Above them flew two bright crimson banners bearing the proud lion of House Lannister. A crowned lion, Jon noted. These are Cersei’s men.

He reached for Longclaw, but stayed his hand as his eyes found the sheathed swords of his foes. They’re not here to offer a contest. He saw one man raise up the white banner of truce. They’re here to offer terms.

Jon remained in the middle of the ford as three of the riders guided their mounts down the muddy banks and into the river. The Unsullied and northmen arrived by his side. He assured them of the situation with a few words. Behind him, hundreds of others were forming up on the northern banks, readying themselves for a new Battle of the Trident.
The three Lannister riders starting forward. Jon watched each of the horses maneuver through the shallows. They were well-fed and surefooted. The men atop them looked equally stronger. Cersei has the supplies to weather the winter.

“Which one of you unwashed northerners calls himself ‘Aegon’?” the center rider shouted from a spear’s throw away. “Or have you chosen one of the cockless slaves as your king?”

Kill the boy... Now was the time. He was certain of it. Jon stepped forward and away from his soldiers. “I am he,” Davos or Missandei would have prefaced the conversation with titles and claims, but Jon had a simpler way of things.

“You?” the rider asked derisively, though his voice sounded colored in shock, too. “You don’t look like an Aegon. A northern bastard, more like.”

Jon remained silent for a moment, but he kept his eyes on the center rider. The Lannister man did not speak. All the world was silent, save for the labored breaths of the horses and the soft rush of water around their feet.

A fiercesome roar split the world asunder. Rhaegal dove through the clouds above and swept low across the sky, north to south. The Lannister mounts turned about and whinnied in panic. Their riders struggled to right them.

“Aye, I am Aegon,” he finally replied. “And on that shore you’ll find Daenerys of House Targaryen – with her dragon and armies. Have the three of you come to halt our advance?”

This time it was the rider who remained silent. He and the others seemed shaken by the dragon’s display, but they remained stoic. He leaned sideways and reached into a saddlebag. He extended his mailed hand toward Jon and revealed a sealed scroll clutched between his finger and thumb.

“A message from Queen Cersei Lannister,” he said. “Her forces – the royal army – awaits your host of usurpers and traitors at Harrenhal. But it need not come to battle.”

“No?” Jon took a step forward and took the scroll from the rider’s hand.

“No,” the man replied. “The queen offers terms. Turn your army around and return to the North. Remain there and no harm will come to you and yours.” Cersei’s promises are meaningless. “Continue south, and the queen has sworn that she will finish her father’s work in ridding the realm of your house and name.”

Jon met the man’s gaze, then turned to look at those gathered on the northern banks. My family, he knew. And my people. I’ll not fail them now. He looked up at the riders and tossed the sealed scroll into the water unread.

“Turn your horses around and ride for your queen,” he replied. “Tell her winter comes for her.” No... “Tell her Daenerys and Aegon Targaryen march southward... to show her the meaning of our words.”

Chapter End Notes

Pardon any typos I didn't really review this thoroughly. Mostly it's been sitting around for 2 weeks and I wanted to get it out there.
The next chapter will be a Brienne-of-fucking-Tarth POV.
Brienne

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Brienne sat in her tent alone. In truth, that was the way she liked it. It seemed she had spent half her life in camps. She could remember the sweet late summer air of Renly’s camps along the roseroad, the lingering chill of Robb Stark’s ever-dwindling and ever-moving camps in the Riverlands. And of course here.

She had marched with three armies now, but this was by far the strangest among them. Dothraki and Unsullied… Brienne usually steered well clear of both groups, perhaps out of a certain respect rather than outright fear. Both the riders and spearmen were indeed fearsome fighters in the own ways.

Neither fought like Westerosi swordsmen. The Unsullied were like stone, hard and immovable. Each action was like a mountain shifting – all at once and with great force. The Dothraki were more powerful and wild, but more undisciplined. They crashed upon enemy lines like waves upon Tarth’s shores during a winter storm.

Tarth... the name meant home. She could see it so clearly in her mind’s eye; its sapphire waters glimmering in the late afternoon sun, a ship on the horizon fading into the growing eastern darkness. Perhaps she would see it – and her father – again soon. It had been far too long.

She signed as she put the oil cloth to Oathkeeper once more. The blade never needed sharpening nor much care, but the simple act of cleaning it helped her think.

Thinking seems to be all I do now – that and riding. They had been nearly a month on the winter roads, marching through miserable conditions on several occasions. The snows had been nothing compared to what they had faced in the dead of the northern winter with that thing hunting any living being, yet the journey had not been pleasant.

She could almost feel the tourney sword strike her at that last thought. Not pleasant, what would Ser Goodwin think of me? Her father’s master-at-arms had been a good man and an excellent instructor in his time, yet now Brienne could only smile at the thought of her pitiful complaint.

That unpleasantness had a purpose, of course. I still have an oath to fulfill. Sansa was safe in Winterfell, but Arya was here in these camps, marching south along with the rest.

That’s what she told herself, anyway. It only took a moment of honesty to admit that Arya Stark needed no more protection that did a dragon. In truth, there were many reasons Brienne had chosen to ride south alongside this Targaryen host. Many reasons...

A scream rent the air, tearing her from her thoughts. An attack, she thought while grabbing her sword’s hilt and facing the tent’s entrance as if some foe were about to charge in. Jon Snow’s encounter with the Lannister riders was well known throughout his army. Patrols had been doubled and more scouts sent out to ensure the Golden Company did not steal a night’s march on them.

More sounds of pain and panic filled the air. Brienne rushed out into the camp itself and quickly found her bearings. The screams were coming from her left – the edge of the camp near the forest. She ran toward them.

Unsullied and northmen gathered had gathered by the dying cookfire when she arrived. The light of
a waxing moon cast the field before her in dim, pale light. The forest beyond was like the Wall tipped in tar: black and tall and utterly foreboding.

Shapes moved in the darkness, swift shadows flashing like draw swords. Horses screamed, their death throes echoing through the night. She could hear the snarls and howls of savaged beasts.

“Wolves,” a northerner grunted beside her, jutting his bearded chin outward. A horse cried out with its dying breath. “Must’ve come for the horsemeat.”

*I’ve never known wolves to attack a camp filled with thousands of men,* she thought. *What sort of beast would risk steel and fire? They must be desperate to come so close.*

“We should do something,” Brienne said. “Come, help me drive them off.” She took two steps toward the edge of the camp, then turned around. None of the men had moved. The northerner looked concerned, and he too turned around as if to beckon someone else go drive off the bloodthirsty beasts.

For his sake, more men came – dozens of them, all wielding spears, torches and strung bows notched with arrows. They began, with some trepidation, to advance into the fields toward the forest beyond. With Oathkeeper in hand, Brienne joined them.

The many torches on either side of her made it difficult to see. Shadows cast by the flickering firelight flashed around her. The men began to waves their torches wildly as they advanced, warding off wolves that Brienne could not see.

She quickened her pace, putting more distant between herself and the rest of the soldiers. Her tired feet met cold, hard ground with every step; pale moonlight flashed off the rippled steel of her sword as she strode onward. Howls filled the night air around her.

Her toe struck something hard. She immediately stepped back and shifted her stance, drawing back her sword and pointing its tip outward. It was reflexive, instinctual, and unnecessary. Brienne could see the mangled corpse at her feet.

The smell of the dead horse was odd, coppery and… fresh. *A fresh kill.* It was rather odd for a warrior to be alarmed at the sight or smell of blood. *I’ve fought corpses for so long I’ve forgotten what real death looks like – and what is smells like.*

The soldiers had caught up to her. They waved spears and brandished torches and swords, shouting all the while to ward off the ravenous wolves. Snarling, the beasts retreated from their kills and fled for the safety of the forest.

*Simpler than I thought it would be, though we’ll have to gather the horse now and set their lines within our own.* The former task might take the rest of the night. *But we need every mount we have for the battles ahead.*

She spotted a horse in the distance and moved toward, sheathing her blade so as not to started the beast with a glinting, sharpened edge. She gave a soft whistle to urge the horse toward her. It turned slightly at the sound, its form seeming to grow longer…

Brienne cursed and fumbled for her sword hilt as the massive wolf bared its teeth in a fearsome snarl and started toward her.

“Back!” she shouted, holding Oathkeeper out in front of her. Shouts echoed around the field as other men spotted the remaining wolf. *Dire wolf,* she corrected herself. Only that white wolf of Jon Snow’s could compare to this beast.
The dire-wolf eyed her, its own dark eyes reflecting the moonlight. It drew itself up and raised its head high, baring its throat as it howled – a piercing sound that seemed to drive all other sound before it. The night was silent for the space of a single heartbeat, then the forest came alive with the pack’s answer.

Howling filled the night air. The sound sent a chill down her spine. There must be scores in there. Hundreds, even. No mere pack could produce such a sound. The sound surrounded her, and there, even from the camp behind her, she could hear a lone wolf howling. Yet for all the power of the pack, the sound itself was low and mournful - the wild’s lament to the realm’s dead.

As the sound faded away into the night air, the wolf lowered its head and eyed her once more. Snarling, it took a step forward. Brienne readied her blade to strike, slowly raising it above her head.

A familiar sensation overtook her. Her breathing was heavy, but steady – calm like the waters in the very center of a storm. Her hands felt heavy, but strong. Like steel, like they’re a part of my sword or my sword a part of my arm. Her heel shifted in the dirt. The wolf took another step forward. Brienne twisted her mailed grip and prepared what she hoped would be the killing blow.

“Wait,” a voice behind her instructed. The word shattered her concentration. She stood as is frozen in place, unsure whether to turn and face the newcomer or keep her attention of the wolf. No, only a fool would turn her back to her foe, and Brienne was not fool.

Yet she watched as the great wolf before her ceased her advance. “You should lower your sword.”

Brienne turned. “Arya?” The girl raised both her eyebrows as if her own name being spoken aloud was something of a surprise.

“She won’t hurt you,” Arya said calmly. Is she talking to the wolf or to me?

As if in response to her own thoughts, the great wolf slowly turned away from the two women, then bounded off into the night. Brienne heard the rustle of branches that signaled her entry into the forest – well away from the army’s camp and its horses.

Brienne furrow her brow. “How did you…?” There were truly no words to describe such a bizarre occurrence. Jon Snow has his wolf, of course, but I’m told he raised the beast up from a newborn pup. And of the Queen and her dragons, well, Brienne did not profess to be a maester. Her Valyrian steel was forged into a sword, not a link for a heavy chain.

Arya shrugged and began to walk back toward the camp.


“Brienne,” Arya kept walking, catching up with the scores of men retreating to the safety and warmth of their fires.

“That was a direwolf;” she said. Arya took another few paces, then stopped. Slowly, eerily so, she turned and looked at Brienne.

“That was Nymeria,” Arya said simply. “My wolf – or she was, once.”

“Your wolf?!” Brienne might have laughed at the absurdity of it all. Yet I saw Robb with his direwolf many a time... and even Sansa spoke of her “Lady”.

“My wolf,” Arya nodded. “And her family, I suppose.”
“Family? That had to be a hundred wolves or more that attacked our horses!”

“They were hungry,” the girl replied, seemingly unconcerned that wolves had ravaged some dozens of horses – mounts for the army’s knights and cavalry.

An odd, pitiful sound made the girl stop and swivel back toward the darkened forest. Brienne drew up Oathkeep and stepped forward, her night eyes scanning the field for the source of the sound. She found it quickly.

A horse lay dying just a few paces away. It’s ragged final breaths sounded labored. Brienne stepped forward, knowing her duty. She gripped her sword’s golden hilt with both hands and drove it downward into the horse’s side. The beast shuddered, then was still.

“A mercy,” Arya whispered as if she thought the words might rouse the trees in the forest.

“Yes,” Brienne replied. “Better to let it rest easy than live a little longer in agony.”

Their eyes met, and in that moment Brienne saw something pass over the girl. What? Sadness? Regret? She had never been good at reading people’s emotions, only their movements.

“Do you really believe that?” Arya asked, looking away toward the forest.


In truth there were many reasons Brienne had killed others. For survival, for vengeance, for honor and oaths and duty. Yet none were so grim but so necessary as mercy. Sometimes, she thought, death is a gift.

“Would you do it for a person?”

Brienne paused to consider the question. I suppose I would... “If they asked it of me, yes.”

Arya nodded again. She seemed rather diminished here and now, less a warrior or a lady and more a lost child asking a parent what it truly meant to die. Yet Brienne thought she saw a flash of anger in those grey eyes – a hint of some hungering beast gone too long without a hunt.

Another moment saw the pair back among the tents and the throng of confused soldiers. Dozens had helped drive off the wolves, but hundreds more had rushed forth from all sides to help or else catch of glimpse of the excitement. The Dothraki were especially excitable, pushing each other in their haste to see the fled foe.

“Verz,” she heard one rider grunt another. Both seemed disappointed as they turned away – as if they had been denied a good fight. They must long for their homes, Brienne thought of the pair and their countrymen, or at least a fight against something other than hunger and hungry corpses.

In her moment of lapsed attention, she lost Arya Stark. Brienne could almost hear Ser Goodwin’s voice ringing off the rafters of her father’s halls as he rang her head like a bell. Never look away. Eyes on your foe, always. Brienne reprimanded herself now. I should have kept my eyes on her.

Not that Arya Stark was in need of much protection. The girl was a fighter would had matched Brienne herself many a time in sparring. The way she moves, weaving between foes, almost like she was dancing... It was impressive. Of course, Brienne was not certain the Braavosi style would be any match for a dozen armored living men, but then again it had been her own ways of fighting that had bested scores of men before.
She forced her way through the crowd of curious soldiers, muscling the last few aside as she made her way back to her own tent. *And still more,* she inwardly sighed as other group of men ran toward and past her. Some brushed past her, some bumped against her elbows and shoulders; one crashed right into her.

The man fell with the dull thud of a body hitting hard ground. She recognized the flash of gold at once.

"I - Ser Jaime!" she sputtered, reach down to offer her companion a hand. When he did not reach for her, she bent down and grasped his only hand, pulling him back to his feet.

"I heard shouting – howling," he said, not addressing their collision.

"Wolves from the forest," Brienne explained, her eyes meeting his sharp green ones for a moment. "Gone now," she added.

"I see," Jaime shrugged. "I suppose the Golden Company is still some ways off, then."

"I suppose they are," Brienne agreed. She pressed her lips together uncomfortably. *Why must every conversation be like this.?* It was like steel scraping against steel; uncomfortable to hear and feel. *Better to end it swiftly.* "Well, good night then." She turned to leave without a second thought.

"Brienne," Jaime called out. "Wait."

She turned back around, her sheathed blade slapping against her side in the whirl of activity. "Perhaps you might join me in my tent?" he shrugged, a gesture made uneven by the weight of his golden hand. *What? What does he mean?* He gave a half smile and nodded to a tent – one like all the rest – only a few paces away. Brienne joined him.

Once inside, he offered her a seat on a low wooden stool and found one for himself. "Not much," he said. "But it’s better than our last journey through the Riverlands."

"I suppose it is," Brienne admitted. She watched Jaime fumbled for something she took to be a filthy bedpillow – a round object covered in brown sackcloth. Yet when Jaime gave the cloth a tug it revealed itself to be a small cask. He awkwardly handled it and set it on its base. "Wine?"

"My brother’s doing, plucked it from the cellar of that holdfast two nights past," he laughed softly as he tapped the cask’s side and poured the deep, crimson liquid into a roughhewn wooden cup. He offered the first pour to her.

"I’d thought your brother would have been under closer scrutiny after his, well, actions," she admitted. *Scattering rumors across the realm…*

"I believe Queen Daenerys meant for him to sleep in the cellar," Jaime said.

"No ravens down there, I suppose." "No…” Jaime admitted rather awkwardly. "I suppose not."

Tyrion’s trickery was repulsive. *To betray the trust of those he had sworn to serve.* It was the lowest sort of cunning. *Not unlike Littlefinger.* Yet is was the contents of those raven scrolls that had set this army to chattering late into the night. *A lost prince, a pretender, a Targaryen!* Brienne had heard them all.
“Do you believe him?” she asked suddenly.

“Who? Tyrion?” Jaime asked, putting his wine aside and staring intently at her.

“No, not Tyrion. Jon Snow.”

Jaime laughed softly. It was a pleasant sound, if uncommon. “A northern bastard turned Targaryen heir? It seems unlikely, and yet…”

“The man rides the green dragon,” Brienne said.

“He does,” Jaime agreed. “And he has a certain brooding quality to him that befits the son of Prince Rhaegar.” I’d forgotten he knew the prince.

“Did you know Rhaegar well?”

“Not well, no,” Jaime raised his eyebrows as he drank deeply from his cup. Brienne mirrored his movements. The wine tasted sour, but it was good to taste something other than ice water. “But better than most, I suppose. I guarded his father and mother. I kept watch over Prince Viserys too, though he was little more than a silver-haired babe.”

“Then you believe your brother and Jon Snow? You think he is Rhaegar’s son and heir?” Brienne asked. I sound like a child. The thought brought a rush of memories upward from days long forgotten. She could hear herself pestering her father’s maester for tales of warriors and knights and battles.

“Does it matter what I believe?” he asked.

“If he is, it would make Queen Daenerys both his wife and his aunt and…” she stopped herself from going any further.

“I know what it makes them,” Jaime said. “I know what people will say, too. They’ve said it about Cersei and me for years. It doesn’t matter, does it? They both knew long before we did and long before my brother announced the truth to the lords of the realm. He bears her name and she his child.”

“They seem happy enough together,” Brienne chose her words carefully.

“I suppose they are,” Jaime shrugged as he finished his cup and turned to pour himself another. Brienne stared down into the murky crimson contents of her own. “And I suppose she might bear him a dozen other dragon babes if they both survive this fight.”

“Against your sister.”

“Against my sister,” Jaime agreed.

Both knew what the coming battle or battles meant. He rode north to fight the dead, but he’s not riding south to fight against his own men.

“What will you do when it comes to battle?” she asked, the wine urging the questions on the tip of her tongue out into the cool night air.

“Try to survive, I’d imagine,” he said. “Not much use in the field,” he raised his golden hand.

“And if we reach King’s Landing?”
“I don’t know, Brienne,” he said sharply. She met his gaze for a moment. *He still loves her, I think.* “She’s my sister.”

An odd sensation took her then, like that feeling of finally reaching the top of Evenfall’s tallest tower and looking out over the vast expanse of sapphire sea, the horizon brimming with possibility but impossible to reach. Yet in her mind’s eye she could see into the future, a future where she and the man before her were something more than companions – perhaps serving these Targaryen rulers.

*Don’t be a fool,* she chided herself. Such fantasies were for maidens and girls who had not yet accepted the cruel realities of the world.

“It’s late,” Jaime sighed and put his cup aside. “And we should get what rest we can. I imagine we’ll meet with the others on the morrow, then continue this march.”

There were a thousand things she wanted to say to him here and now in the quiet, comfortable silence of his tent, but she could not bring herself to speak aloud even one of them.

“Good then, Ser Jaime,” she said, getting to her feet.

“Good night, Lady Brienne.”

…

She was among the last to enter the tent the following morning. The king and queen stood together at the head of the long, low command table. Brienne’s eyes left Daenerys’ figure and looked over the scattered maps of the realm and the Riverlands. She saw carved wooden dragons and lions and wolves arrayed against each other.

Around the table stood other advisors. Ser Davos and Ser Jorah flanked the king and queen on either side, while Missandei and Varys stood further to the left. Arya Stark and Gendry stood opposite them, the lad seemed apprehensive as he stroked his stubble and looked over the map. Sandor Clegane – armored as always – loomed behind them, his face cast half in shadow by the burning brazier.

Others filled the tent too. Unsullied lieutenants and commanders and a few Dothraki bloodriders formed a wide outer circle. The little Lord Umber and Lady Mormont stood side by side, the boy with a much-too-large sword hanging from his hip and the girl with a small dagger forged of dragonglass at hers. *Not much use now,* Brienne noted, but still the gesture made her smile.

At last her eyes settled on Jaime and his brother. Tyrion did not look her way, but her eyes locked with Jaime’s green ones for the space of a few heartbeats before he looked down at the map.

The Queen’s gloved hand reached down and plucked a wooden dragon from the painted blue splotch Brienne took to be the God’s Eye.

“So, the Golden Company,” she said, looking around the room.

“Sellswords, Your Grace,” Davos explained. “Our scouts and the Reed’s warg say they’ve made camp just outside the walls of Harrenhal.”
“Ten thousand or more, I’m told.”

“At least that many,” Jorah said. “I fought with the company for years. They’ll have brought heavy horse and elephants with them, too.”

Elephants… Brienne had only heard of the beasts. A merchant visiting Tarth had once described them to her, along with many other wonders of the east. The prospect of tusks as long and sharp as swords had seemed so interesting then. Less so now I might stand across from them.

“The Unsullied’s spears should be enough to fend off their horse,” Davos said. “The elephants, though…”

“I’m not concerned about the elephants,” Daenerys insisted as she turned the dragon figurine over in her hand. “We need to know how to defeat these men. Without proper reinforcements,” she glared at Tyrion. “We’re weak enough as it is.”

“Considered killing them?” Clegane grunted from the shadow-shrouded corner. “Might do the trick…” he added to fill the silence.

Brienne almost laughed despite herself. Clegane made it sound so simple. Of course, she had never been one for grand strategy and politics and schemes either. All those lordly plots were decided on the field of battle anyway, or in single combat. That was where she belonged.

“I fear it may come to that,” Varys hummed. “Since Aeg – King Jon sent Cersei’s riders south again with words of war.” Jon’s frustrated exhale was audible. “Perhaps we might send riders of our own to-”

“I’ll not treat with the woman who betrayed out cause. How many thousands of northerners died for want of Lannister arms and supplies? How many women and children might we have ferried to safety on Lannister and Greyjoy ships. How long-”

Daenerys dropped the wooden dragon and placed her hand on her husband’s arm. The gesture seemed to calm him some.

“Forgive me,” he sighed before drawing himself up and squaring his shoulders to the table. “Some of you already know the truth, the rest of you have no doubt heard the mutterings in this camp and beyond. What I am and what I call myself are not important now. This isn’t about me or my name. It’s about us. All of us. We fought for the realm in the North and we fight for it here.”

“Varys is right,” Tyrion said. “We don’t need to treat with my sister. We only need to treat with the Golden Company.”

“They’ve never broken a contract,” Jorah explained.

“In Essos, no they haven’t,” Tyrion continued. “Tyrosh and Pentos and Myr are all the same to them. But that company is not made up of Tyroshis, Pentoshi and Myrish. Not entirely.”

“Most are Westerosi, exiled warriors or hedge knights off to seek gold and glory in the east,” Jorah agreed.

“As was their founder, Aegor Rivers – a Targaryen bastard.” Brienne grimaced at Tyrion’s satisfied smirk. What did it matter who founded the sellsword company? Sellswords were honorless and untrustworthy. Better to give them steel than gold. “They might retain certain sympathies. I think it possible. If I could send a raven to their camp offering-”
“I think you’ve sent enough ravens,” Daenerys snapped. The tension in the room was so thick Brienne doubted Oathkeeper could have cut through it.

“The Golden Company cannot be bribed or bought,” Jorah said, taking a half step forward to ensure his own armored frame stood between the queen and her Hand. “They must be defeated in the field.”

“How?” Brienne asked. She had never deigned to ask a question in any war council. It was not a warrior’s place. Yet it seemed too simple, defeat in the field.

“With dragonfire,” Jorah replied.

The pronouncement silenced the assembly. Brienne watched Daenerys and Jon intently. The king kept his gaze on the map while the queen looked to her husband for some sort of silent assurance. Burning living men... sentencing soldiers to such a terrible fate. They like this idea even less than I do.

“Burning our own countrymen seems a poor way to win allies,” Tyrion replied.

“These are not our countrymen, not anymore,” Jorah replied coolly. “They’re sellswords come to rape and plunder for gold – the worst sort of soldier. The realm will be well rid of them.” He has a point.

She locked eyes with Jaime again. He’s fought the queen’s Dothraki and dragon before, she knew. He had never spoken of it with her. Perhaps the memory was too gruesome, or perhaps the mention of fighting against Daenerys was not something he thought prudent to set forth in this gathering. Either way, Jaime did not speak.

“Even war elephants will have trouble against two full grown dragons,” Davos agreed.

Tyrion shook his head and sighed, though he seemed to silently realize his own effort to avoid burning the sellswords was a lost cause. “It’s not the elephants that trouble me, ser,” he said. “If my sister has produced more of those scorpions to bring into battle… it only took one bolt to ground Drogon.”

“If we destroyed those weapons and killed the elephants from dragonback, would the Golden Company surrender or sue for peace?” Daenerys asked, her tone higher than Brienne had heard it before. She directed the question at Ser Jorah.

The old knight gave her a curious look. “Difficult to say, Your Grace, though with their greatest weapons gone the men might lose heart.”

“And if they don’t?” she asked.

“Then it will come to battle,” Jorah replied.

“I don’t think it has to,” Arya blurted out from the corner. All eyes turned to her figure, proud but defiant beside Gendry.

“What do you mean?” Jon asked his sister.

“We’re fighting Cersei,” Arya said. “If some of us can slip past Harrenhal and get into the city, we could just kill her.” The statement hung in the air unchallenged. “I could do it.”

The look on Gendry’s face was mirrored on the others’ faces. Jaime wore a look of horror and took
a half step forward, as if to stop Arya from leaving the tent just then to carry out her plot. **Assassination?** War was cruel and horrid, yes. *And we have all lost ones we cared for, but this...*

“No.”

The denial came from the king and queen together and all at once. They seemed surprise by their own unity in denial. It was Daenerys who continued on from the command.

“I won’t order that, nor will I consider it any further. That is not who we are.”

“But-”

“If we start assassinating queens, it might give others ideas,” Tyrion cut Arya off.

“You’d rather see more northerners die, then?” Arya spat, color rising in her cheeks.

“Arya...” Gendry muttered.

“No,” she stepped away from her companion. “This is a war. A war against your sister,” she pointed a thin finger at Tyrion.

“A war I’d very much like to see us win,” Tyrion said.

“Would you?” She was nearly shouting now. **No doubt those outside can hear nearly every word now.**

“There are other ways, Arya,” Jon said calmly, trying to ease the growing tension. “Better ways.”

“I haven’t heard any.”

“You would, if you were quiet,” Tyrion quipped.

That sent her over some unseen edge. She reached for her dagger and started forward, her eyes narrow and furious. Tyrion leapt back in shock as Brienne and Clegane both stepped forward, but it was Gendry who reached for her and held her back.

“Get. Off. Me.” she writhed in his firm grip. After a moment, Gendry let her go.

“Arya...” Jon moved toward her with an outstretched hand.

She glared at him, then at Tyrion, then she turned and stormed from the tent. The rest of the assembled councilors were silent, the suddenness of the outburst having caught them all off-guard.

“Damn it, girl,” Clegane grunted for the corner as he started forward toward the exit. Brienne made to follow him and Arya, hoping to save Catelyn Stark’s daughter from, if not others, her equally dangerous self.

When she emerged into the blinding winter sunlight, she found Clegane standing only a few feet away. He met her gaze and jutted his chin forward.

“Ran off that way,” he grunted.

“The forest?” Brienne asked.

“Aye. Run after her if you like, though if she doesn’t want to be found, I doubt she will be.”
“There are wolves in that forest.” Even as she tried to explain the obvious danger, she remembered the scene from the night before. *She calmed that monstrous beast…*

“Aye, there are,” Clegane agreed with her. “And now there’s one more.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, thankfully my time sink of a project is over with, took up about 10 days in the middle of writing this.

Speaking of, found this one a bit difficult to write. I will say right off the bat that I'm not going to smush Brienne and Jaime into a feel-good romance. Their relationship is a bit more complex than that.

I also realize that I probably should have worked in an Arya chapter earlier, as she's dealing with some lasting issues over having to mercy-kill her own brother. We'll get to that soon enough.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Her heel fell upon the thin branch’s center, snapping it cleanly in two. The woods swallowed the sound. Arya looked around her. Even in daylight the forest was dark and foreboding. Barren trees blocked the pale sunlight from reaching the forest floor while still-green soldier pines formed crooked walls on either side of her.

Still, it was pleasant in here – alone and away from the press of bodies in the camps. The air was fresh, cool and still. It calmed her even as she calmed herself. Calm as still water. Quiet as shadow.

Her old teacher’s words were of no use here. She still seethed with anger… and it felt good. Her face was flushed red and her hands felt as strong and light as Valyrian steel. Would that she had something to strike…

Arya could still see Tyrion’s mismatched eyes looking her over. She could hear his and the queen’s refusals to consider her approach. They don’t know, they don’t understand.

She kicked a small stone in frustration. It flew into the air through the underbrush, passing beyond her sight. Yet in the distance she heard the faint plop that could mean only one thing.

Arya swiveled and turned toward the noise, dagger at the ready. Then, she started forward pushing her way through thickets and thorns. Soon she beheld a small black pool beside a great oak tree with gnarled, tangled roots spreading out everywhere like some kraken.

The scene reminded her of her home in Winterfell and of the godswood, where she had played as a girl and sat beside her father as he polished his greatsword and prayed to the old gods of the North.

The godswood… Perhaps coming into these woods had been a mistake, for now every step forward into the gloom seemed to awaken fresh memories of her home and her brother.

Anger of a different sort, cold and bitter, tempered her fury then. It’s my fault. In winter we must protect each other, but I couldn’t protect him. Bran was dead because of her. She did not truly understand what had happened with the ravens and his sight and the trees, but she knew the Red Woman had done something to make him that way. And I couldn’t stop her. Death had taken another member of her pack.

She had spared her younger brother the torment of lingering a life of agony – the only thing she could have done for him – but still she doubted her own actions. Worse, doubts slowly crept upon her now. He could have survived. He could have lived. Perhaps the gift of mercy was no gift at all.

She found a spot beside the pool and sat. The ground was cool, not cold, and the black water seemed made of glass. Arya leaned forward ever so slightly and beheld her own reflection on the mirrored surface of the pool.

The girl staring back at her was a stranger. Her grey eyes were as dark and sunken as the pool she was looking into. Her hair was tangled and long – far too long. There were scars upon her face that Arya did not recognize nor recall earning. It was an odd thing, to be able to change your face at will yet not truly know your own. I’ve changed.

The wind whispered her name.
“What?” she snapped back and reached for her blade. “Who’s there?” she demanded answers of the winter air. She heard her name again and felt a tingling on the back of her neck. It’s nothing, it’s the wind. Don’t be an idiot.

“Arya?” the call was distant and muffled by the forest, but she knew the voice. You see? It was Jon you heard. She did not respond just yet.

“Arya?” he called out again, closer now. “Ghost! Come.”

She could hear her brother’s wolf pacing through the underbrush to where she sat. She turned around as Ghost emerged from among the trunks and brambles, his white coat more a faded silver in the gloom. He stopped, examined her with his blood red eyes for a moment, then lazily paced forward and pushed his snout into her hand like any common dog would. She laughed softly and stroked his fur. The gesture seemed to calm her some. Then Jon, shorn of his cloak but with Longclaw at the ready, followed his wolf into the small clearing. His eyes met hers.

“Arya,” he sighed as he took a step toward her. She did not back away.

“Jon,” she replied, placing extra emphasis on the name.

It had not bothered her when she first heard it – the truth of her brother’s parentage and blood. Of course, she had been happy that Jon was not a bastard and that he could rightfully claim a name as his own. As we all can, names are but words and words are wind.

Yet to hear of his announcement before the enemy’s outriders and again in the tent seemed strange. It hurt, but only for an instant – like a dagger of ice plunged into her before melting away in the spring thaw. He threw it away so quickly, his name, she thought. But he is my brother – the only brother I have left.

“The army is already on the march,” Jon replied. “We should be too.”

“You found me quickly,” she stated.

“Ghost did,” Jon said with a nod to the wolf still pressing his head against her gloved hand. “He knows your scent.” Something not as easily shed as a face or name.

“Maybe he’ll recognize Nymeria’s, then.”

“Nymeria?” Jon asked, the named coming uneven off his tongue.

“My dire wolf,” Arya said.

“Your wolf,” Jon said flatly, his eyes staring back into the past as if to spot the long-forgotten memory. He smiled, then frowned slightly and looked around. “Lost in these woods?”

“I lost her riding south with father, Sansa and the old king years ago. Weeks after we said goodbye and you rode with Uncle Benjen for the Wall, remember?” Jon nodded but remained silent. “It seems so long ago now,” she said, turning away and staring back into the black pool. “Like another lifetime, before everything fell apart…”

I can’t tell him. That guilt which had weighed her down for weeks now rested on the tip of her tongue, but she just could not let it go. She did not know how he would react – or if he would even give a reaction. Her brother could be like that, cold and unreadable as the Wall he had once guarded. I killed him, Jon. I killed our brother.
“Everything has not fallen apart,” Jon said. He took a step toward her and smiled. It was always good to see him smile – and she knew it was meant only for her. “We’re together now. All of us.”

“Sansa’s not here.”

“Sansa is safe in Winterfell and so is Bran.”

The sound of his name spoken aloud felt like a cold dagger plunged into her. Here, alone in these woods with Jon, she could not bring herself to speak the truth. Why does trying to be strong make me feel weak?

“You know why they could not come south,” he continued.

I know, and I’m afraid. It was the first time in a long time that she had admitted that to herself. She was afraid what Jon would think of her if she told him what she had done… and she was afraid for Jon, too. And for the others. I cannot let it happen again.

Horns and trumpets sounded in the distance. Arya could hear them clearly as if she were standing across the field of battle, but to Jon they must have sounded faint for it took a moment for him to collect himself.

“We should return to the camp,” he said.

The horns sounded again. The sound shook her from that distant sense of sadness she had felt here in this forest grove. Fear turned to a surging anger as she considered the battles and tasks before her and the gathering she had left earlier that day.

“You should,” she replied coolly, unsheathing her dagger and examining it in her left hand. “I’m going to slip past Harrenhal and into King’s Landing. I’m going to-”

Jon held up a hand. “We discussed this,” he said, brotherly smile fading.

“With Lannisters,” she sneered. “You really think either of them wants to see their sister killed?”

“Tyrion is the Queen’s Hand and Jaime helped fight the dead,” Jon countered. She could see the frustration brewing behind his eyes.

“Only after Cersei lied about sending her armies north to fight. That’s what they do Jon. They lie and betray and backstab. They killed father. Our father. They killed Robb… they do what needs to be done.”

“Tyrion is not his sister,” Jon said. “And I’ll hear no more of this. Cersei sent some men to try to kill Daenerys – are we to become like her?”

“If we want to win,” Arya replied.

“We have two dragons,” Jon said. “That will be enough.”

Will it? She had seen the dragons fight against the dead in the field and outside the walls of Winterfell. But the dead killed one of them and injured the others. It was too much to place their hopes in dragons. Anything can be killed. Yet again, she did not tell Jon the dark and desperate thoughts swirling within her mind.

Again, Jon sighed. The sound awoke a long-forgotten memory within her. It was, she realized, a sound she had heard a thousand times and more. When I was a girl. Father used to sigh like that
whenever I did something. It had never been disappointment with him as it had been with her mother Lady Catelyn. *It was like he could not give me what I wanted.*

She opened her mouth to say something – perhaps even to apologize – but in that moment Jon stepped forward and wrapped her in a hug. Her held her close for a moment and stepped back to muss her hair and, for a moment, she once more felt like a girl of ten.

“It will be fine, hmm?” he said in an almost fatherly tone. That cold desire for vengeance subsided within her, sinking back into the deep place from whence she knew it would come again. Then she looked at Jon and nodded.

Her brother’s brow furrowed as he turned and looked around the grove. “Where has Ghost gone?”

Arya looked around now too, scanning the clearing for any sign of the wolf’s white pelt. He was nowhere to be seen.

“Ghost?” Jon shouted. “Here Ghost!” Arya joined in the call. The wind through the barren branches was their only response. “Where’s that damned wolf?”

“He’ll come back,” Arya said, thinking of Nymeria and her pack.

“I’d rather it be sooner than later,” Jon said as the horns in the distance sounded once more. “We’re no more than a half day’s ride from Harrenhal and we’ll need him with with us.”

They walked back through the winter wood in a pleasant silence – interrupted by Jon’s calling through the forest to Ghost. Arya’s mind was focused on the battle to come as, she was sure, was Jon’s. When they emerged from beneath the trees, they both beheld a mass of men and horses moving off toward the south. Gone were the rows of tents. Only a few of the dead horses from the night before remained scattered near the tree line.

Arya turned back to once more search between the trees for Ghost or any other wolf, but she saw only branches, brambles and shadows. As she turned back, she saw a group of Unsullied spearmen and northern bannermen waiting their king’s return. Daenerys stood among them, as did Brienne and – Arya’s pulse quickened – Gendry. He smiled at her and held up the reins of her horse, beckoning her to come ride beside him.

…

The ride itself proved tense, as if a northern chill had frozen the soldiers’ bones. Few words were spoken among the levies – Arya’s own countrymen. She could feel their fear if only because she carried her own. The Unsullied, of course, said next to nothing. Arya liked that. They were true warriors.

Gendry proved more talkative. Perhaps it was his way of dealing with the cold. *That’s not right, though. It was much colder in the north and he’d just huddle under his cloak.* That had been during the bitterly cold days, though. At night, in the warmth of their tent, Gendry’s lips had been otherwise occupied. *They’re soft,* she recalled, feeling rather foolish. *The only thing about him that is…*

Being beside him – with him – drove the other concerns from her mind. It was odd, like she was wearing another face entirely; one not quite like Arya Stark’s, but one that could smile like her and
laugh on occasion. So it felt odd, yes, but it felt good too.

“What do you suppose an elephant looks like?” he asked, seeming pulling the question out of the winter air around them.

“What?” Arya looked at him, his question stirring her from her thoughts.

“And elephant,” he said again. “This Golden Company is supposed to have dozens of them.”

“I’m not sure,” she replied – and she was not. There had been no elephants in Braavos nor statues of the beasts. She had only heard descriptions of them. She shared them with her companion.

“Big and grey,” he said. He looked at her, his sea blue eyes filled with amusement. “Helpful, thanks. I’ll be sure to look out for big, grey things whenever we fight these sellswords.”

She shot him a look. “They’re huge. Like those mammoths we fought at Winterfell.” His eyes widened and his mouth seemed to slacken some. “Those were dead things though,” she continued.

She could still remember the burning blue of the wights’ eyes – the beasts and the men. *Corpses did not know fear, though,* she thought. There had been no way to route them and no other way to drive them off. They were like a storm. *And it was all we could do to shelter in place.* But living men? They felt fear. Arya could feel it in the soldiers around her. *And Cersei’s sellswords would know fear too… when Drogon and Rhaegal descended from the clouds to turn them to ash.*

“Well, hope I fight men instead, then,” Gendry finished. “Course, the queen’s dragons might finish them all before I even get my armor on.”

“They might,” Arya replied.

*It always comes back to war.* And it always had. In her past she could see nothing but conflict and strife – and it seemed her future held more of the same.

*My future,* she thought. What was her future? Was it with Sansa back in Winterfell? *No, I cannot return there.* The memory of Bran’s last moments was still too fresh. *With Gendry?* He was the rightful lord of Storm’s End. *But does he want to rule? And if he does?* What then? Would she be a lady of the Stormlands, sit in some high chair and bear his Baratheon children? The thought seemed as terrible as the thought of being with him was pleasant.

And still a more terrible thought gripped her mind. *What if we lose? Would I run away like I did when Cersei took father’s head…? No. That was certain. I will fight. Whatever it takes. Whatever it costs. Cersei is mine.* Had she been first on her list? It was difficult to say, for when Yoren had told her that story so many names had flooded into her mind it had been hard to keep track. Yet Cersei Lannister had always been there, a face ever-present in her dreams.

“Well, anyway…” Gendry glanced off toward the east as he searched for some other subject. “I suppose we have something of a battle plan when it comes to it.”

“Do we?”

“Ah,” he pursed his lips. “They came up with something… after you stormed out.”

“I was angry,” she said.

“You always are.”
“I am not,” she snapped back. Arya turned and gave him a menacing look – only to find him laughing quietly.

“No?” he smiled. “Sound pretty angry right now.”

She might have shoved him to the ground were they not both on horseback. Not that she had ever had much luck in attempting that feat on foot. Gendry was stronger than he looked, and he looked quite strong.

“Anyway, doesn’t much matter now does it? I figure that..” his voice trailed off.

“What?” she kept her eyes fixed on his, but he was looking southward.

“That. Never thought I’d see that again,” he said, jutting out his chin to motion in front of them.

Then Arya saw it too. The lopsided outline of the Kingspyre Tower of Harrenhal loomed in the distance. Arya could see the other, lesser towers around it, framing it like the spikes on some ugly broken crown. Still lower were the squat guard towers set along the long curtain walls of old Harren the Black’s mighty fortress.

Around them, northmen and other soldiers stopped to take in the sight, though the levies of the Riverlands simply marched onward.

“Harrenhal,” she spoke the cursed castle’s name aloud.

“Plenty of happy memories there,” Gendry added. *That’s where the Lannisters took us after they killed Yoren – and when they were searching for Gendry. I’d almost forgotten Cersei was hunting him too.*

For a moment, they both rode along in silence – both trapped in memories of a past life. *It feels like a different life. That’s where I learned what Jaqen truly was…*

“Wonder is the forge still works…” he wondered aloud. She looked at him and shrugged, but a flash of bright color caught her here. She turned back toward the distant castle and saw hundreds of brilliant golden and crimson banners fluttering the in the wind far below its walls.

“We’ll have to kill them to find out,” Arya said grimly, pointing to them. *There must be thousands…* She could tell that even from this distance. What sigils flew on some of the banner she could not say. Yet it did not truly matter either. For every crimson or colored banner there were ten spun of golden thread – and only that.

“Suppose we will,” Gendry agreed, sounding not at all eager to see battle joined.

*And does it have to be? I could go kill whatever captain leads these golden sellswords.* Of course she could. It would be easy enough to slip past their lines. She could even

*And I failed the last time. I wasn’t quick enough. Wasn’t smart enough.* She had been a servant of Lord Tywin Lannister in his time at Harrenhal. *If I had only said his name sooner, Jaqen could have killed him.* Perhaps that would have turned the tide of her brother’s war.

*I can’t look back now.* Harrenhal was ahead of them, garrisoned by thousands of Cersei Lannister’s soldiers. She could not consider the shadows of past failures now. She had to focus on the war to come.
Ok, well obviously given the delays I'm not going to finish before the season airs. I just literally can't write that much. In all likelihood this will be complete by early May. We're headed into some action sequences which, in my case, tend to write themselves.

As for this chapter, Arya's obviously a tough character to write. I considered having her and Jon talk about Bran, but that seemed like a pivotal moment that would have ignored the years of torment and turmoil she went through. That is to say than even with Jon, she can't really return to being the little sister she was and can't fully predict his reaction to the news she killed a brother (when both profess to love and want to protect their families).

Next two coming up are battle scenes. You are all going to hate me.
The towers of Harrenhal loomed in the distance. They seemed like the hand of a wight, the bony fingers thin and shattered in some places and swollen with black blood in others. Yet, where a wight might only have had ten fingers or fewer this fat fist upon the southern horizon had three times as many, all crumpled and broken and leaning from side to side.

“It looks like your Moat Cailin,” Daenerys, mounted and riding beside him, said. Her playful smile was nothing more than a flash of lightning in a storm. Jon was not truly certain he had seen her smile at all, but he knew her better than that. Daenerys wore that regal mask wherever she went, but it was only a mask. Jon had come to know the gentler heart beneath.

“Bigger, though,” he replied. *And burned by Targaryen dragons centuries ago.*

“It seems to be,” she agreed. “And there are Cersei’s men – fit for battle.”

Jon could see the golden and crimson banners flapping in the winter wind. Beneath them lay row upon row of Lannister-crimson tents. *Thousands,* he thought. Perhaps defeat would have been certain, but with two dragons the end result would be fire and ash beneath the walls of Harrenhal. *And those thousands will die.*

The thought jarred him. It seemed to counter his nature – his very purpose. For years he had focused on saving lives and rallying the realm against the dead. To fight the living now… able-bodied men, it seemed odd. *But the dead are gone. Those men there are my enemies now.*

And enemies they were. Men who fought for gold and who would harm Daenerys and his unborn daughter and the rest of his family. He felt his right hand curl into a fist at the very thought. *I must protect them.*

“We should set the lines here,” Daenerys said, motioning to a flattened field ahead of them. “And the camp behind the lines… and we should keep Drogon and Rhaegal near our tent this time,” she said, eyeing him with a knowing look. *Just in case.*

The very idea brought a bitter taste to his mouth. *Burning the living with dragonfire.* He could still hear the screams of the people of White Harbor. *These are no innocent maidens and mothers,* Jon assured himself. *These are men who would see you dead – who would see Daenerys and your daughter and Arya and all the rest dead.*

The faint screams subsided in his mind as he considered the task before him. He thought of Lord Eddard Stark for a moment, but it was another name that surged to the forefront of his mind. *My name. Aegon… What would The Conqueror have done?*

*I don’t need an answer,* he decided. Jon knew his histories well enough to name the tower looming on the horizon. *Kingspyre.* Aegon Targaryen had burned Harren the Black and the rest of his line in that tower. Dragonfire could win wars and win kingdoms. One swift attack and…

*No. We don’t have the men. We need to be smart. I need to be smart.* This could not turn into another battle outside Winterfell. There were no Knights of the Vale to ride to his rescue now. This was a fight they had to win.
“Jon?” Daenerys asked, looking at him slightly concerned.

“Agreed,” he responded. “I’ll have the men begin setting the defenses.”

“Are you all right?”

He looked into her violet eyes. Beautiful eyes. They were like the soft purple of a summer sunset – and they shone with all that sunset’s warmth. Yet, like a summer night, they held some secrets and doubts in the darkness.

“Aye,” he responded simply, for he was tired. The prospect of ending this march and settling in beside Daenerys for a night’s sleep seemed a princely gift. He cast an eye toward the west where the pale sun was already beginning to sink into the western hills. The days were still short. Winter has not gone from this place.

For a moment, he wondered how Bran and Sansa were fairing back in Winterfell. For surely the winter was still bitter and cold there, but other northerners could be sent back to their holdfasts. And perhaps some game has returned to the Wolfswood or some fish to the White Knife. Whatever their struggles, Sansa would see the North through them. He knew that much.

Jon was, for lack of a better word, jealous of her. She’s home and safe, away from all this. He had told Arya as much earlier, but the words he had spoken in comfort gave him none now. In his heart, he longed for a home with Daenerys away from all this. Yet even now he could not imagine what that might look like. It’s only been battles and bloodshed.

He had no love of those bloodless forms of battle either, those squabbles between houses and the other unpleasantries of lordly politics. I suppose some good can come from all that though, he thought with a glance at his wife. After all, she had summoned him for political reasons and he had answered for military ones, but their union had been something more, and something far sweeter.

And soon enough he found himself sleeping beside Daenerys once more – or lying beside her, at least. Sleep never came easy the night before a battle. Even in years past he had remained alert all through the night, listening for signs of danger: the snapped twig that signaled an enemy’s approach or the whistle of arrows through the air.

Daenerys shifted beside him and murmured something incomprehensible. Her body was soft and warm where his was tense and cold. He lay still and silent as she moved again, stray silver curls trailing along his side, tickling him some. Her womb was swollen now, though she still hid her condition well enough under winter furs.

Our child, he thought. I am to be a father. Of all the titles and new names he had won and discovered over these trying years, that single word instilled him with the most dread. What if I fail her? That seemed a more terrifying prospect than facing the might of the Golden Company by himself. That I might be a poor father, or worse, not live to be a father to her at all.

No. His denial was so forceful that he sat up in bed. Daenerys once more shifted and murmured something, but she did not wake. He would be a loving father to his daughter – and to all her brothers and sisters. Their family would be whole and unscarred.

He silently rose from the bed, dressed and armed himself with Longclaw. He drew the blade out just enough to see the dim brazier light glint off the rippled steel – steel that had slain friends and enemies alike. Jon had little doubt it would shed more blood if he somehow found himself on foot in a few hours’ time.
My son might one day wield this when I’m gone or else old and frail. He hoped the unnamed boy would never have to swing the sword in anger or desperation. He hoped he would never have to use it at all.

He sheathed Longclaw, but his eyes lingered on the pommel. Ghost… Where had that wolf gone? It was odd. Jon had grown so close with his old friend that being without him left him with a strange feeling. Ghost’s presence in his mind was so assuring and so constant he often ignored the sensation. The wolf was a part of him, not unlike the sword at his side. Walking around without either left him feeling naked and vulnerable. Off hunting, perhaps, he decided. He’ll return soon.

As he thought about his wolf, another familiar presence pressed against his mind – one he knew to be close at hand. This companion, he knew, would prove at useful as an army of wolves. Indeed, he already had many times over.

With one last glance back toward the bed and Daenerys’ sleeping form, he turned and left the tent. He emerged into the chill night air, basking in the silence of early hour. A few Unsullied patrolled here and there between the tents, but all else was quiet.

Jon walked down the length of one row and emerged into a central clearing where two great shapes lay slumbering side by side. The smaller one shifted and – in an instant – Jon found himself greeted by one molten gold eye examining him.

He walked toward Rhaegal and put a hand on the dragon’s scaled snout.

“You’re awake too, hmm?” he asked, chuckling softly. Rhaegal rumbled deeply in response. “Aye,” he agreed, rubbing the dragon’s warm scales.

Like Ghost, Rhaegal had a presence to him, an intelligence that set him far above any ordinary creature. He thinks and feels as I do, Jon knew. It was easy now to understand why Daenerys often called the dragons her children.

“You’re to have a little sister soon,” he said. Rhaegal blinked and his deep black pupil seemed to grow a size larger. “Perhaps one day you’ll permit her rides on your back – when she’s old enough. But first we need to make it safe for her. Do you understand?” Jon heard another rumble from deep within him. “Good.”

…

The sun rose that morning in a swirl of brilliant crimson and gold. Jon watched it rise higher and higher in the sky. Too quickly. Far too quickly. The morning had come sooner than he hoped. That sweet predawn silence was shattered by the bellows of northern horns, the buzzing of Unsullied horns, and the distant sounds of an enemy army preparing itself for battle.

Jon threw himself back into the chaos growing around him, making at once for his tent. He pushed through the crowd even as the soldiers made way for their king.

Outside the tent, he found still another crowd assembled and ready for war. Daenerys stood among them wearing an expression of relief.

“Thought you’d run,” Davos greeted him with a chuckle and a crooked smile. The gesture calmed his nerves some.

“No,” he said as he took his place by Daenerys’ side. “Just practicing my speech.”

“Best start practicing your Dothraki then.”
Jon smiled despite himself, then turned to the others. All those who had been with him in the tent two days prior were with him now. *Councilors and advisors and friends – all steadfast allies against the dead, but what about now?* Another horn blast reminded him of the urgency of the moment, but it was Tyrion who spoke of the impending battle first.

“Well,” he sighed. “As best we can tell my sister has some twelve thousand men arrayed against us. At least, that’s what the crannogman’s hawk saw – however that works. Normally I’d advise against attacking an army set in a defensive position, as I’m sure any reasonable commander would, but in this I see no alternative. We either drive this Golden Company from the field or sit here and starve.”

“Agreed,” Daenerys said coolly. “The Unsullied, Northmen, and Rivermen will give these sellswords battle while my Dothraki sweep around and take them from behind.”

“Were it so easy, Your Grace,” Jorah muttered. “These men will have light and heavy horse of their own alongside those elephants. Draw them out, though, into and open and…” he looked down the tent row to where Drogon and Rhaegal lay in the clearing. Daenerys kept her lips shut but nodded after a moment.

“Fire and blood. A brilliant strategy,” Tyrion quipped. “Only, it seems Cersei has produced three of those deadly ballistae. We cannot risk either dragon so close to the enemies’ lines with those weapons.”

“Drogon destroyed one easily enough,” Daenerys countered.

“Only after being wounded!” Tyrion replied.

“Forgive me,” Davos stepped forward to occupy the center space, breaking the tension between the queen and her Hand. “I know little enough of giant crossbows and dragon scales, but perhaps we might fool the Lannisters into thinking the dragons have flown south toward the capital…”

“What do you mean?” Jon asked at once. Tyrion’s eyebrow was raised as well.

“We have a plan, ser,” Tyrion began before Daenerys held up a hand to cut him off.

“Let him speak.”

“Well… I mean for Your Graces mount your dragons, fly off toward King’s Landing and double back once the battle is joined – once you see the Isle of Faces. You’ll know the site. Fly low and take them in the rear, destroy these weapons, kill the elephants and send their men fleeing southward in earnest.”

“A diversion,” Gendry said.

Silence overtook the assembly until Jorah muttered his simple agreement. “A good plan, Your Grace,” he said to Daenerys. “Strickland will believe he has been played for a fool by leaving the city unguarded.”

“He won’t consider the dragons if they’re gone…” Tyrion thought aloud.

“It is a good plan,” Daenerys said. “Forgive me, ser, but I never took you for a battle commander.”

Davos held up his short hand. “Better at avoiding battle, Your Grace, though I suppose that’s the point here – for a time.”
“It is,” Tyrion said.

“Have the Unsullied and Dothraki hold their lines for long enough,” Jorah nodded. “I’ll let the riders know to assemble at once. Perhaps someone should do the same with the queen’s soldiers. If we move quickly we might catch these mercenaries in their tents.” He strode off in some haste.

Daenerys turned to Missandei. “Would you inform the lieutenants? Stalwart Shield should command the center alongside Ser Jorah, when he returns.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” Missandei gave a shallow bow and hurried away. Jon turned toward his sister and Gendry, both standing hesitantly at the edge of the uneven circle. Arya wore only leather and fur. Indeed, Jon did not see a single bit of true armor on her. Gendry, thankfully, was more heavily armed and armored.

“These aren’t dead men, Arya, a dagger won’t be much use against a wall of spears.”

“Then I’ll find a spear,” she said.

“I’d rather you find a bow,” Jon replied. An expression flashed across Gendry’s face that Jon took to mean agreement.

“They’ll fight alongside me, if it comes to it,” Brienne stepped forward and into the conversation, looming over both Gendry and Jon alike and completely overshadowing Arya. She was armored in fine plate and had a mailed fist clenched around her sword’s hilt. “And Podrick will help too,” she looked around. “Wherever he is…”

Jon locked gazes with Brienne, then silently nodded. She’s sworn to keep Lady Catelyn’s daughters safe. More than that, though, Jon knew Brienne to be a fearsome fighter equal to any he had known. And the Unsullied will hold the line. They’ll be far behind the lines.

“I trust he will,” Jon replied. “Fight with the Northmen – all of you. They’ll need your strength.”

“They’ll have it,” Gendry nodded, hefting up his hammer.

“Good,” Jon said and clapped the lad on the back. “Go find the northmen and bid them assemble behind the Unsullied center. Gendry nodded again and turned. Arya did too, but not before meeting Jon’s eyes for a moment. Be safe, he might have said. Or be careful. Yet no words needed to pass between the two of them. Goodbye seemed as frequent a phrase as good morning. And we shall see each other soon.

With a final glance, he turned back to Daenerys. The crowd of advisors had dispersed in a hurry, leaving only the two of them in a sea of bodies scrambling for arms and armor. Jon reached her in a few long paces and placed his hands on her arms, holding her steady as if she might topple over like one of Harrenhal’s towers.

“Are you ready?” she asked, looking up at him with an oddly soft expression.

The question was simple – almost sweet – but it ignited fresh doubts within him. For battle and what comes after? No, Daenerys, I am not. But now was not the time for words nor for second thoughts. It was time for battle.

“Aye,” he replied, giving her a reassuring squeeze. “Though perhaps I’ll fly behind you. You’re the better rider.”

“Drogon is larger, is all,” she reassured him as she broke away and began walking to where their
two dragons lay waiting their riders.

Both Drogon and Rhaegal were already alert and ready, their heads raised high above the tents in order to observe the goings-on in the camp. Daenerys called to both of them as they approached. They lowered their heads and regard their riders with curious expressions.

Daenerys placed a hand on Drogon’s side, then turned back to Jon. She smiled.

“It’s been a long time since an Aegon Targaryen rode a dragon,” she said in a voice just above a whisper.

“Daenerys…” Jon said, uncertain of what she meant by this. He opened his mouth to say something else – anything else – but his words and breath were but off as she leaned in and upward to kiss him deeply. He lost himself in the feel of her soft lips on his. The horns and trumpets and rattling of spears faded away as he closed his eyes for one sweet moment.

And then she pulled away. “Stay close to me,” she whispered as she stepped back and began to climb up Drogon’s side. Her words from some weeks past echoed in his thoughts. Promise me. For your daughter. For your sisters. For your family. Promise me you won’t do anything foolish…

After a moment, he made his way to Rhaegal and placed a hand on the dragon’s side. Rhaegal thrummed deeply, offering his assent to Jon’s riding on him. Rather quickly, Jon scaled the dragon’s side and settled in between his great spikes and, with a shouted command, guided his companion into the sky alongside his wife.

The camp disappeared underneath him as Rhaegal climbed higher into frigid air. The uneven tent rows became thinner and smaller as dragon and rider ascended. Even from this distance, Harrenhal looked more like some collection of stones than a mighty fortress of the realm.

Above him, Daenerys and Drogon rose higher still. Jon saw bits of cloud burst into thin, wispy strands as they pressed against Drogon’s massive form. He felt his own dragon shift beneath him too. And far below the frozen Riverlands stretched out before him. Fields and the broken keep to the south, dense forest to the west. Jon did not look behind him – northward.

Daenerys held Drogon in place for a moment, the dragon’s mighty wings keeping a steady beat against the shrill sound of the wind in his ears. Jon saw her small figure turn and look back at him.

“Are you ready?” she asked, her words carried upon the wind. He nodded in response.

Then Drogon surged forward, diving back down to gain speed and passing over the perimeter of the camp. Jon urged Rhaegal to follow.

His face stung from the wind’s assault and he reached down to his side to make certain Longclaw had not plummeted to the ground below. Even now, he was unsure of himself when on the dragon. But I must be, he knew. She is.

Jon and Rhaegal drew near even with Daenerys and Drogon. The two dragons and their riders swept across the middle field and over the enemy’s camp. Jon tried to count the tents as they passed – as if he might be some scout – but it was no use. This was a gesture of pride and purpose. To draw their eyes upward… to lure them.

Behind him, the Unsullied were already forming up. Their ranks formed a thin black line against the faded greens and whites of the field below. He silently wished them all good fortune, these foreign soldiers in a foreign land.
And behind them stood a looser formation of what Jon knew to be his own countrymen. And Arya in there among them, he thought. The Dothraki had formed up in loose formations on the infantry’s flanks, their war cries carried upon the wind.

A mighty roar scattered his musings into the clouds. Drogon banked and circled the Kingspyre Tower once – then twice. Jon followed Daenerys’ lead, making a show of their power. He had little doubt the sellswords below were solely focused on the threat above – or else fleeing for cover.

The two dragons and the two dragon riders again circled the towers of the keep. The camps below had come to life. Not as fearful as Ser Jorah would have us believe.

Horns sounded. Men shouted. Horses neighed and odd, trumpeting sounds echoed from within the walls. Men armored in glinting steel and glittering gold poured from the tents all around the perimeter of the grounds. A river of gold seemed to rush forth from the walls of Harrenhal and out onto the fields.

She’s hired half of Essos to fight for her. He had scene greater forces – both living and dead – in the north, but wights and wildlings were nothing compared to a disciplined army. He hoped this ruse would work.

For half a moment, his eyes found the weapons Tyrion mad mentioned and of which he had been so fearful. Bent black steel bows lay between the tents. Three of them, Jon counted. We could destroy them now… Rhaegal could do it easily enough. Jon almost leaned into his dragon’s spikes to urge him downward, but as he glanced down again he saw men running to turn the weapons skyward.

We have a plan. I cannot go back on it now. He had done that once while fighting the Boltons outside Winterfell. And I nearly died again. His eyes found Drogon again. I must stay with her.

And so he did. Once more Drogon rounded the highest tower before making off southward over the massive, broken walls of the keep and over the grey waters of the God’s Eye.

It’s huge, Jon thought as he guided Rhaegal in pursuit of his brother. As if the Wall had melted into some great basin. The fleet that had ferried them north from Dragonstone could have easily fit inside its waters. Ten such fleets might have.

The shoreline receded behind him as they flew onward, though neither truly knew where they were going nor when to turn back. The air was crisp and cold up here – like it was at the Wall in autumn. Forgetting for a moment the task at hand, Jon allowed himself to slip in waking fantasies of other lives. Jon Snow the Bastard. Jon Snow the steward. Jon the traitor, the wildling lover, the Lord Commander.

And ahead of him, somewhere southward, lay a future of uncertain fantasies. Father and husband and king… All that depended on what they did today.

The sun rose higher in the sky and, soon enough, an island came into view. Gods… It was red, blood red. Jon nearly urged Rhaegal halt before he recognized the white bark and red canopies of the northern weirwood trees. I’d never thought there’d be so many.

Daenerys seemed phased too, if only for a moment. Far above the shores of the island she turned Drogon and directed him northward again. The two dragon riders locked eyes – and Jon was almost certain he could see her violet ones through the wisps of clouds.

It made no matter, for in another blink of an eye she and Drogon were diving down toward the
lake’s surface. Jon leaned against Rhaegal and urged his companion to follow.

Two dragons fell from the sky like thunderbolts, drawing up just above the water’s surface. Jon looked over his own dragon’s side and saw the green shimmer of scales upon the grey waters below.

The dual wingbeats made a steady rhythm as they flew – like war drums urging an army on to battle. And the battle, had it already been joined? Jon was not certain how much time had passed. Minutes? Hours? The world seemed to disappeared while upon dragon back. Yet they would find out soon enough.

And soon enough the broken towers of Harrenhal once more came into sight upon the northern horizon. They seemed taller now, if only because the two dragons were so near the water. And still larger they loomed as Drogon and Rhaegal came closer.

Jon steeled himself for the task ahead. His fingers gripped Rhaegal’s spikes tightly. It is battle. It is war. It must be done. Fire and blood. Those were Daenerys’ words – his words. My sire’s words. They felt odd at times, crude and cruel. Yet when he thought of Robb’s and Rickon’s deaths, Sansa’s torments and all else that had befallen those he loved, they did not seem odd at all. They felt right.

Together, they passed over the northern banks of the God’s Eye once more and circled westward around the thicket of old stone towers. The sight to the north made Jon’s breath catch in his throat.

Two thick lines - one black and one gold – were pressed against each other on a field of green. The Unsullied, outnumbered two to one at least, held their ground against the mercenaries. Even from here Jon could hear the shouted commands in the common tongue and the Unsullied’s now familiar one. The clatter of steel on steel filled the air.

Here – for a moment – the gold-clad soldiers would surge forward against the Unsullied lines. Then, the spearmen would rush into the gap like molten steel: fluid, fiery and oddly graceful. Then, like steel, they would harden against the next assault.

Chaos had consumed the edges of the battlefield, though. Dothraki screamers clashed with Westerosi knights, charging, reforming and charging again. Neither side seemed too eager to commit its full strength to battle until the contest in the center had been decided. And we must decide it.

He held Rhaegal back for a moment. Thankfully, Daenerys did the same. He called out to her, hoping his wife would hear him.

“We need to burn the camps!” he yelled. And make them flee. The sight of fire would do as much to break a man’s spirit as facing true dragon flame would… or so Jon hoped.

“You fly along the walls!” Daenerys shouted back to him. “I’ll sweep behind their lines!”

Don’t… he might have said. She’s carrying our child… Such arguments were a madman’s words to Daenerys, he knew: unheeded and unheard. This was her fight as much as his.

“Fly low!” he shouted back. “Easier to maneuver!” And harder for them to aim.

Then, he leaned into Rhaegal’s spikes and shouted the Valyrian command. His dragon roared in fury and dove downward toward the cluster of crimson tents. Drogon echoed his brother’s call as he split off toward the read of the enemy force.
Jon found the first weapon in and instant and guided Rhaegal toward it. The men below scrambled for safety, running into small tents or else simply fleeing out of the dragon’s path. A few brave souls ran toward the massive crossbow, slowing turning the mechanisms to aim the thing at Jon and Rhaegal. He saw a huge arrow’s steel tip glint in the sunlight – but by the time it was in place it was too late.

“Dracarys!” he shouted, though the command made little difference. He had already felt the roiling fire from with Rhaegal. A second later a column of golden flame erupted from the dragon’s mouth and bathed the weapon in fire. The crack of splintering wood split the air as Rhaegal roared in triumph and loosed another jet of flame – this time at the fleeing men. Screams echoed upward from the camps as burning corpses crumpled to the ground.

Jon urged Rhaegal onward as he searched for the next ballista. Rhaegal unleashed a continuous stream of fire on the enemies below, setting fire to men and tents and empty grass. Walls of black smoke and ash began to rise upwards from the ruins, obscuring his vision. Yet onward they flew.

He looked northward toward the battle. The Unsullied lines still held firm, but his attention was drawn skyward as Drogon swooped down and unleashed a torrent of fire on the unsuspecting enemy host. His attention was fixed on Daenerys’ tiny figure as she expertly guided her dragon across the battlefield. He tried to will her to keep safe with his thoughts.

Such was his focus that he nearly missed the sight of the second great ballista below him – and nearly missed the black steel bolt it shot passed his head. There. Right there. Burn it!

He inhaled deeply, the smoke stinging his lungs, and tried to yell the command to Rhaegal, but the dragon had seen the threat too. He screeched in anger and turned so suddenly it took all Jon’s strength simply grasp the spikes and remain where he was.

Rhaegal climbed high, then suddenly banked and dove at the men as they readied another shot. A furnace wind washed over him as his dragon loosed another jet of flame at his target. The second weapon burst apart like the first, its tenders turned to ash in the assault.

Jon looked around him as Rhaegal’s fires began to consume the camp. Screams and cries for aid rose upwards with the black smoke. They mingled in with the more distant shouts of fear and panic as Drogon rained down death upon the Golden Company’s rear.

And, through the smoke, Jon saw their lines beginning to break. The enemies’ heavy horse had fled in panic and was only just beginning to reform far behind the lines. The Dothraki seized their chance to harry the infantry’s flanks as the Unsullied pressed forward.

“Fire!” a deep voice shouted from below. Jon turned just in time to see a cloud of arrows rise up from Harrenhal’s walls. The arrows seemed to rise as slowly as the sun. Indeed, all the world seemed to slow as Jon watched the wave of death rise then descend toward him.

He urged Rhaegal away and raised his own arm to shield himself as the arrows found their mark. Most clattered against the dragon’s thick green scales, but some tore through the tender flesh of his wings. Rhaegal roared in anger and turned at once toward the walls. Jon could not stop him.

With two mighty wingbeats, he was upon and over his foes. Archers scattered and leapt from the walls as golden fire splashed across the old stones. Jon frantically glanced around for other threats – and he found them.

A line of odd, large creatures was lumbering forth from the far side of the keep. Mammoths, he thought at first for they had the look about them. Yet where mammoths were covered in thick
brown hide these beasts were hairless and grey. Men rode atop them, either alone as a dragon does a rider or else in smaller towers fastened atop their backs.

*Elephants*, he knew at once. There has to be ten of them, perhaps more. They formed a long, grey line on the far side of the field, picking up speed as they moved forward… and toward the right flank of the Unsullied lines.

Jon glanced back toward the battle and tried to make out the happenings through the ever-higher walls of smoke. The Unsullied had begun to turn the Golden Company back on one end. Yet on the other end Jon could see his own northmen pressing the attack. They fought savagely, carving their way deep into the enemy’s formation – and exposing themselves to the new but unseen threat.

*Arya*… It was his only thought now. Not the archers. Not the third ballista. Not the camp. Not even Daenerys in battle. His sister was fighting in there somewhere. Even she could not stand against ten armed and armored elephants.

“Rhaegal!” Jon shouted as he kicked his heel into the dragon’s ride side. Rhaegal lurched at the command and roared, beating his wings furiously as he too saw the new threat. The dragon surged forward over the walls and unburnt areas of the enemy’s camp.

But it was too late. The elephants were to quick and too many. Even as Jon urged Rhaegal forward shouting every command he knew, the massive beasts gained speed – their odd, trumpet-like calls echoing across the battlefield and across the sky. *No*…

Jon watched in horror as the line collided with his army’s side. Men screamed as they were tossed aside like leaves in an autumn storm. The elephants did not stop, for nothing could stop them. The great beasts swung their tusked heads back and forth, scattering the northmen and trampling those who could not escape in time.

In an instant, the right flank of the army began to collapse. The elephants slowed some as groups of Unsullied shifted toward them, hemming them in with spears, but even years of training and discipline could not stop an elephant’s sheer strength.

Rhaegal rushed over the field toward his target, but Jon knew he could not risk dragonfire lest he burn his own countrymen. Instead, he shouted a command as he thought it – and Rhaegal understood. The dragon spread his wings and reared his legs, bringing claws as big as swords to bear against the closest elephant. Then he fell upon the beast.

The *rip* of claws into flesh cut through the din of battle. The beast screamed in pain as Rhaegal dug in and landed atop the elephant, crushing it with his weight. The impact and uneven landing almost sent Jon flying from his back and into the chaos of battle below.

Rhaegal roared in triumph and shot a burst of fire into the sky. The other elephants trumpeted their calls and began to turn, trampling over friend and foe alike in their haste to get away from Rhaegal. But they did not flee.

Enemy archers began firing uneven volleys at dragon and riders from atop those odd towers. The arrows did no harm to either, but they drew Jon’s attention to each elephant in turn. With a single wingbeat, Rhaegal leapt from the bloodied, broken corpse of one beast and took down another – this time crushing the elephant’s neck with his jaws. The beast died instantly.

Another roar shook the very ground itself. Jon turned to see Drogon descending on the broken flank, his molten gold eyes fixed on another elephant. His maw was open wide and Jon could see the flame roiling within.
Then a steel bolt slammed into Drogon’s side.

Jon watched in sheer horror as the dragon twisted and turned in the air, Daenerys’ tiny form almost unnoticeably in the chaos. He felt a surge of hot anger at the attack – as if he himself had just been struck. His vision turned blurry and his hands felt heavy, but strong.

Drogon roared in pain and landed on the ground amongst the Unsullied and sellswords. The two sides fled as he lashed about, crying out and snapping at the bolt sunk into his leg. He roared again and twisted, lashing out with his tail and bathing fleeing golden-armored men in dragon fire.

*The ballista.* He had only burnt two… and the third one had found its mark. He turned back to the enemy’s camp, now concealed behind a thick wall of black smoke. *I need to destroy it. Now.* He could not risk further harm to Drogon or Daenerys. Without the dragons there could be no victory.

He spoke the command and Rhaegal surged skyward, banking sharply and turning toward Harrenhal. Bodies, friend and foe alike, were strewn on the field beneath him but he paid them no mind. His attention was solely fixed on his duty now.

His vision seemed to narrow as dragon and rider flew. Every beat of his heart sent a fresh surge of righteous anger through him. His hands gripped Rhaegal’s spikes tightly.

Together, they burst through the wall of smoke and quickly found the last weapon. Jon’s face contorted in rage as he guided Rhaegal toward it. An odd twang rang out and the ballista loosed another bolt. It missed Rhaegal’s wing by mere feet. *No more,* he thought as Rhaegal descended upon the weapon.

There was no fire here, no awful conflagration. Jon’s dragon simply landed atop the construct and smashed it like so much kindling. Rhaegal roared in triumph as men fled in every direction.

Yet as he basked in the thrill of fresh kill, the world around Rhaegal and Jon seemed to fall away. The men that had been running for their lives turned suddenly and began pulling down the crimson cloth tents… revealing what had been hidden beneath them.

All around him, cloth fell away to reveal still more ballistae. They were of the same make of the weapon Rhaegal had just smashed, but smaller – more like the scorpions that the Night’s Watch kept atop the Wall. There were more than three. There were more than ten. Twenty? Or perhaps more. Jon had no time to count.

“Sövegon!” he shouted to Rhaegal. “Fly! Now! Go!” Rhaegal buffeted his wings and launched himself skyward, but the bolts had already flown.

Three buried themselves in Rhaegal’s side. Another two sunk deep into his neck. Countless more tore through his wings. He roared in agony as he struggled to escape the barrage.

The men below adjust their aim and prepared another volley. Jon clutched his dragon’s spike tightly, willing Rhaegal to fly farther and faster. *Go... go!*

As the ground receded beneath him, he knew it was too late. The odd *twang* of the ballistae rang out clearly. The bolts whistled as they flew – twenty or more black arrows launched skyward and found their mark yet again.

Rhaegal did not cry out. He did not make sound. Jon saw his wings cease their frenzied beating and fall still.

Then he was falling. The wind rushed around him and it was all he could do to press himself
against his dragon’s scales. He looked up for a moment as the world spun, hoping for once last
glance of Daenerys – if only to make certain she was safe.

Then Rhaegal crashed into the ground with a sickening crunch. Jon was flung from his perch and
tumbled onto the hard ground below. All the world went black.

Chapter End Notes

Well, here we are!

This chapter was a bit choppy and harder to write in some places. My other battles
have had the POVs in the thick of the action to some extent, so this was a different
approach but hopefully it made sense (...?)

As for the ending... well, stay tuned.

On a broader note, thank you to all of you for sticking with this, reading, commenting,
tracking me down on Reddit, etc. I started this as a sort of random one off thing I
thought would be interesting and, after some encouraging comments, kept writing.
That process really just became a way to fill time and stay engaged in the world of
Thrones as we suffered through the Long Night. I hope this story, among others on this
site, has provided you with some entertainment through that period.

Now, as you may have guessed, this story will not be finished by the time Season 8
premiers. It is my hope to have it done by mid-May, before the finale. However, we're
looking at a ballpark estimate of like 11-14 more chapters depending on what I cut, so
June is a possibility. Whatever that timetable looks like, I sincerely hope you'll keep
reading.
She felt – if only for a moment – that a piece of her had been torn from her flesh. It was a horribly familiar feeling.

And then she saw the reason why. Across the field, Rhaegal was plummeting from the sky. His wings were torn and motionless save the buffeting from the wind. No...

Her dragon – her child – crashed into the enemy camp with a sickening thud and disappeared behind a rising wall of dust and smoke. He did not cry out in pain. He did not rise again. And there was no sign of his rider.

Rage swelled in her, filling that emptiness the awful sight had created. They’ve killed my child. But Jon might yet be alive. She needed to save him. She needed to protect him – and she needed to do it now.

The battle raged around her. Elephants gored her men with their tusks and trampled others. Her Unsullied lashed out with spear and sword, holding back the surging foe. Yet all went still for a moment as the rest of the field saw what she had.

A great cheer went up from the gold-clad forces. It was at once drowned out by Drogon’s roar of fury. He bathed a group of men in crimson flame, then surged forward to sink his teeth into the closest elephant, killing the beast in a single motion.

“Drogon!” she shouted. Go. Fly. He did not need to hear the command. Her great black once more soared into the air, ignoring the black bolt in his side. In a moment he was across the field and over the tents, circling round his brother’s body and unleashing torrents of hellfire upon the men below.

Among the ruined tents and broken weapon racks Daenerys saw dozens of ballistae, readied and pointed skyward. The soldiers manning them became to fire their deadly volleys at her now. Steel bolts as long as spears fly at Drogon. One or two found their marks while others tore through Drogon’s wings or else bent and broke against his hardened scales.

He roared in anger and swiftly landed among them, destroying two with a single swipe of his tail and another with a burst of dragon flame. Yet still more bolts came flying at him.

Daenerys frantically scanned the scene for her husband – and saw his still form crumpled beside Rhaegal’s head. And then she saw the truth. A single black bolt protruded from Rhaegal’s right eye. The shot had killed him in an instant.

“Jon!” she shouted. “Jon! Here!” He did not move. Another bolt flew past her head.

“There! Right there! Fire!” men shouted from all around her. Lannister levies and sellswords were emerging from the curtains of smoke, wielding spears and notched bows. Drogon lashes out with tail and claw and deadly fire, defending his brother’s body, but even he could not fight so many. Not on the ground.

“Jon!” she shouted again, her voice breaking from the strain. No... It can’t be. He can’t be. He was not. She refused to believe it. She would have felt it.
Drogon roared as another bolt slammed into his neck. Men screamed as his flames engulfed them, turning them to ash in a matter of seconds. *I cannot reach him now. We have to get out of here.*

At her command, Drogon surged skyward once more, circling once around Rhaegal’s body and unleashing a continuous jet of fire before banking and flying back across the field to where the battle raged.

And in that moment, she knew the battle was lost. In the center, her Unsullied held firm. Yet around them the formation was beginning to come undone. The elephants had torn through the right side of the line and the Golden Company’s horsemen pushed the attack from the left.

Her heart sank as she saw something still worse. Another line of elephants had emerged from around the walls of Harrenhal – twice as many as had charged into the fray just moments before. If they made it across the field they would break the Unsullied lines.

Deadly purpose filled her as she readied Drogon for the assault. He beat his wings furiously and surged forth across the field, fire roiling within him. The line of elephants was closer now. She could see the archers riding atop the beasts’ backs and saw the glint of pale sunlight upon the thick golden bands set about their tusks.

But she could not begin the attack. A cloud of steel bolts and whistling arrows rushed past her. Some found purchase in Drogon’s wings. He roared and banked away from the assault and she, looking back across the field, saw groups of archers rushing forward from the ruined camps and men pushing those small ballistae.

*I cannot stay,* she knew. Drogon was her last dragon – the last dragon. To risk him was to risk everything. And she could not do that. She still had much to protect.

And so she watched in horror as the elephants gained speed and closed on the frayed flank of her army. It was like watching the hammer fall. With Drogon in flight and now too far away, there was nothing she could do…

The wind picked up, carrying with it an odd, ghostly sound. *The cries of dead men,* she thought grimly. *But no…* It was long, low and mournful, but loud… and growing louder. *Like the howling of wolves.*

And then she saw it, movement in the trees on the far side of the field. A figure emerged from the shadowy gloom of the tree line, then another. Then another. Like a wave of grey water breaking upon the shore, a massive group of animals rushed forth onto the battlefield.

She could see two figures at the head – both far larger than the rest. *War dogs?* Her heart fell at the thought. *They’ve brought hundreds more beasts of war to bear against us.*

But then she recognized the snow-white pelt of Jon’s dearest companion. *Ghost.* Another direwolf, far larger than he, ran beside him. And behind them both ran a pack far larger than either might have imagined.

As Drogon banked again she saw the pack split, one group running southward toward the camps while another made for the charging elephants. Behind her, the wolves fell upon the archers, ripping out their throats and savaging their bloodied bodies. The arrows ceased falling.

To her side, the wolves kept running. In an instant they had fallen upon the far larger creatures, biting at their hind legs and weaving amongst them. The elephants faltered in their charge and trumpeted their panic.
She watched in morbid fascination as the wolves battled the beasts. Their line broke, curved, and broke again. *Not a battle...* The wolves offered no contest, for a direwolf was no more a challenge to an elephant than the latter was to a dragon. No, they were driving them away from then northmen and toward the very center of the contest below.

*They haven’t seen it.* And there was nothing they could do. The stout center of the Golden Company’s army had driven back her Unsullied, but their own rear was disorderly and unguarded.

Drogon banked again and roared. The wolves howled. Men screamed and were tossed aside as their own panicked beasts crashed into their lines and sent scores of golden-armored bodies flying into the air.

There was no order now – no lines or discipline or reason to the madness. Twenty armored elephants tore through the Golden Company’s ranks, breaking their lines. Their handlers had lost all control. The wolves had driven a wild fear into the creatures’ minds. They ran about in circles, trampling friend and foe alike.

The Unsullied pressed their newfound advantage, advancing lockstep, shields then spears, pushing their foe back across the field. Behind her, scores more wolves were savaging the archers and killing the defenseless ballista men while dozens more ran for the enemy’s horse.

*Now.* Fiery purpose filled her. Her hands gripped Drogon’s spikes as she guided him higher into the sky, into a sweeping turn, then down at a dense group of sellswords. She shouted the command that she had countless times before.

Drogon loosed a roiling column of fire at the mercenaries. The soldiers screamed – then died. Again Drogon unleashed his fury upon them, flying over the center and then toward the horsemen on the far side of the field opposite the forest.

The horses broke and ran before her, some flinging their riders in their desperate attempts to escape the onslaught. All around her, the Lannister host lost all heart. Men threw down their weapons and fled, falling beneath their own elephants’ feet or else perishing in bouts of dragon flame.

Those who emerged from the carnage made for the safety of Harrenhal’s walls, but few made it. The wolves across the field turned and pursued their prey, tearing off limbs and ripping throats away, silencing their screams. The Golden Company had broken.

Madness overtook her for a moment. Grief and rage filled her. Daenerys relished this power – this chance to destroy the men that had sought to destroy her and those she loved. She guided Drogon back and forth across the field, turning her enemies to ash.

And across the field her army surged forward, capturing fleeing soldiers and killing those who offered contest. Their panicked elephants had fallen, slain by friend and foe alike. The wolves were beginning to feast on their bodies.

As Drogon banked again, she saw a stream of horses fleeing southward. *Hundreds, perhaps more.* The Golden Company was abandoning the field. *And Harrenhal.* Through the grey smoke she could see others mounting horses or else fleeing on foot. They made for the road and the safety of the lake.

She kicked her heel into Drogon’s side, directing him toward the fleeing mass of defeated men – and then she remembered Rhaegal and Jon in the camps below.

*He’s alive. I know it. I can feel it.* She needed to protect him. To save him. To see him healed and
whole again. And so she made Drogon turn again – away from the fleeing soldiers and toward Rhaegal’s body.

Drogon landed among the smoking ruins of tents and abandoned weapons. Daenerys scrambled down her dragon’s side and stumbled in the dirt. She stood and hastened to Rhaegal’s body, touching each of his wounds and silently swearing vengeance against Cersei. She stopped for a moment at his head, placing a hand upon the steel bolt that had ended her sweet child’s life. You will not have died for nothing.

A flash of movement caught her eye. Behind her, Drogon growled. A shadow emerged from the smokey gloom and ran right toward her. She looked about for something – anything to defend herself from the assailant but he was on her in an instant.

Ghost slowed as he approached, pacing toward her and stopping just before her. Drogon sat back. Ghost leaned in, sniffed her hand and gave her an affectionate lick. She almost laughed despite herself.

Then more shadows emerged into the clearing. Ghost snarled and put himself between Daenerys and the new arrivals. Northmen and Rivermen bloodied and mounted atop horses and her own bloodriders, weary but filled with the rush of sudden victory.

“Khaleesi,” they dipped their heads and raised their bloody arakhs in salute. Their eyes lingered on Rhaegal’s broken body.

“Help me,” she said. “Jon is here, somewhere. Ride for aid. We need a healer. The rest of you will help me search.”

Some riders rode off at her command while dozens more arrived, a soot-blackened Ser Davos among them.

Daenerys, Ghost at her side, frantically paced around Rhaegal’s body. Every step sent a jolt of panic through her. Jon… He was alive. I felt it.

Yet she could not find him. Twice she circled Rhaegal, but Jon no longer laid where she had seen him. Perhaps he’s well and unharmed. Perhaps he made his way back into the fight.

“Khaleesi…” one of her riders said, walking up to her. He wore a solemn expression and bore a blade in his hands. No…. It was Longclaw.

She did not look at the blade again. She already knew her love’s fate. She’s taken him. She has him. Daenerys ran back to Drogon and climbed back between his spikes.

“Your Grace!” Ser Davos ran forward from among the growing crowd. “Wait!”

“I’m going after them,” she stated, her tone deadened and devoid of emotion.

“To do what?”

“They have him, ser.”

“And?” he nearly shouted. “If he’s a prisoner dragonfire will do no good against them now. Send riders, perhaps, or-”

“I must go now,” she shouted back.
“No,” his denial was firm. “I know what you intend. If he’s alive, they’ll keep him that way, but burn them and…”

“I must,” she insisted.

Davos approached her and Drogon, an odd expression on his face. “Daenerys,” he said, abandoning all pretense of formality. “You can’t.”

She could not control her breath. Even the effort tired her. She has him. She fought back tears. It could not happen again. Not to him. Not like this. It will not happen again.

Yet she knew he was right. Men could be sent in pursuit, but she could not risk it. Her hand fell to her slightly swollen womb as she looked over Rhaegal body. And I cannot risk our child. Our daughter.

The day was won, but in her heart Daenerys felt naught but despair.

Chapter End Notes

First of all, how about that premiere!

Now, obviously this is a shorter chapter and really an add on to the last one.

Hopefully you enjoy the end to the battle. The idea was always to have the GC's elephants panic and stomp all over their own men (a familiar feeling to all you fellow Rome: Total War players out there)

As for the wolves, the original idea was to have Bran’s greenseer spirit guide the animals into battle, since the CotF used animals to fight the first men aquaman-style. That didn’t really fit here so I just figured Ghost smelled his sister and went off to find her… but he’s also smart as fuck so he leads the wolves into war. Corny? Yeah, but that's what you've got.

On the topic of what I've planned, there was quite a bit. I had a whole arc where Edmure Tully returned (actually kind of set up in Chapter 17 or 18 or something), but it didn't really mesh with the core story I've got going nor do I have the time to write it. I vastly prefer to focus on the crux of the conflict, which will spill into an exciting sequence of chapters very soon.

That said, I'm not going to ignore key plot points that Season 7 set up. Theon is making an appearance and all that.

Anyway, always love to read what you thought of the update + what you thought of Episode 1
Cersei III

Chapter Notes

This chapter is brought to you by the dulcet tones of Podrick fookin' Payne. I've got to be honest that was such a good little musical montage.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She paced down the halls of the Red Keep, Qyburn struggling to keep pace. Ser Gregor strode in front of her, his footsteps seeming to shake the very walls that Aegon and Maegor had raised hundreds of years ago. Fitting, that I should have their blood and heir in the cells they built.

She had been furious when that coward Strickland had slunk back through her gates with only a thousand horsemen in tow. He had twice her number and now blames wolves and elephants! The greatest company in the known world sent fleeing by their own beasts. She knew she should have hired another company – the Windblown, perhaps. The defeat at Harrenhal had put everything at risk.

And then she had heard the news. The green dragon, the one she had seen flying above the pit, was dead. Slain by Qyburn’s contraption. I must have more. It was more than she could hope for – only it was not. The northern bastard had been riding the beast and the sellswords had taken him prisoner just before they fled the field like the gold-craving cowards they were.

It doesn’t matter now, she assured herself. One victory in the field does not make the girl Aegon come again. She only has one dragon left… and I have the boy. The bitch would not dare attack the city whilst this ‘Aegon Targaryen’ sat chained in the Black Cells.

And she has Jaime… Her brother had gone north to fight the dead. But the dead are gone, no more than piles of bones in the Riverlands. He should have returned to me by now. He should be here, by my side.

Terrible ideas filled her thoughts as she crossed in the inner courtyard and made her way to the Black Cells. She is beautiful. Then comes another, young, more beautiful, to cast you down and take all you hold dear. She knew those words better than she knew her own name. She is more beautiful.

And her brothers? Well, Tyrion had always had a penchant for foreign whores, but Jaime. He was always mine. Only mine. But he left me. For her. Has he fallen for her? Does he love her? No. She would not believe that. I carry his child. Our child. He will return to me.

She sped down the stairs as quickly as her feet and swollen womb would allow. The cells were near full, of course. Full of southern lords who had disobeyed her, southern heirs would had forsaken their oaths, and enemies who her forces had captured.

Soon enough she was deep within the bowels of the Red Keep. Qyburn produced and lit a torch, though the man kept his distance from Ser Gregor with a lit flame.

Cersei stopped first at Ellaria Sand’s cell. The site of her victory over the woman temporarily drove thoughts of Jaime from her mind.
The stench had abated months ago, for the rats had gnawed off every bit of flesh from the daughter’s corpse. She peered between the iron bars to see the proud Dornish bitch, but her prisoner offered no respond. Broken, Cersei smirked, as all my enemies will soon be.

She continued down the dim hall, passing crying women and other broken men until she reached his cell. The two guards stood at attention, their heads bowed. Inside, she could see this false princeling with his loose black curls and his head bowed. He looked up at her as she commanded the guards open the cell for their queen. Cersei strode inside.

“You’re here,” Jon Snow looked up at her with cool grey eyes. His tone bristled with anger and defiance.

“I am,” Cersei smirked. “Qyburn assures me your wounds are far from mortal. A pity the same cannot be said for that beast of yours. His skull will look quite lovely alongside the others.”

The man’s visage contorted in rage. Iron chains rattled as he jerked forward. Ser Gregor took a step forward to protect his queen, but it mattered little. Jon Snow was bound firmly to the wall. There would be no escape. Not from here.

“You killed him,” he said, sinking back against the wall.

“I did?” Cersei feigned offense. “No, I fear not. I was here, you see. My men must have done it. A pity, really, your dragon was beautiful… in a certain, brutal sense.” She paused to gauge his reaction, but he gave none. “I’m told the battle was a ferocious affair. Men, horses, elephants dying by the hundred. I wonder how many of your northmen survived? I wonder if your queen did.”

Even in the dim torchlight she could see what color he had drain from his face. Fear was a powerful weapon, especially against one with so much to lose.

Then, Jon Snow seemed to collect himself. “If she were dead, you’d have killed me already,” he said, rasping and grimacing as if the words had caused him great pain.

Cleverer than you look, then, she thought. Though I suppose that’s not saying much, is it?

“You’re right,” she said. Then she took a step toward him. “Tell me, how is it a northern bastard managed to tame a Targaryen dragon?”

“If you’re asking, you already know,” he said, staring up at her.

“I do,” she smirked again. “I too received one of those messages from Winterfell. The one that proclaimed you as Aegon Targaryen. Tyrion’s doing, I expect.”

“I had not part in it.”

“No, and were it not for the dragon I might not have believed you. Perhaps I still don’t, but does it matter? The truth is what we make it,” Cersei said.

“The truth is the truth,” Jon replied firmly. More like Eddard Stark than he cares to admit.

She remembered putting the man down here in these cells. It might even have been this one, but she was not certain. What she did know was that Lord Eddard had been desperate to save his family from harm when steel finally met steel. Perhaps the boy he raised will be the same.

“And if it is, then you – Rhaegar’s son and heir – and the girl—”
“-Daenerys-” he cut her off.

“...the girl is Rhaegar’s sister... your aunt by blood,” she finished, smiling. “Jaime and me, you and your queen, perhaps we’re not as different as we think.” He remained silent and did not meet her intent gaze. “And Rhaegar? Well, had things gone differently decades ago I would have married the prince. You might have been my son.”

“What do you want?” he demanded of her.

“Me?” Cersei asked mockingly, as if the question might have been directed at Ser Gregor. “I want the realm whole and united and at peace. I want my family at my side, safe and happy. And I want a future for that family.” She slid her right hand down over her womb. “And I shall do whatever it takes to ensure that future.”

“You betrayed us. Thousands died because of you! In the North and here in the south!”

“Did you listen to nothing I just said?” she asked, wondering if this man before her was as honorable and foolish as his dead uncle.

“You sent men after Daenerys. You nearly killed her and our...” he stopped talking and looked away.

What? The bitch is with child...

Cersei laughed derisively. “You got the girl with child? Yes, I suppose we are more alike than you think, but our similarities will soon end. My heir will rule the Seven Kingdoms and sit the throne after I have withered away. Your line will wither far sooner.”

Cersei paced away toward the far end of the cell then circled around once more, enjoying the sight of her enemy battered, broken and chained. Then, she made for the door. Ser Gregor moved aside.

She stopped in the entrance to the cell and turned around, looking right into Jon’s defiant eyes. “My armies are already regrouping. They shall kill the last dragon and your queen with it. You’re going to die. Your child and your men and your sisters are all going to die. But take comfort in knowing they’ll all be gone before I allow you to move from this cell.”

She left the entrance and allowed Qyburn to shut and lock the door behind her. Her Hand took the torch with him, leaving this Aegon Targaryen to enjoy the utter darkness of the cells his sires had built.

...

Cersei sat the throne for much of the afternoon, though there were few issues of state that the crown had to deal with. Rebellious Reach lords and hungry peasants were problems, yes, but all were nothing compared to the war for the realm.

As she waited for the only man she had an interest in seeing, she thought about the valued prisoner in the dungeons below. He cares for her, she knew. For the girl. She had heard the pain in his voice. He loves her – as I trust she loves him. That was a weakness - a weapon. Jon Snow’s capture had been the true victory in bringing the dragon down.

Victory... the word left a foul taste in her mouth. The Golden Company had been driven from the field. How was this the world’s finest army? All the wealth of House Tyrell wasted on drunkards and old men.

Strickland would arrive soon. He would answer for his failures and reform his company for another march against the girl’s remaining forces. There could not be many of them now – a few
thousand Unsullied left, perhaps fewer. *Not enough to lay siege to King’s Landing, I’m told.*

As the shadows lengthened in the throne room, Qyburn ordered the rest of her Queensguard to usher the remaining petitioners from the room. Military matters required a certain degree of secrecy and, though she held many a lord’s heir as honored guests in the Red Keep, she could not count on all under her reign to live up to their oaths.

*The promises of gold and glory can sway many a weaker mind,* she thought as she watched the doors open at the far end of the room. Lord Strickland entered in his golden armor and cloak. *Tattered fabric,* she noticed at once. His footfalls echoed on the floor as he swiftly approached and knelt before the crown before standing again, hands held behind his back.

She stared down at him for a moment before speaking. “I’m told the battle outside Harrenhal did not go as planned.”

“As planned?” Strickland looked up, his eyes mere slits in the torchlight and his brow furrowed. “No, not as planned.”

Cersei felt her fingers curl upon hearing the man’s tone. “Thousands of men, horses and elephants against a starving army of Northerners. You could not force them from the field?”

“We killed the dragon,” Strickland forced the words out in a strangely mute tune. Even from the throne, she could see the muscles contorting on his face. *I am your queen, fool.*

“One dragon,” Cersei corrected the captain. “The girl still has her great black one.”

“I noticed.”

“Did you?” Cersei asked, her tone sharp and biting. Strickland stood quickly and took a step toward the throne. Ser Gregor mirrored his movements from the steps above. Strickland took a step back.

“I lost a thousand men to that beast’s flames,” he said. “And another thousand are maimed and burnt. And all the company’s elephants.”

“A thousand or two,” Cersei repeated. “And yet you have ten times as many ready to fight. Reform your men and march forth again, my lord.”

“More of my men are scattered in a dozen directions, Your Grace. It was no orderly retreat.”

“Then by all means find them. I paid for them,” she sneered. *He’s afraid,* she realized. *It was a mistake to send him against the lords of the Stormlands. Their levies are nothing. He’s been softened battling against peasants.*

“That will take time, Your Grace.”

Cersei stood at once. “I took you for a commander, Strickland, not a coward. You proved your worth breaking the wills of southern houses and holdfasts, but that’s not why I hired you and your men. Gather your forces wherever you can and break the girl’s remaining forces.”

The sellsword’s face contorted in rage. “I took the other one – the boy who calls himself Aegon come again – after we slew the beast he rode.”

“And you have my thanks for that,” Cersei replied coolly. “I’m certain he will prove useful.”
“He will,” Strickland said. “Use him to sue for peace or broker a truce.”

“Truce?” she almost choked on the word. “While we have the advantage? I think not. Gather your men and march forth as I said.”

Cersei could see the thoughts swirling behind the man’s eyes. And yet we have a contract. It did not matter his thoughts or fears. This man and the men behind him were bound to her now. As if that matters, a voice not entirely her own whispered. He was your brother – your lover – and he left you. If he could not be trusted, neither can Strickland.

“Very well,” Strickland said, bending slightly in what she took to be a bow before turning swiftly and walking from the throne room.

“Your Grace, shall I-”

“No,” Cersei stated without waiting to hear Qyburn’s suggestion. She knew precisely who she needed now. A bold man. Bolder than Strickland is, anyway. A man who has proven himself in battle against the bitch’s dragons. “Find Ser Bronn of the Blackwater.”

“At once, Your Grace,” Qyburn bowed and hurried away. Cersei returned to the royal apartments.

…

Bronn arrived some time later – far later than she had expected. Her annoyance had only grown in the intervening hours. She had ordered a handmaiden to produce a small flagon of wine and drank two full cups. Yet she kept her regal composure. It would not do to give the man reason to question her now.

“Your Grace,” Bronn presented himself just beyond the threshold of the old small council chambers. He wore fine leather, winter furs, and a jewel-hilted sword at his side. A man who can be bought.

“Ser Bronn,” she inclined her head. “Thank you for answering your queen’s call at this late hour.”

“Late for some, I suppose,” Bronn shrugged as he entered, casting a wary eye toward Ser Gregor in the corner.

“I suppose it is,” Cersei agreed, inwardly seething at the man’s utter lack of respect for his betters.

“So, what is it I’ve been summoned here for? Not Harrenhal, I’d think. Heard the other queen took that one.”

“She did,” Cersei hissed, unable to contain herself any longer. “And it was your suggestion to meet her forces outside its walls, if I recall.”

Bronn’s eyes widened for a moment, but he kept his laggardly composure intact and leaned against a column.

“Aye, I did,” he shrugged. “I also wasn’t there. You sent those golden fuckers off to fight the girl. Fancy lads, those golden fuckers, but you might’ve given me all that gold for all the good it did you.”

I know how to play a man like you.

“You’re right, Ser,” Cersei feigned a smile. “The most expensive cowards in the known world.
That’s why I’ve stripped Strickland of his command… You will lead my armies in the field.”

Brons’s eye went wide and he almost lost his footing as he leaned against the column. “What?”

“I’m giving you command of four thousand Lannister soldiers and another three thousand Stormlanders sworn to the throne.”

“Because you’ve got their heirs hostage, aye,” Bronn replied.

“Exactly,” Cersei agreed. “You’ll lead these men. And I’m placing the Golden Company under your command. March north in force and destroy whatever remains of our enemy.”

Brons looked her over for a moment. “...and in return?”

“Harrenhal,” she replied.

“A fine castle,” Bronn nodded. “Thing is, you’ve already promised me Harrenhal. Seems I’m risking my head for nothing more than what I’ve been promised.”

Cersei turned and looked back at Ser Gregor. The knight took a step forward and reached for the blade at his side. He unsheathed it, pulling a hand’s length of steel from the scabbard.

“And in completing this service you’ll keep both Harrenhal and your head – a fitting reward, I think.”

Brons seemed to drink in the full might of Ser Gregor. His eyes lingered on the half-drawn sword. Then he met Cerseis gaze again. “Aye,” he nodded. “Fetch me – pardon – allow me to take horses, food and supplies. There are some good boys in the city watch that I’d like by my side, if it’s no trouble.”

“Of course,” Cersei inclined her head. “You shall have whatever you need.”

“Any more of those scorpions?”

This is why Tyrion preferred you so much, she knew. The man was lowborn scum, but his mind was sharper and bloodier than was his sword.

“I shall make certain Qyburn had your army well-equipped to handle the girl’s last remaining dragon. Kill the beast yourself and I’ll pay you the thing’s weight in silver.”

“Tell that to the rest of the lads and you’ll have another dragon skull in now time at all,” Bronn laughed. Cersei smiled despite herself.

“Very well,” she said. “Rest now, ser, you’ll have quite a road ahead of you.”

“Your Grace,” Bronn bowed absurdly low and turned toward the door. And yet he lingered just before the threshold and turned around. “Your Grace,” he said.

“Yes?” Cersei raised an eyebrow, annoyed that this conversation had found new life.

“Should I come across your brothers…”

“Take them,” Cersei said. “And bring them to me.”

Brons seemed to mull over her words for a moment. Then he nodded. “Of course.” Then he was gone… She looked at Ser Gregor and nodded. The massive knight followed Bronn out and shut the
oaken door behind him.

Then she was alone.

Chapter End Notes

Well, this was more setting up of things to come, but I always enjoy writing Cersei.

And of course, always enjoy your comments. I thought this past episode was the best since Season 6. Wonder if you'll agree.
Daenerys XIV

Chapter Notes

And she never wanted to leave (x5)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The world seemed colder – just as it had for the past three nights. The howling wind stung her cheeks as she entered her tent and settled into bed. It felt too large for only her. The warmth of the closest brazier could not reach her. Her bed was cold and, for the first time in a long time, Daenerys was alone.

It felt odd – wrong – to be like this. *He should be here. Beside me with his arm around me and face buried in my hair. He always liked that.* She thought of how she used to trace his scars as they lay abed on those long northern winter nights. And she thought back to those sweet nights aboard the ship. And before that, to when she had taken up in ancient keep of her house, longing for something or someone to make the island feel like home.

She reached behind her and pulled the furs tighter around her, only to realized they were not bed furs at all. *His cloak...* He had left it here in the tent. It smelled of him, the smell of northern soldier pines. She held it close and whispered his name into the night.

She missed him. Indeed, she seldom left his side for months on end. Now all the world felt empty and she felt... *hollow? Is that the word?* Like a piece of her had been snatched away and left a gaping emptiness in its absence.

*I am his and he is mine.* Those were the words she had spoken beneath the heart tree before it burned, even though she had known them to be true long before that moment.

And so cold dread filled her as she lay awake thinking about her love chained beneath the Red Keep. It felt worse even than when she had put a hand on Rhaegal’s broken body to say goodbye to the second of her mighty children, killed before his time. But death was so final. Rhaegal’s fate was decided, Jon’s was not.

*Or perhaps she’s killed him already. She knows the truth as I do. She would consider him a threat. For certainly Cersei had read even one of the raven scrolls Tyrion had sent southward. No, she would not have. I will not accept that.* This was not the end.

It could not be. Had she passed through tempests of fire and ice only to once more lose her family and be cast out into the world cold and alone? *Did we defeat death together only to fall like this?* She remembered the feeling of his blood on her hands after the battle outside Winterfell and remembered the tears steaming down her face as she begged him to hold on.

*No,* she thought again. *Jon will live. Our child will live.* She could not live in a world without her family now, nor would she accept one.

*I am not a helpless girl any longer.* For that’s what she had been when Khal Drogo and Rhaego had been taken from her: helpless and alone. *I promised myself I would take what was stolen from me. Now I must take back my husband too.*
Fire filled her. What tears she shed for her slain dragon and husband would be shed alone. There was a war to win.

Only, she did not know now to win it now. To attack the city was to risk Jon’s life and to sit here at Harrenhal was to wither away in winter. Thoughts and fantasies were all she had now, and so she lay away for some time, watching shadows dance on the walls of her tent, listening to the wind howl and whispered words of her guards, and thinking of the days to come – and of what she would do to Cersei Lannister.

Drogon is strong – far stronger than Rhaegal or Viserion ever were. She silently loathed herself for locking two of her children away, for had she not they might have grown as big as her black, with hardened scales and larger wings and more terrible fire. Her mistakes had put everything at risk.

Not just my mistakes. It had been Tyrion would had stolen her family’s secret, sending it across the realm on ravens’ wings. And for what? A few swords. Perhaps the Golden Company knew to target Aegon Targaryen atop his green dragon – knew to send their black bolts flying toward the dragon’s head. They would not have known otherwise…

Tyrion could not be trusted now. No one could. No one truly understood what she stood to lose.

She sat up as a lone figure entered the tent. “Khaleesi?” it said. Jorah, she knew at once. All tension melted away. Even her old title cooled the angry fire burning within. She looked up at her old friend, his weathered face and worn armor always a welcome sight.

“Ser Jorah,” she sighed. “Enter.” He did in full, making certain the tent flap closed well enough behind him.

“I thought to…” his warm smile faltered as he looked her over, his eyes falling on Jon’s cloak. She pushed it aside as she rose to greet him.

“Check on me?” she suggested, perhaps too coolly.

His face fell, yet still he stood firm. “It’s been nearly three days Daenerys…”

The way he said her name stirred something deep within her. Like I am back with my brother on the Dothraki Sea. Weakness, she knew. It was a horrible feeling.

She knew he had not meant it like that, but she could not stop herself. The fire within her roared once more.

“She has him,” Daenerys said, hissing the first word.

“I know,” Jorah nodded. “And we’ll get him back.”

“Will we?” she asked. “How, ser? How? Are we to lay siege to the capital with only a shadow of my army left? Burn the Red Keep with Jon inside? How?” How many hours have I wasted thinking of ways to have him returned to me?

Jorah sighed and looked away – far away, as if his gazed could piece the tent and camp beyond.

“When you sent me away to find the cure to greyscale, did you even think you would see me again?”

“I knew that-”
“Truth now, Khaleesi,” he met her gaze again. “For I did not think to see you again. How many minds and lives has greyscale taken, hmm? Was I any different than those before?”

“You were not a prisoner,” she countered, though she could feel her own resistance to the man’s words collapsing like the Wall.

“In my own body, perhaps,” Jorah replied. “And yet I survived. I returned to your side. He will too.” Will he? How do you know, ser? “You mustn’t give in to those feelings of despair.”

“I won’t,” she insisted.

Jorah smiled despite himself. “Perhaps I misspoke,” he said. “You’ve never been one to, but your people need you now. The battle was not easy…”

*I know.* She had watched Rhaegal fall. She had seen the wounded writhing on the blood-soaked ground… and had seen the piles of corpses. She had even visited some of her Dothraki riders just yesterday, though the proud riders had insisted nothing was wrong. They had ridden across the poison water for her, but even they could not ride forever.

She swallowed hard. “How many did we lose?”

“I don’t know,” Jorah admitted. “But we need to march, need to move. We cannot stay here.” No, we cannot.

“Summon whoever is left, then. Summon them here. We need a plan.”

“Of course,” Jorah bowed and turned, making to leave the tent.

“Ser Jorah,” she called out from across the tent. He turned and waited for another command. “Thank you.” He smiled softly, bowed low, then turned and left.

Missandei was the first to arrive just a few moments after Ser Jorah had left. Daenerys’ dearest friend helped her ready herself for the day, but few words passed between the two. *She knows the loss I fear.* Yet Daenerys could not force herself to speak of Grey Worm’s death in the North nor ask her friend to recount the countless cold nights she had spent alone.

Soon, Ser Davos arrived, his smile briefly breaking the growing unease in the room. Varys and Tyrion followed him in, though the latter did not meet her gaze. Ser Jaime and Brienne of Tarth followed a few of her Unsullied lieutenants into the tent. Then, after a moment, Arya Stark entered with Gendry in tow.

Her storm grey eyes found Daenerys’ own at once. Jon’s eyes, she thought as she looked back at her love’s sister. Arya’s eyes held a coldness that Jon’s never could. *She hides her pain well,* she thought.

Daenerys looked around the tent. *So few now.* She leaned back ever-so-slightly, then almost stumbled, for she had expected to lean against Jon’s shoulder as she so often did. The empty space to her right felt more like a chasm.

His absence filled the room. All knew of Rhaegal’s death and Jon’s capture, but none spoke of it. *They act as if he’s already gone.* The thought left a bitter taste in her mouth.

Finally, Ser Jorah returned with a few other men in tow. He met her gaze and… *Something is wrong.* She knew that look. “What is it?” she asked him.
“Our scouts report another Lannister host marching north from the city,” he said. She looked at Tyrion, then at Ser Jaime. How? she wanted to ask. How many armies does she have – and how many battles must I fight. She did not have time for even one. She needed to get to Jon.

“How many?” she asked instead.

“Remnants of the Golden Company,” Jorah said. “And some levies from the city itself and the surrounding lands.”

“Lannister men, Your Grace,” one of the soldiers behind Jorah said.

“Aye,” Jorah said. “A few thousand at least.”

“How far?”

“A day’s march,” Jorah said, looking grim. “Perhaps less. We’ve fewer scouts than we did before…”

“Cersei’s army will be fresh, well-rested and well-fed,” Tyrion decided to speak. “We should-”

“Because they did not march north to fight beside us,” Daenerys cut off her Hand. “How many men do we have that can still fight?” She looked to Jorah and then to her Unsullied lieutenants.

“A few thousand.” It was Ser Davos who answered. “Half their number, perhaps less.”

“A few thousand,” Daenerys repeated the phrase. How can it be so few now? She had commanded eight thousand Unsullied and nearly five thousand bloodriders. And now I’ve lost half of them and more. And I’ve lost him.

“We need more men. Remind me, my lord, how many men did our ravens from Winterfell win us?” she glared at Tyrion.

To his credit, he stood firm. “A few hundred, but from other houses who had battled the dead. If we could send ravens to Dorne and riders down the Boneway, I think that-”

“No.” The denial was firm and complete. I cannot ask these men who fought death itself to risk themselves again and again – and I cannot risk defeat. She needed to crush Cersei’s strength, here and now. It was like fighting the dead. The ranks of soldiers were endless. There was only one way. “We still have one advantage.”

Tyrion’s eyes widened. “We’ve discussed this, Your Grace,” he sighed. “And now of all times, you cannot risk it.” I must.

“Am I to demand that the men we have left march into battle while I sit back and do nothing?”

“They swore to die for you,” Tyrion replied.

“They swore to fight for me,” she hissed. “And I shall fight for them.”

“Your Grace,” Jorah interjected, trying to cool the rising tempers in the room. “I’ve been with you from the first. I saw your dragons born into the world and I’ve seen two slain. If Drogon should fall now…”

“My sister will have equipped these men with more scorpions and ballistae, the same as those we captured in the ruins of the Golden Company’s camp,” Tyrion added with a nod to Jorah. “Even Drogon cannot withstand such an assault.”

“He will,” Daenerys insisted. He’s strong. “I will bathe those weapons and the men operating them
“You don’t need to risk a dragon,” a voice said from the corner. All heads turned as Arya Stark stood. Her eyes were fixed on Daenerys’ own.

“What do you mean?” she asked. Silence settled among the gathered as Arya paced toward the center.

The girl shrugged. “Fly at night. Your black dragon in a black sky. Kill them while they sleep.”

The silence following the statement was one of the deepest Daenerys had known. No one responded, for no one could. Daenerys glanced around the room to find disturbed looks on Davos, Jorah’s, Varys’ and Brienne’s faces, and outright horror on those of the two Lannister brothers.

“You would have me burn these soldiers in their tents?”

It was an utterly ruthless suggestion, something neither her Hand nor any of her other advisors would have put forth in a thousand meetings. In truth, it terrified Daenerys some... and she knew why. Because it feels right. To burn my enemies. To destroy those who would see my family destroyed.

“In their tents, across a battlefield, does it matter?” Arya asked. “Death is death.”

It seemed a smart move, an uncertain and unorthodox one. Yet such maneuvers often turned the tides of war. Had it not been Tywin’s men who had marched through the gates her father had opened in welcome, only to sack and burn the city? Had it not been he who order her brother’s children butchered? And Tywin’s only daughter had secured the south by betraying their northern cause as they fought for life. Uncertain and unorthodox will win the day. They will get me Jon back. I cannot unleash Drogon on the Red Keep, but I can here.

“You Grace,” Tyrion began. “If you mean to sit the throne and rule these people, you mustn’t-”

“First I must sit the throne,” she snapped back. “That means defeating this new army your sister has mustered, however I can. You are dismissed. All of you.” She looked around the room at each man in turn and watched as they leaved. Jaime lingered at the edge of the entrance for a moment, then swept from the tent.

Daenerys stepped back and collapsed onto the bed. Her hot anger had burned away and her fear and congealed and settled in the pit of her stomach. I burned men outside Harrenhal and I can do so again. I will do whatever it takes to get him back. Still, it troubled her.

“You alright?”

Daenerys looked up to find Arya still here and still looking at her. Why didn’t she leave with the others? It was a foolish question. She isn’t like the others. She is like me. She understands.

“Arya,” she sighed. Daenerys tried to regain her regal mask, but she found she had not the strength. As if in response, Arya strode forth and sat on the bed beside her.

Jon’s sister had always been friendly, but distant in a certain way. They had talked over hot meals in Winterfell’s great hall and, once or twice, Arya had joined Daenerys in the keep’s solar. But now? This felt different.

“You didn’t answer my question,” she said, trying to smile.
“I…” Daenerys was almost at a loss for words. Arya’s directness was odd, yet refreshing, like those grey eyes could see through the mantle of ‘queen’ to the woman beneath. *Perhaps you’re more like your brother than you’d care to admit.* “No, I am not,” she finally said it. A weight seemed to lift off her chest as she admitted the truth.

“No,” Arya agreed. “We need to get him back.”

Their eyes met again… and Daenerys knew those words were the truth. Arya had cut to the heart of it. She could hear the pain in them, the longing. *She loves him too, in a way only a sister can.* Daenerys could still remember the love she bore for Viserys, though those memories were no more than shadows of the past now.

“We will,” she promised. Arya’s expression shifted, as if she were looking for gaps in Daenerys’ own armor.

“You need to believe it,” Arya said.

“I do,” Daenerys protested, furrowing her brow at the response. “We will destroy Cersei’s remaining armies and then take the city.” She hesitated for a moment, then reached out and placed a hand on Arya’s. Her skin felt cold, but she did not pull away. “I promise you we will get Jon back.”

Yet in her heart doubts lingered. They had troubled her greatly last night, those thoughts of a family almost joined together before being torn apart.

“You had a good plan,” Daenerys said, trying to not think of her husband trapped in the Black Cells, if only for a moment. “And a good mind for strategy. Perhaps I should make you my Hand.”

“My hands are better used for other things,” Arya’s lip turned upward slightly, accepting the invitation to emotional respite.

Daenerys suppressed the urge to laugh. “I suppose that’s true. Still…” She paused for a moment, thinking of discussing the coming battle with Arya, but it did not seem right. *It is something I must do alone,* she knew. *Just as I did in the east.* That familiar fire would come to her in the moments before battle – then she would show the enemy the meaning of her family’s words, but for now…

“I never did truly thank you,” Daenerys said, thinking back to their time in the North.

“You did…” now it was Arya who furrowed her brow.

“A true thank you, I meant,” Daenerys said. Arya shrugged. “Saving a queen’s life is no simple task. I think that merits a proper reward, no?”

Arya shrugged again. “I’m not sure there’s anything I want.”

“No?” Daenerys said. “Not Storm’s End?” Daenerys was impressed by Arya’s mastery of her own emotions, yet even she could not keep the color from rising up her neck and making her cheeks flush, if only so slightly. “There are no other true-born Baratheons with a claim. I never thought I might march in the same army as Robert’s son, but then again…” she raised an eyebrow and smiled at Arya. The assassin’s mask melted away and she smiled softly, though she offered no response. *She isn’t certain. About the boy or the keep?* “Think on it,” she said.

“Do you have to?” Arya asked suddenly.

“What?”
“Think on it,” she clarified. “What you want, with Jon, after this. After we get him back.”

_I think on it every night._ She could not admit that, of course, even to Arya. A queen had to be assured of her own choices. Yet how often had she dreamed of a simpler life with Jo by her side? _Too often._

“Every night,” she decided to speak the truth. “Every night since I remember thinking of the throne at all.”

“Then why don’t you go?” Arya asked. “Take your dragon. Take Jon and go.”

“Where?” Daenerys laughed at the absurdity of the notion.

“Anywhere you want,” Arya shrugged. “You have a dragon.” _Where once I had three..._

*Mother of Dragons, they call me, but what sort of mother outlives her children or sacrifices them for her own gain?*_ She had a child growing within her now. _And she must be protected too._

She could not abandon the realm to another’s rule, nor would she truly be safe if she did. Queens who gave up their crowns often gave up their heads with them. Taking the throne meant safety for her family and for her. Perhaps it even meant, at long last, home.

“I can’t,” she said, her voice suddenly uneven. Arya gave her a curious look, but spoke no more of distant fantasies in even more distant lands.

“So, how do we get Jon back?” Arya asked, her voice losing what warmth is had as she focused on that task at hand. _Her brother has become her purpose now,_ Daenerys knew. _Even a moment’s distraction about Gendry meant little to her._

“I will destroy Cersei’s men and we’ll march on the capital together,” Daenerys replied. _What comes next I do not know._

“Jon’s _inside_ the Red Keep. Cersei will kill him before she ever lets you batter down the gates. And the others said we don’t have the numbers for a siege,” Arya replied. _I know._

“Then we’ll find another way,” Daenerys said. She could see Arya was not convinced. “We are sisters, now,” she said. “By the oaths I swore to your brother and the love I bear for him, we are family. I swear to you I will see him returned to us whole and unharmed.”

“You don’t have to do it alone,” Arya said as she stood. Daenerys could see something at work behind those eyes, though she knew not what is was. The younger woman walked toward the tent’s exit, then looked back across her shoulder. “I’m not going to lose another brother.”

Chapter End Notes

First of all,

To the 3-4 people on Reddit who told me Arya's having a romantic interest was so out-of-character, kindly go choke on a fat pink mask.

Anyway. Since we're back in session, it's important to realize that Home's Daenerys is more a mix of show and book, and has developed in different ways over the past 63
chapters. Just keep that in mind so you don't read this and consider Emilia Clarke's character straight away. Here, I got to think about how she'd react to Jon's being taken from her while there's also a real chance to save him. I shot for a mix of melancholy and anger - that desire to be safe and happy and home versus that desire to utterly ruin those who threaten the former.

Speaking of, Rhaegal is not safe or happy or home. I received some, well, interesting feedback to that development. If you're looking for stories where our heroes steamroll through to the finish, do search elsewhere (also don't tune in this Sunday). This is not such a story. I've tried to keep true to the spirit of GRRM's story and the show and I shall continue to do so. Hopefully you enjoy most of it!
She’s going to do it. The thought had haunted him all morning and well into the afternoon – when the new Lannister host had set its lines just to the south of Daenerys’ own encampment. She’s going to burn them tonight. He had seen it in her eyes before Daenerys had dismissed them all, just as he had seen it in her father’s eyes years before.

Was it madness? Perhaps, he thought. Perhaps she is truly her father’s daughter, willing to burning the guilty and innocent alike for crimes real and imagined. Yet he had come to know this Targaryen queen. He had fought beside her just as she had fought beside the northerners in their war against the dead. And for life.

No, not madness, he decided as he paced down the muddied path between tent rows. At least, not like her father. Daenerys’ madness was fiery anger tempered with hope and with cool purpose. The madness of love. She loved Jon Snow, that much was clear, and Jaime knew she would do near anything to get him back from Cersei – even if it meant burning ten thousand men as they slept. The things we do for love...

And what would Cersei do in response? His sister’s child - his child - would soon be born, if he had counted the days and weeks correctly. She won’t give up the city or the throne now. She would send Westermen to die by the thousands if she could keep the babe safe. And Daenerys will burn them by the thousands to keep her own safe. Mothers, it seemed, not dead men or dragons, were the deadliest force in the realm.

Two mothers. Two queens, Jaime reflected as he turned and paced back the way he had come. And thousands of men trapped in between them... including me.

He had to do something – anything - to stop the slaughter. I swore to fight with the living against the dead and the dead are gone. This quest for the throne was not his fight, nor could he rightly take up arms against his own family’s men. I swore to fight for life and I did.

And yet I’ve been dragged into one battle already. He thought he might have lost his life outside the walls of Harrenhal after the sellswords unleashed those war beasts. There had been an elephant at Lannisport’s menagerie when he was just a squire, but there was a difference between seeing a caged beast and seeing twenty charge at you from across the field.

Perhaps they should have been left in their cages, he thought to himself as he recalled how the beasts had panicked and smashed into the Golden Company’s lines when those wolves had stormed forth from the forest.

Wolves and elephants, dragons and dead men... What had happened to putting spears in the hands of smallfolk and swords in the hands of knights? I’d give all the sand in Dorne for a proper battle again. A normal battle. Or a measure of peace.

Yet with Daenerys’ determined gaze burning into his memory, he knew there would be no peace until the one of the realm’s two queens submitted to the other – or died in refusing to do so. Jaime could only think of Daenerys’ great black dragon turning his men to ash along the Blackwater. And she means to do it again.
Tyrion, he thought without hesitation. *Tyrion will know what to do. He will not want to see Lannister men burn, even if they are Daenerys’ enemy. There is another way – and Tyrion will think of it.*

He looked up as a patrol of Unsullied crossed his path and marched to their own section of the camp. More stood sentry along the edges of the tent lines, where stakes had been set into the ground. Jaime waited for the patrol to pass before hurry toward where his brother’s guarded tent had been set on the other side of the encampment.

His thoughts lingered on the patrol. *There used to be more, eight thousand… and now? Had half that number survived the war in the North and the last battle? Half again that number? And how many Dothraki screamers are left? Whatever the count in full, it would certainly be a mere shadow of the army Daenerys had assembled outside King’s Landing before winter had come in force.*

*Foreigners died to save the realm and now they’ll die to put their queen on the throne – fighting still more foreigners bought with gold and false promises.* When would the houses of Westeros decide the fate of their own country? Perhaps much of his own homeland’s strength was spent. *And with winter come marshalling a summer host is all but impossible.* Yet strength still remained in the south, strength enough to tip the scales toward lion or dragon. *Look at me,* he thought as he reached his brother’s tent. *I’ve become Tyrion.*

The thought jarred him and he pulled away just as he was about to pull back the tent flap and enter without invitation. *Tyrion… Daenerys’ Hand. Her advisor. Eager to prove himself and correct his failures. If I tell him we must act to deny her a victory, will he side with me or with her?* He loved his brother, but he could not be certain.

And just then he heard hushed voices from with the tent itself.

“Oh I’m afraid not, my friend,” someone said. *Varys?*

“You must,” a second voice insisted. *And my brother. “You must do what I cannot.”*

“Or will not,” Varys said. “Perhaps you might propose this arrangement to the queen?”

“I might as well propose my own beheading. She stricken with grief over the dragon’s death and her husband’s captivity. What do you think she’ll do to me if she learns of this?” *Learns of what?*

“Nothing good,” Varys said.

“Precisely,” Tyrion said, sounding annoyed. “Still, it doesn’t change the facts. Our king is unlikely to escape my sister’s dungeon alive. We need to secure our queen’s position, assure strong alliances and a continuation of her line. We need to send the ravens. *You need to send them,*” he finished.

*Alliances. Continuation of her line. What are they talking about?* Jaime took a half-step closer as his curiosity grew. Whatever it was, it was for Daenerys’ benefit, though apparently the queen would not approve at all.

*He serves her still.* Whether it was love for Daenerys or hatred for Cersei that drove, Jaime was not certain. He only knew that he could not speak to Tyrion of his own intentions, yet neither could he pull himself away from the conversation unraveling before him.

Varys sighed. “Very well, but if this should go poorly…”

“You’ll have me to blame? I don’t doubt I’d be blamed if the wind blew the wrong way on the
morrow, my friend. Have no fear on this small count. Now, come on.”

Shadows shifted inside the tent and Jaime realized his mistake, he quickly turned back the way he had come and hastily turned down another row to avoid his brother and the spymaster. He only stopped when he was far enough away that he was sure neither had seen nor followed him.

*Ravens*, he reflected on his brother’s hushed words. *What is he planning to do now?* Daenerys had almost ripped the pin from his brother’s chest when she had learned of his announcing Jon’s lineage to the realm. She might rip other things from him if he continued to pursue his own ambitions. She might think him a traitor. *He’s going to get himself killed.*

Whatever Tyrion’s plans were, Jaime could not think much on them now. As much as he loved his brother, he had to focus on who Daenerys might kill that very night. *Thousands of men, innocent men, smallfolk from outside Lannisport and The Crag, Silverhill and Crakehall and the scattered holdings near the ruins of Castamere. Men that fought with me for years.*

As he rounded another corner, he saw their banners fluttering across the field. *My banners, golden lions on deep crimson. I commanded these men once.* Sigils of solid gold flew beside them, yet there were far fewer than there had been just a few days before. The Golden Company had been scattered and broken in the fight – perhaps only a fifth of their strength had reformed. The rest would still be wandering the Riverlands or else making for the closest port with an eye toward Essos.

He kept his eyes fixed on the banners, trying to count their number and make out the others in the forest of heraldry. *The red ox of the Presters, the brindled boar of the Crakehalls, and many others. Good men. If Ser Forley Prester or Roland Crakehall were with their men, I might sneak across and treat with them.* Both lords were well-reasoned and reasonable. If he told them to flee, they just might.

And then he saw a banner unlike any other – a banner he thought not to see here or anywhere in this war. *A burning green chain across a smoke-grey field. He’s here.* Jaime’s spirits soared. If he could only get across the expanse of grass separating the two camps, he could meet with the one man who would surely flee at only the mention of defeat.

And so he bided his time, watching the cloudy sky darken and waiting for the right time to walk to the edge of the camp and slowly slip between the patrols. He would have to be quick and, once there, convincing. Daenerys would wait until midnight perhaps, but no later. Her victory over this new host would be swift and complete… and, if he failed, thousands would die.

Jaime took time to ready himself in his tent, stripping away what armor he had in favor of fur-lined leathers. He left his golden hand and sword behind, along with anything else that might rattle or glimmer or weigh him down in his haste across the field.

When he next emerged from the tent, the sun had already set. Whatever moon hung above the world was mercifully shrouded in dense cloud. Soon, all the world would be black. He could not have asked for better fortune.

*Nor could she*, he realized with some dread. *Whatever scouts they have set in their encampment will not see a black dragon in a pitch-black sky. She’ll be on them before they’ve rubbed the sleep from their eyes.* He needed to go. Now.

He began walking southward, hoping to find a place to cross. He passed groups of Dothraki huddled around their fires. They eyed him warily as he passed. Their horses were likewise grouped together some distance away – within the stakes this time. *To protect from those wolves.*
... or not, he thought with some surprise as a massive form emerged from between two tents. *The girl’s direwolf... No, both of them.* While the other wolves had disappeared back into the forest after feasting on the flesh of horses and beasts killed in the battle, the two Stark direwolves had remained in the camp.

The horses began to shift and panic and they caught the scent of the two beasts. Jaime watched in awe as they silently paced toward the Dothraki mounts, then stood still and silent. A lone figure, shorted than either wolf, emerged from between them. He recognized the dagger at her side at once.

*Arya Stark. What is she doing?* The girl had been the one to suggest the course of action he was trying to prevent. *Deadlier than even I realized,* he thought grimly. *Perhaps she can be swayed.* He lingered there for a moment longer, watching her pet the grey she-wolf before disappearing among the nervous horses. *I cannot stay any longer,* he realized. There was not much time left now.

Jaime hurried to the edge of the camp, trying to identify gaps in the patrols and gaps in the torchlight. He paused beside the rows of stakes for a moment, lingering there and wondering whether this was the right decision. *Fleeing in the dead of night like I did from Robb Stark’s camp once... but I am not that man anymore.*

Turning, he slipped between to stakes and moved beyond the reach of fire light, into the the darkness of the field between the two camps.

The going was slow and more than once he had to fight the urge to simply get up and sprint across the field. *And if I do that I’ll be riddled with arrows before I reach the first row of tents or else met with spear tips at the ready.*

How many minutes or hours passed as he struggled across the field he could not rightly say. Still, he made good time through the utter blackness between the camps. Twice he paused and lay still. The first time because he thought he heard the dragon’s roar and mighty wingbeats, though in the end it must have been only the wind. The second because something truly did fly overhead.

*Ravens,* he knew. He could not see them, but he could hear their cawing in the night. They flew off to the south and east, over the camp and away to wherever they had been bid. *Tyrion’s ravens...*

Finally, he reached the edge of the Lannister camp and crouched low, trying to find a gap in their patrols just as he did in the camp he had just left. His family’s men had not had time to set stakes into the snow, but they had set the line on a small ridge up which Jaime scrambled – and fell.

He stumbled forward and four hands seized him round his arms at once. The guards dragged him upright and roughly set him down. A third lad stormed forth from near a campfire and drew his sword, pointing it right below Jaime’s chin. *Wonderful...*

“Looks like we caught ourselves a Targaryen spy,” the youth smiled cruelly. “Wonder what the queen’ll do with this one.” *I’m eager to find out too, boy.*

“Unsullied?” one of the other soldiers asked.

“One way to find out,” the lad with the sword smirked, lowering the point of the blade from Jaime’s chin and trailing it down his chest. “Perhaps if we-”

“What’re you oafs doing?” a booming voice demanded of the sentries. They all turned at once to see a sturdy figure pacing toward them. Jaime took in the sight of the newcomer as the firelight illuminated his features. A big man, not unlike Robert or even the lesser Clegane. *Dented but*
polished mail, a knight... no! He noticed the boar sigil emblazoned on the breastplate, then a smile broke across his face.

“Ser Lyle,” he said, finally breaking his silence. “It’s been too long.”

The armored man stepped forward and, shoving the sword-wielding sentry aside, peered intently into Jaime’s eyes. His own went wide in recognition.

“Ser Jaime?” Ser Lyle Crakehall sounded shocked.

“My lord,” Jaime inclined his head. “I might bow lower, if only...” he gave an odd shrugged and nodded at one of the two men holding his arms with vicelike grips.

“Off, both of you fools!” Ser Lyle Crakehall demanded, gripping both guards by their cloaks and pulling them backwards with twin swift tugs. They fell into the snow and dirt. “This is Ser Jaime Lannister.”

“Kingslayer...” he heard one of young sentries mutter in awe from the ground. He rubbed his right arm with his hand gave an apologetic look to the lad.

“I’ll have these fools flogged for their stupidity,” Ser Lyle shook his head in mock disgust.

“No need for that,” Jaime insisted. “You have fine sentries, my lord, only just a bit more interested in learning what’s between a man’s legs rather than what’s between his ears.” Ser Lyle raised his eyebrow, utterly bemused, and Jaime realized the jest had flown far above the large knight’s still larger head.

“Hmmmph,” he grunted in response. “Anyway, last I heard you’d died in the North! Fled the Dragon Queen’s stockades, hmm? Come to take command? We could use a man like you in the center, these sellswords-”

“No exactly, no,” Jaime interrupted him. “And I’ve no time for more pleasantries. Who is in command? Take me to him.”

Ser Lyle looked him over for a moment as if seeing him in a new light, but then swiftly nodded, turned and led him into the Lannister camp.

“I remember your command of our host at Riverrun,” Ser Lyle said, as if remembering a well-spent summer afternoon. The man is unable to help himself. Gods help him should Daenerys capture him. He’ll spill every secret he’s managed to stuff into that massive head of his.

“Which host?” Jaime inquired, eager to keep the man in talking.

“Ah...” the knight sighed. “I’d almost forgotten – so long ago, you know,” he said awkwardly. “The second siege. When we took up the cause of those Frey fellows. Pity what happened to them...” Is it? “Your negotiation was well done, my lord, if I might say so. A castle taken and battle won without a drop of blood shed. The mark of a true knight and true lord, I should think,” he said, though he did not meet Jaime’s gaze.

“I suppose so,” Jaime said, thinking of his threats to catapult Edmure Tully’s babe over the walls of his ancestral keep if he did not yield it. What would Daenerys say to that? Then he thought of the siege and the sigil he had seen earlier that day. “Tell me, who is in command of this host. Your lord father?”

“Hmmmph,” Ser Lyle grunted. “I fear not. Your sister - the queen, I mean - has taken a liking to a
lesser sort of general.” Good. They rounded another turn and found themselves standing before a crimson tent far larger than those surrounding it. “You’ll find him in there,” the knight instructed, standing aside so that Jaime might stride forth and enter. He did.

…and at once beheld Ser Bronn of the Blackwater sitting in a cushioned seat – a half-naked girl on his half-naked thigh. He groaned in annoyance as he stood, not truly recognizing Jaime. He turned away as Jaime entered the tent. The girl collected her clothing and scurried away.

Bonn stood with his back toward his old friend, pulling up his breeches and pouring himself a goblet of wine. He did not yet turn back around. “What is it lad?” he asked before quaffing down the drink and pouring himself another. “Come on now, we haven’t got all winter.” Jaime felt a smug smile spilt across his face as he waited for Bronn to turn around.

“No, I suppose we don’t,” he said.

Bonn spun, spilling much of his new pour. His dark eyes met Jaime’s own. “Jaime fucking Lannister,” he said, making no effort to hide the utter astonishment in his voice. “What in seven hells are you doing here?”

“I might ask you the same,” he replied, looking around the tent and examining all its finery.

“Nice, isn’t it?” Bronn asked, following Jaime’s gaze. “I’d just considered it all a gift from your sister when she named me commander of this army.”

“And how did you manage that?” Jaime asked, genuinely curious.

“Managed not to get half your sister’s men flattened by their own elephants, I suppose,” Bronn shrugged. “And managed not to get the other half burned alive.”

“Well, you still have time for that,” Jaime said. And I don’t have much time left.

“Is that so?” Bronn asked. Jaime heard some of the amusement fade from his voice.

“Daenerys plans to attack your camps tonight and burn your men while they sleep,” he said simply, without anger or truly any emotion of any sort.

“And so you decided to cross over to the camps she’s about to burn,” Bronn responded, unconvinced. But clearly unwillingly to let himself be burned alive.

“I crossed the field to make certain you know – to make certain you have time to flee before she takes to the skies. I was at the Blackwater same as you.”

“Oh, I remember well enough,” Bronn said. “And perhaps you forgot to consider that a damned dragon will find our camp wherever we set it – unless you’ve brought a river for my men to dive into?” Bronn asked, his tone growing more hostile.

“Not if you leave now - and leave all this behind. March south in darkness and she won’t be able to track you.”

“And come the morning?”

“You’ll be safe in King’s Landing, if you hurry,” Jaime said. “Daenerys won’t dare attack the city outright.”

“And I’m sure your sister will be pleased to see me alive and well-”
“With her armies alive? I should think so,” Jaime countered before Bronn could finish his thought.

“And you’re coming with us?” Bronn asked.

*Perhaps?* In truth, he had not thought this far or thought this through. His instinct was to save Lannister men from burning alive. The idea of seeing Cersei heavy with his child was bittersweet. *But I cannot leave,* he realized. *If Daenerys finds an empty Lannister camp and my empty bed she’ll brand my brother a traitor. If I can get back across the lines without being seen… They might think it a retreat. It might work.*

“No,” Jaime decided.

“That lady knight of yours still alive then? Bronn mocked. “Or is your eye set on the Dragon Queen now she’s newly available? Always knew you had a thing for blondes, though the relationship might be a bit complicated… you having one hand and having slit her father’s throat, and all.”


“Aye, lands and titles and gold,” Bronn agreed. “Harrenhal and lordship over whatever is left of the Riverlands.” He tucked his thumbs into his sword belt. “Not bad for an upjumped sellsword.”

“No,” Jaime agreed. “Not bad. If you survive this war. And it seems you have no intention of doing that.”

“Oho,” Bronn laughed. “I do Lannister, I do.” He walked up to Jaime and placed a hand on his shoulder. Their eyes met. “I’ll see you back to the lines. Get clear of here. I’ll do the same with my men.”

“And my men,” Jaime reminded him.

“Suppose that’s true,” Bronn nodded. “And those golden fuckers as well, or whatever’s left of them.” He went to the tents entrance and bid his guards enter. “Lads,” he said. “Spread the word and spread it quick. We’re marching south. Leave everything you don’t need behind. And if any man so much as touches his lips to a bloody horn I’ll shove the damned thing up his-”

“At once, m’lord!” the guards nodded before running off.

“You’ve a knack for command,” Jaime noted as the watch the guards run from tent to tent. Slowly, the camp became a silent surge of activity as men readied to march at a moment’s notice.

“You once said I had better instincts than any officer in your army.”

“And I meant it,” Jaime replied.

“Aye,” Bronn sighed. “Come along, then.”

They walked through the camp back the way Ser Lyle had guided Jaime just a moment before, passing Lannister soldiers, stormlanders, and Golden Company mercenaries waking and readying themselves. Each tired face Jaime saw bolstered his spirits, for each was another life he had saved.

When at last they reached the edge, Jaime turned to Bronn. “Thank you,” he said.

Bronn almost laughed. “Thank you, Lannister. Now go. We’ll do the same.” He hurried back
toward the tent and his men, then turned and met Jaime’s gaze one last time. “I hope we’ll see each other again.” As do I. He dipped his head in a nod, then disappeared into the night.

Jaime looked back every now and then as he crept across the field. Were it not for his speaking with Bronn, he might not have known the camp had emptied and the men fled south. The tents still stood, their deep crimson fabrics illuminated by hundreds of still burning campfires. It was a rather peaceful scene.

Until a dreadful roar split open the night silence. Jaime looked skyward, searching for Drogon’s massive black form, but he saw nothing until a jet of crimson flame shot down from the blackness and consumed an entire row of tents. He could feel the heat even from where he lay pressed against the hard ground.

No screams. He breathed a sigh of relief. Bronn had fled with his army in silence and intact.
Daenerys continued to guide Drogon in long passes over the abandoned camp, unleashing dragonfire on the unmanned equipment and empty tents below.

By the time Jaime reached the row of sharpened stakes, the entire Lannister camp was burning as bright as the summer sun. The inferno cast its light upon the field too, illuminating every small ridge and stone.

Such was the spectacle that Jaime did not realize that, with his back to the fire, he was visible to the camps and patrols within. Shit. He stood and ran for the safety of the tents, but others found him first. He stumbled again and rose to find himself greeted with the black iron spear points of the Unsullied.

Chapter End Notes

Well. As for the show, there are plenty of criticisms I could levy... and then go find the same errors in my own work. One major failure is the writers’ lack of interest in or engagement with the fantasy elements of a fantasy show (though I'll withhold final judgement as we're only halfway through). I don't mind Mr. Night's purpose being a weapon, but I'm not sure what Bran's purpose was or is.

I thought they did a good job of showing what it would be like fighting against the dead, though their wights were lumbering and slow in some scenes and busting through stone in others (and that tsunami... can bodies even move like that?)

Anyway, in this chapter Jaime reckons with another fantasy element: Dragons - the WMDs of Westeros - while he reckons with his place in the fight for family and the throne.

Hopefully getting the next chapter out by Saturday or Sunday am.
Chapter Notes

So two quick notes since I saw some comments all leaning the same direction.

1. Jaime, like everyone else, sees himself as a good person. He acts according to what he thinks is right and good for him and those he cares about. People don’t stop, look at themselves objectively, and then act based on that framework. Most of the time they just act.

2. Fire and dragonfire. I suppose it’s difficult in the age of drones and shit to understand the destructive power of fire. Arson used to be punishable by death. Fire was and is incredibly destructive. Wildfire and dragonfire are enhanced versions of it. In the world of Ice and Fire, dragons and dragonfire are the closest things to nuclear weapons that you get. The destruction they bring is total and horrifying. Fighting a battle with conventional means might result in 25% of the soldiers dying, another 10% getting wounded, and the rest either retreating or getting captured. Burning a camp with a dragon might just kill all of them - like nuking an army base would (I am not on a watch list for that phrase).

I don’t usually write notes to defend my story choices or plot points, but with regard to last chapter I feel like it’s important to understand things from the perspective of the characters.

She climbed down from Drogon’s side, face flushed with rage and knuckles white. She had burned the camp, the tents, the weapons – all of it. Except her army. Thousands of enemies had escaped untouched, retreating in the darkness toward the safety of the capital. They had left before she took flight that night. Another ten thousand men to man the walls. Another ten thousand men defending his cell.

The smoke from the enemy camp was already wafting over her own as she stormed across the clearing and into her tent, paying little heed to the soldiers who looked. She wanted to shout, wanted to scream, wanted to unleash her anger on whoever she could. I failed, she thought. And then she looked up.

Tyrion and Varys were already here, odd looks etched upon their tired faces. Ser Jorah stood beside them. He was armed, armored and ready for a fight. Which he shall not have, for there is no one to fight. Missandei stood there too, her amber eyes warm and welcoming in the firelight. But something is wrong. She knew the look and, as she looked around the room again, she instantly knew why.

Four of her Unsullied stood around a fifth black-clad figure who had been forced to his knees. A spy? She thought at first. Yet as she drew closer she recognized the familiar features of the man. Her chest tightened as he looked up at her with his sharp green eyes.

“What is this?” Daenerys asked, taking care to mask the emotion in her voice.
Missandei stepped forward. “White Rat and his brothers found Ser Jaime approaching from outside the camp,” she said. Daenerys looked into her friend’s eyes and saw a mixture of pain and confusion. *I will have answers.*

“Enemy camp,” her Unsullied guard added.

“You were in the enemy camp?” she directed the question at Jaime. He looked up at her without a hint of fear or doubt in his eyes.

“I was,” he replied simply.

Daenerys felt that familiar sensation deep within her - as all dragons did. “And what were you doing there?”

“Savings thousands of men from being burned in their sleep,” Jaime replied defiantly. She turned sharply to look at Tyrion, who wore a look of absolute defeated on his scarred face.

“Saving enemy lives,” she said

“Your enemies, Your Grace,” Jaime said. He adjusted himself and stood then, looking down at her instead of the other way around. Daenerys did not step back. “Not mine.”

“You swore your sword to me,” she countered.

“For the fight against the dead,” Jaime said.

Her vision narrowed. The rest of the room fell away. She could only see him, this man who had once fought to save her. This man who she had thought to trust with a command. *And with my peoples’ lives. Now he has betrayed me.*

It had not been the first time. *His father betrayed mine. He sacked King’s Landing when they opened the gates in welcome.* Jaime, of course, had slain her own father too, but that was another matter. *I know what my father was. I thought I knew what this man was… and I was wrong.*

“And now you fight for your sister? The woman who betrayed us? The woman who sent assassins after me? Or perhaps you knew of that too – you traveled with them after all.”

Jaime raised an eyebrow. “If I knew what those men were, would I not have let them kill you in your sleep just as you meant to do to my family’s levies tonight?”

“You’re Grace,” Tyrion stepped forward. She turned to glare at him. “My brother made a mistake, yes. A foolish mistake. But he acted out of love for family-?”

“Your family,” she snapped back.

“My family,” he agreed. “Though you’ll note I am standing here with you, not some leagues away beside Cersei.” *That doesn’t mean I can trust you either. If not for you Jon might still be here.*

“And?”

“And, his folly was just that. We lost no soldiers,” Tyrion continued.

“We lost a victory.” *And perhaps more.* “And your sister’s forces will soon be safe behind the walls of King’s Landing. You said it yourself – we don’t have the men for a siege.” Varys made an odd noise and Tyrion looked away pointedly. She did not miss the gesture. “What?”
“Other houses may soon join us, Your Grace,” the spymaster said in an even tone. “News of our victory at Harrenhal will surely have spread.”

“Where? To the lands ravaged by the dead? Or the lands Cersei conquered with the armies she did not send northward to aid us?” Varys offered no response to that. She turned back to Tyrion. “Your brother aided my enemies. That is treason.”

“Your Grace,” Tyrion held up his hands as if to hold back her advance. “Perhaps it is-”

“Perhaps what?!” she whirled on her Hand.

“Decisions made in haste will not help us now. We must be careful. Jon Snow is still in my sister’s grasp.” Again, she felt that cold dread congeal in the pit of her stomach. She has him. Jaime Lannister’s betrayal had put her love’s life in still greater peril. A victory tonight could have forced her to yield, but now? Now she had nothing.

“Do nothing? Do not punish the man who gave counsel to my enemies? Your enemies, I think?” she took a step toward Tyrion. “I named you my Hand because I trusted you.”

Tyrion looked at his brother, then back at her. “Throw him in a cell. Let him think on his actions for a time.”

“A cell? So the punishment for treason is imprisonment?” She stared into his mismatched eyes, then at the silver pin upon his breast. She considered removing it just then. I can’t trust him anymore than I can trust his brother.

“It is if you ever want to see your royal husband again,” Tyrion replied coolly. He’s right. Tyrion had spoken her fears aloud for all to hear. Yes, she could kill Jaime – burn him like she had the camp he had saved. Yet what would that yield? If Cersei learned of it – and surely she would – what was to stop her from executing Jon in retaliation?

Slowly, she began to nod. “Put him in the stockades then. Twenty guards or more,” she looked at White Rat and repeated the orders in Valyrian. The lieutenant nodded. “And if he should escape, you will take his place,” she glared at Tyrion.

“Very well,” Tyrion agreed, grimacing as he met his brother’s gaze once more. The Unsullied seized Jaime and marched him toward the entrance of the tent. Daenerys watched him go.

At the entrance to the tent, Jaime fought against the firm grips of the Unsullied guards and managed to turn around. He looked right at her. “What was I supposed to do? You meant to burn them all! You mean to kill her. She’s carrying my child!”

Daenerys did not have a chance to respond before her men drove him from the tent and led him away. Yet his words lingered in her mind. She’s with child. I cannot kill a woman carrying some innocent babe, can I?

Her hand dropped to her own womb as it so often did in these days. Her child grew within her. Her husband - her own blood - clung to life from within some cold, dark cell. There was nothing she would not do to keep them safe. Nothing.

“Your Grace,” Tyrion began. “If we might speak alone.”

“Alone?” Daenerys snapped at him. “No. I placed my trust in your brother and he betrayed me. Whatever you must say of the matter you can say it here.”
Tyrion sighed. “How many lives did we lose in the North? How many lives must still be lost? You told me once that you did not want to be queen of the ashes.”

“I don’t,” she replied.

“No,” Tyrion agreed. “You have a good heart. A gentle heart. Let it guide your way now.” A gentle heart will not get Jon back. “Treat with my sister. Soon she will realize that she’s outmatched, and she’ll sue for peace. A just peace.”

Peace. The word kindled the inferno within her once more. “You want peace with your sister?”

“Peace for the realm, my queen,” Varys stepped forward and stood by Tyrion’s side.

She took another step toward the two men. “Back in Meereen, before I named you my Hand, I considered having you killed.”

“I remember,” Tyrion said, averting his gaze for a moment. Perhaps I should have. How many times have you failed me? Every strategy - every foolish plan. Tyrion was a Hand that might strangle her if she let him – or else drop the blade before he could strike the killing blow. How had she not seen that before? “And now?”

Daenerys reached down and tore the silver pin from Tyrion’s breast. “I cannot have a Hand whose sister wars against me. Whose brother gives my enemies aid. Who has shared my family’s secrets.”

“Your Grace,” Tyrion stepped back. “I only meant to-”

“I don’t care what you meant,” she spat. “Your house was once the ruin of mine. I will not let it be once more. Get out.”

Tyrion Lannister gave her one last look - a look filled with doubt and fear – before he followed his brother out of her tent. Varys followed after him. Missandei lingered for a moment, bowed low, then departed. Daenerys felt a twinge of regret at seeing her friend and confidant leave her presence.

“Your Grace…” Ser Jorah spoke at last. He stepped forward cautiously, as he might have when approaching Drogon. She whirled and stared at him, the silver pin clutched in her hand.

“What?” she asked, perhaps too harshly for her old friend. “You don’t approve?”

“It’s not my approval that matters,” he replied, keeping his tone soft and even.

“No, it isn’t,” she said. “And yet you clearly have something to say.”

“Tyrion Lannister crossed half the world to stand by your side,” he began. “And he has served you well.”

“Has he? His failures cost us our allies in the south. His schemes have put everything at risk – and for what? And now… now he begs me make peace with his sister while his brother passes still more secrets to her armies.”

“The man is no general, Daenerys,” Jorah said. She noted the use of her name rather than her title. “Yet if you mean to rule, you will need him as your Hand.”

“First I must win the throne.” First I must save my husband and safeguard my child’s future.

“And you’ll have need of him to do that, too,” Jorah sighed. “We need allies now. Southern houses
and men that have fought under the dragon banner before. He can sway them and win them to your cause.”

“I had allies, before they were killed and captured,” she replied. He met her determined stare, but said nothing. “You would have me summon him back and place this pin back on his breast?”

“That is for you to decide. You are the queen we all serve.”

Daenerys nodded and turned away. “I want to be alone now,” she lied.

“Of course,” Jorah said, bowing and making for the exit. She closed her eyes and clutched the silver pin as if were her lover’s hand.

“Wait,” she commanded, turning.

“Your Grace?”

“We cannot stay here any longer. Ready the men to march.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy Friday!

Well, it's a quick one, but it gets us where we need to be in a few respects! Next up is Cersei (hopefully posted well before E4 airs)

Also don't want to overload on Daenerys POVs.
“Coward.”

She let the insult hang in the air as she glared at Bronn. *Cutthroat. Sellsword scum. I should never have trusted him.* The man and the army she had given him command of had slunk through the city gates in the predawn gloom – untouched and unbloodied. *He has given up the countryside and the road.*

“A living coward,” Bronn said as he gave an absurdly low bow and walked across the painted map on the floor of the courtyard.

“You fled without fighting,” Cersei sneered. “Tell me, ser, why should I reward a cowardice and treason with castles, titles and gold?”

“Because cowardice and treason saved your lovely little army from being turned to ash,” Bronn said, a hint of annoyance creeping into his voice as he took up a spot against the wall and leaned against it.

“I offered you the dragon’s weight in silver if you slew it,” Cersei spat back. “I gave you the rest of Qyburn’s weaponry and command of the Golden Company’s remaining men. You could not manage to destroy the girl’s remaining eunuchs and savages with all that?”

“Oh, I had planned on it,” Bronn shrugged. “Drew up right south of their lines and set my own-”

“And then you fled,” she interjected.

“After your brother told me what the Targaryen queen had planned for me, aye,” Bronn countered. *My brother? Has he been speaking with Tyrion? Or perhaps…*

“My brother?” she asked, her anger yielding to something that felt strangely like hope.

“Blonde hair, one hand, might have had him in your royal bed a time or two,” Bronn said. She ignored his insults. “He told me the girl was planning to burn us in the dead of night.”

*He’s alive. She knew it. She had always known it. Her twin was stubborn – foolishly so. And he risked himself to save my armies. Perhaps he realized his mistake. Perhaps he would seek forgiveness. But then why is he not here now?*

“And he did not ride with you here?” she asked, not entirely certain she wanted to hear the answer.

“Ran back across the lines,” Bronn said. “Seemed to think the Dragon Queen would blame your other brother if he went missing.”

*Tyrion… So it was true. Her brother, the father of the child growing in her womb, had chosen her*
enemies over her. Else he would be here now begging for my pardon. I am alone now, save for Qyburn. Who else can I trust?

“I see…” she muttered, looking over the map of her realm. Her eyes found Harrenhal just to the north of her own city and she followed the kingsroad down to her gates. She must be marching here at this very moment.

Yet her beleaguered army would need to rest too. And even that black beast must sleep. She did not need an army or a victory in the field now. She and her child would remain safe behind the walls of the Red Keep…I shall give the bitch what she most desperately wants.

She looked back up at Bronn. “Gather one hundred of your best riders, ser. Sellswords and the like,” she said. Bronn raised an eyebrow. “Ride by night and burn her camp. Kill her if you can.”

“You want me to ride into their camp with one hundred men…?” he asked.

“Yes.” You fool. “Take her by surprise. Burn her tents. Burn her stores. Make certain she does not have the means for a siege.”

“You might ask Strickland to do that,” he countered. “You know, the man you paid for the privilege of fighting the dragon.” I don’t need a dragon to burn you alive.

“Strickland and his forces will remain here to guard the city. You will ride forth and raid her camp.”

“And if I should refuse this order?” Bronn asked.

“Then I’m sure our enemies will enjoy the sight of your head atop the city gates when they arrive,” she sneered. “Go. Now. Collect your men and ride at sunset.”

Bronn looked down at the center of the map, then shot her a curious look. Then he bowed low – properly this time – and left.

Cersei remained in the courtyard staring at the painted map. Seven Kingdoms… now one city. She was cut off from the Westerlands, even she could see that. The rest of the realm was fragmented and scattered. It would take an iron fist to hold it together.

Yet first the girl had to die. She won’t have the men or supplies for a siege. I can wait her out here, recall the fleet to keep the harbor open. Perhaps even bring over another company from Essos. Perhaps the other Lannister lords and commanders might offer their expertise in defense of the city. Were I born a man and made a knight I might have won this war already.

The city had held before, when her lord father had been split between Robb Stark’s forces in the west and Stannis’ impending assault. We survived that. I shall survive this. But I must be prepared.

“Brenna,” she called out behind her. The sweetness of her own voice took her by surprise. Light footsteps echoed against the cold stone of the keep as the girl emerged from the other room.

“Your Grace?” the girl – a ward like the scores of other heirs Cersei had demanded of the halls and holdfasts in the Crownlands and beyond – curtsied. Cersei smiled at her.

“Fetch Qyburn, would you?”

“Of course, Your Grace,” she curtsied again and sped off.
It was odd, really, having a keep filled with children and squires and young ladies-in-waiting. It almost made her feel like a mother again. The mother of the realm, perhaps. She might groom these lordlings for their loyalty and secure the lands closest to the capital – or else extract vengeance on those houses that betrayed her.

She felt the babe kick within her. And they shall all bow to you, one day, she thought as she left the map of the realm and returned to the warmer rooms of the royal apartments. That is where Qyburn found her some time later.

“Your Grace,” he said in a voice just above a whisper, inclining his head ever-so-slightly as he entered the room. “You summoned me?”

“I did,” Cersei replied. “I wish for a full report on our forces. Here in the city and in the field.” Father would be pleased, I think.

“Ah,” Qyburn’s face fell.

“What?” she snapped.

“I fear I bear ill news, Your Grace.” Jaime? The girl? Her last dragon?

“Speak it, then,” she said, feeling her chest tighten in anger.

“My little birds in the south have told me a Dornish host is moving up along the Boneway.”

The Dornish. How long has those filthy sand-swept people plagued her family? Plagued the realm? Aegon should have burned their cities three hundred years ago. I would have. Still, she would not believe it. Would not accept it.

“Why should the Dornish move now? The Martells are gone. Who commands the host?” she demanded the answers of her Hand.

“Lord Yronwood, I believe-”

“Believe? You aren’t certain?”

“I’m certain two thousand horsemen are riding northward with all haste as we speak,” he paused and looked around the room. “With perhaps another ten thousand spears only a few days behind them.”

Ten thousand? It cannot be. And yet it could, she knew. Dorne was unspent from the War of the Five Kings. I sent Euron to pillage their coasts, but fishermen are not soldiers. Lord Anders has held his spears back.

“Indeed, Your Grace,” Qyburn dipped his head.

It did not matter. Her old fool of a husband had smashed the old Dornish host on the Trident and she would do so again. She glanced up at Ser Gregor and smirked. You have not killed your last Dornishman, Ser.

“I expect they’re not coming at your invitation?”

“Oh, no, Your Grace, no,” Qyburn shook his head. “I believe the Targaryen girl has offered them-”

“Revenge, yes,” she sneered. “For imagined insults. Or perhaps lands and titles too. It does not matter. Strickland will have the command once more. Send him into the field with his men and my
own. The lords of the Stormland will join us in driving back these southern invaders. Perhaps if he reaches their horsemen before the others arrive…” she smirked.

Qyburn looked at her with a curious expression – almost fatherly – like he knew something she did not. Cersei hated that look. “I do not think that would be wise,” he said, laying out the words cautiously as if any one of them might topple over onto the others.

“Why?”

“I fear the girl has summoned some of the Reach lords to her cause as well – perhaps with Highgarden as the prize. I should think-”

“How many?” she demanded of him.

“Another fifteen hundred mounted knights… and perhaps another six thousand spears. The reports differ,” he said, pressing his lips together in an uncomfortable gesture. “Should they fall upon Strickland whilst his back is turned it might-”

“I know what might happen, yes,” she cut him off yet again.

“Of course, Your Grace,” Qyburn dipped his head in a bow.

“Enemies from the south. Enemies from the west. Enemies from the north. It seems we’re surrounded. We must prepare for siege. The girl won’t dare storm the walls whilst her lover rots in the cells below. Make certain his chains are secure,” she said.

“Of course, Your Grace,” Qyburn repeated.

“And recall Euron Greyjoy, wherever he is.”

“I believe The Silence was last spotted near Dragonstone itself, Your Grace,” her Hand said.

“Good,” she nodded. “With the Iron Fleet protecting the harbor, I expect our position will hold. Still, make certain those weapons of yours on the walls work. That last dragon’s skull will decorate the throne room, I think.” She looked around the room at Qyburn, then at Ser Gregor, then finally at the painted map of her kingdoms. *It shall only take one more bolt.* “That is all,” she concluded. “Set Strickland to the defenses and bring Greyjoy to the keep when he arrives.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Qyburn bowed as low as his frame permitted, then turned and left, leaving Cersei alone.

…

The following days passed slowly – far too slowly for her liking. She spent the third morning after Qyburn’s council watching her wards sparring and jousting in the inner courtyard. *Joff used to enjoy the fights,* she recalled with a twinge of regret.

Her eldest son had been troubled, yes, but no less deserving of his mother’s love. *And that sour bitch murdered him.* Poison had been to good for her. How had Jaime not seen that? She should have been whipped through the streets and flayed before having her head set atop the walls.

*And how her ilk is marching up the roseroad to join the girl’s eunuchs.* The very thought caused her to clench her fists in rage. *Traitors – all of them.* They would break on her walls or starve outside them. *Once Euron arrives, all will be well. The city will be safe.* Her hand fell to her womb.
Yet would Jaime return? Or would her child, her heir, be raised without a father? As I came of age without a mother.

Still darker thoughts invaded in her mind the absence of company. Memories of lonely days spent here in this keep while Robert drank and whored through half the city. And before that, in the forest with the witch... Gold will be their crowns, Gold their shrouds. She said I would have three children. But she is wrong now. I know it.

A shout rang out from the courtyard below as one youth bested two others. Cersei pulled herself from her troubled thoughts and looked down into the melee. A larger lad stood over two smaller squires. A new Ser Gregor, she smirked.

Then trumpets drowned out the cries of ‘yield’ and shouts of triumph. Cersei turned her gaze toward the inner gate, listening as the chains rattled and raised the portcullis. Five riders emerged from under the gate, four bearing the golden kraken marked with the crow’s eye.

Their horses stirred up dust in the yard as they pranced about, scattering the sparring squires. Yet Cersei had eyes only for the man in the middle. He’s come.

Just then, Euron looked up at her from far below. She saw a savage smile cross his face. She considered moving to greet her ally, for it had been many months since they had last spoken, but it would not do for the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms to debase herself so. Let him come to me.

He did. She made him wait for a time and awaited him in the throne room. There, seated upon the Iron Throne itself, she welcomed this self-proclaimed King of the Iron Islands to her city and thanked him for his service.

“Service?” Euron laughed when she used the word. “Perhaps the thralls and salt wives we took from the Dornish shores and the reaches of the Mander will give us service, but what we did was far sweeter.”

“Nevertheless,” Cersei said, forcing herself to smile as if she were still a girl in her father’s court. “Your contributions to the war against these foreign invaders and their treacherous allies have not gone unnoticed. The crown thanks you for your efforts.”

“And now?” Euron asked.

“Now what?”

“Now you’ve called the Iron Fleet back to harbor. What is it you have planned? A raid? A battle? A wedding?” Bold, aren’t you?

“A siege,” she stated. “The Targaryen girl managed to survive the war against the dead. She and her savages and slaves are marching down the kingsroad while Dornish snakes and traitor Reachmen march to join them.” Perhaps if you had done a better job of destroying them in their own lands they would not be marching here now.

She saw Euron’s face fall. “Sieges are dull,” he said. “Until they smash your walls in, that is.”

“I have no intention of having my walls smashed,” Cersei replied coolly. “You and your ships will defend the harbor and, when the time is right, strike at our foe.”

“When the time is right...” Euron repeated the phrase. “That time is now. I was promised a queen, not a siege or a post in port. I have brought my ships to fight your war. I have raided the shores and harbors of your enemies for you. I have bled for you – yet you would not lift a hand for me, even to
“And the crown keeps its promises. As do I. Once the girl’s forces have been destroyed and she hangs from the battlements for the sport of my city’s crows, we shall wed,” Cersei finished. Or perhaps you’ll die in the fighting, she thought. Battles are chaotic things. Even poor Tyrion suffered such a grievous wound on side these very gates.

“Very well,” Euron eyed her curiously, then bowed low in acceptance. Cersei stood as the audience with the man ended… and at once realized her folly.

Euron took a step forward, his eyes fixed not on her own, but on her womb. Something shifted in his expression. Damn. Damn this man.

“Do you take me for a fool?” he sneered, his courtly demeanor vanished. “Crow’s Eye, they call me, but even I can see that you carry another bastard in your belly.”

Cersei looked about the empty throne room, hoping that someone – some ally – might emerge just now and give her the moment she needed to rectify this foolish mistake. Yet she was alone now.

Her eyes found Ser Gregor. I could kill him and seize his ships. I could throw him in the cells just now, let him rot alongside the boy. Or...

“And you don’t even deny it,” Euron said. “Marriage,” he spat on the floor.

“I am with child,” she said defiantly, standing tall above the Greyjoy man. “Yet my offer stands. When this babe is born to me, it shall inherit Casterly Rock, not the Seven Kingdoms. You know as well as I that the realm would never accept a bastard as king.”

She watched Euron’s movements carefully, the way his fingers clenched and unclenched, the way his eyes met hers, then darted toward Ser Gregor, then settled on the throne behind her. I know what it is you truly want.

“Once the war is won, we shall marry – and, if you can produce a son, he shall one day sit the throne,” she said.

“I’ll not fight for bastards and broken promises,” Euron replied. “Kill the girl yourself, if you can. I’ll take my fleet home. Perhaps I’ll set anchor in Lannisport before then, though. I do miss the city.” He turned swiftly and began to walk away.

Cersei felt her face contort in rage. “And what happens once I am dead?” she shouted across the throne room. “Will this new queen forgive your war on her? Will the Dornishmen and Reachmen forgive your plundering their villages and ports?” Euron stopped midstride but did not turn. Cersei smirked. “We are bound together.”

A crooked smile broke across Euron’s face as he shook his head. “No,” he said. “We are not.” Then he left.

…

The world grew smaller over the following days. The girl’s armies closed in from north and south alike while the city prepared itself for siege. She stood on the battlements of the Red Keep itself
and watched Lannister men, sellswords and city conscripts set scorpions on the walls, brought up barrels of arrows and spears, and prepared pitch and oil.

The harbor was empty now, save for the small royal fleet that remained. She still seethed at Euron’s betrayal. Without his ships, the city was vulnerable. *Once the girl’s forces break on my walls I shall hunt him down*, she swore to herself.

Yet how to defeat this enemy host? *I’ve no ships now and no advantage in the field.* Her only hope was to somehow slay the girl and her dragon. Perhaps Ser Bronn’s raid would be a success. *Or perhaps Jaime will return to me.*

Her brothers - the traitor and the fool – were still encamped with her enemies. *Our family’s enemies.* Would Jaime remember himself before it came to battle once more? *Will he return?* She did not know.

*No. He must. This is his child. Our child. He must return.* She needed him. Here beside her, on the walls commanding the men. *We came into the world together. We belong together. He will see that. He will.*

Dreams of what might come to pass were of no use now. *Now I must hold this city. My city.* Perhaps it did not have to come to battle at all. *Perhaps there are other ways. I have a king locked in the Black Cells.* If Jon Snow could be swayed toward a truce or toward peace itself… Well, she had bested cleverer men.

Cersei made her way down to the Black Cells by herself this time, save of course for Ser Gregor a few paces behind her. The darkness of the lower levels was almost peaceful – save for the scuffling of rats and weeping of prisoners. After a moment, she found herself looking down at the most valued among them. He looked back up at her.

“You’re back,” he snarled. *Ever the wolf, even when chained in a kennel.*

“I had hoped we might speak of the future,” she cut to the heart of the matter.

“The future?” Jon said. She could see the confusion in his eyes. “When last you were here you threatened to kill Daenerys – to kill our child and my family.”

“I did,” she nodded. “You love your family as I love mine. My words were spoken in anger. You mustn’t let them linger.”

“I do,” she nodded. “You love your family as I love mine. My words were spoken in anger. You mustn’t let them linger.”

“Why are you here?” Jon demanded.

“Ever a man of action, I see,” Cersei said, forcing some pleasantness into her tone. “I’m here to end this war. To save thousands of lives, perhaps even your wife’s…” Jon looked up at her. She could see something at work behind those cool, grey eyes. *Perhaps he will accept.* “I will allow you and the girl – Daenerys – to leave this country. Perhaps you might carve out a kingdom in Essos or return to Slaver’s Bay. I’ll even consider allowing your precious North to part with the realm.”

*What say you?* The man was Rhaegar’s seed, but if Lord Eddard Stark had imparted a shred of his precious honor onto the boy raised a bastard, then surely he would accept these terms.

“You want me to flee? To leave Westeros to you?” his tone was disbelieving.

“Yes,” she said. “Go raise your little hatchlings in the east where they belong.” Jon sat up against the wall, his chains rattling. He looked her in the eye.
“And you think I would accept that? That Daenerys would accept that? You’d send your armies north to burn Winterfell to the ground once summer comes again,” he snarled again.

“You have my word that I will not,” she replied, trying to remain calm.

“Your word,” Jon shook his head. “You promised to send your armies north to fight the dead with us. Your word is poison.”

Her fingers curled into fists. “That’s it? Even now you are too honorable to make peace. To save countless lives… perhaps even your own child’s?”

Jon looked away. “I have nothing else to say to you,” he muttered.

So be it. She left the cell and slammed the iron door shut. The harsh sound echoed off the stone walls. If you are so eager to die, I shall aid your efforts. She did not need Greyjoy ships or southern lords. No. She would give these Targaryen usurpers what she had given all her enemies. Let them burn.

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully this wasn't too choppy! Shorter "scenes" felt like the way to go.

See everyone after tonight's viewing...

Also, I have read the leaks in full. Rest assured that my outline is complete. I may add little scenes here and there for fun, but my ending is already written (wrote it like a year ago) so there's no real influence from the show's being on air.

I'd also add that leaks are leaks. Reading bullet points on Reddit is going to be a poor experience versus watching the episode itself. If it still sucks, then it sucks and we can all hate it until the sun rises in the west and sets in the east. Keep the faith!
Silence. It had ruled his life for months now. It had been his life. Theon Greyjoy could not remember the last word he had spoken aloud. It was easier than he thought. *I lived for years in silence, when I was not Theon at all. And that was when I had nothing to live for.*

His uncle’s flagship was manned by mutes dragged forth from every corner of the world. Some were Ironborn like him, some were southerners. Most were men who looked as if they could not have spoken a single word of the common tongue even if they had kept their own.

Their faces were scarred and burned. Their skins ranged in tone and color from pale white to ebony. Some bore the tattoos of eastern slaves. Others bore so many tattoos that Theon could not rightly make out their true features beneath all the black ink.

What these men thought of Theon’s face he did not know, for he had hid it under a helm bearing the fearsome kraken of his house. The metal was bitter cold at times and stifling at others, but he kept it on day and night. He had to. These mutes did not know him. But Euron does.

He had taken his ship – his last ship – south when Daenerys and Jon sailed north to Winterfell. The men had patched the sails and painted Euron’s red eye upon his family’s golden kraken, then they had slipped in amongst the hundreds of ships as they fell upon the Dornish coast some months ago. Their deception has been lost in the chaos of battle. *For what was another Greyjoy ship amongst hundreds of others?*

*And now I’m here. Come aboard after that same raid.* It seemed impossible that his uncle had not noticed him among his own crew, but then perhaps Euron was like that. *His sight fixed on the horizon, looks for ships to seize and lands to plunder.* He cared not for the mutes aboard the Silence, save that they obey and join him in the next slaughter.

Still, his uncle was careful. Two great brutes guarded his chambers at all times. *And he carries that axe with him wherever he goes.* Theon doubted he had the strength to slay his uncle. *And even if I did, the others would slit my throat and throw me into the sea alongside my sister. But he has not killed her yet...*

*Perhaps he simply enjoys tormenting her,* Theon thought. For in truth the last three Greyjoys lived aboard the flagship now. Euron kept Yara tied to the mast or locked in the brig. Sometimes, when the seas were rough and the waves rocked the Silence, he would have her lashed to the prow of the ship in some maiden’s mockery. Yet she survived.

*She’s strong,* Theon knew. *Stronger than I am.* He had not let her linger in anguish, for he knew what it was to languish in captivity. The very first night aboard the ship, when the crew slept, he had revealed himself to her. The memory of the anger and pain in her eyes was seared into his mind. It gave him purpose. It gave him strength.

*It is not strength I need now,* he knew. *I need a plan.*

This was not Winterfell. It could not be. All those years ago when he had taken the Stark castle, he had acted without truly thinking. *And I paid for it. The Starks paid for it... my other family.*

Even the memory of his crimes brought a bitter taste to his mouth. He kept his lips pressed
together. Those boys. And Bran and Rickon, Rodrik and Luwin and the others... And how many more suffered once Ramsay seized the castle? He could have drowned in the blood he had spilt.

His ghosts had kept him company now. They spoke to him, whispering things his silent crewmates could not. You are a Stark and a Greyjoy. They are your family. She is your family. No, this time he had to be certain. He could not fail them. He needed a plan.

He had thought to free Yara in the dead of night when they had been called back to King’s Landing. But our call to port lasted half a day. Euron had come back aboard the Silence in an awful rage. The fleet had set sail at once, abandoning the Lannister queen and making for some certain future.

Today, Theon knew why. After three days of sailing in wild winds, the Iron Fleet had set anchor of the isle of Driftmark. Euron had summoned his lords and captains aboard the Silence for some council. Theon watched them arrive one by one.

Blacktyde and Harlaw and Orkwood. Even the Farwynds of the Lonely Light. Theon recognized their sigils from his lessons with Maester Luwin. The lordship of the Iron Islands sailed with their king. Captains – many scores of them – came aboard too. Theon stood at the stern of the ship and watched them all gather on the top deck.

Each lord and lesser captain might command one or two ships, but the true lords of the Iron Islands might command ten, or twenty, or even fifty ships. They sailed under Euron’s eyed kraken, but their decisions were their own. They do not bow to blood. They did not for me when my sire sent me to raid the Stoney Shore. They might not for him, if he fails them.

Theon watched the crowd and the discontent grow in tandem. They were promised Westeros, he knew from the kingsmoot. He planned on marrying Daenerys, then took to Cersei. Now he has nothing. Would these proud ironmen accept defeat?

Then his uncle arrived. Euron wore the same salt-stained black leather and mail as his crew, but here in front of this ironborn assembly he once more donned the ancient Driftwood Crown as a reminder of his station. He stood above the rest and raised his great battle axe to silence the crowd.

The gesture failed. Lords grumbled and shook their heads. Captains spat upon the deck rather than into the sea itself. He might cut out their tongues too, Theon mused silently.

“King, we named you,” a barrel-chested man toward the front of crowd shouted above the growing commotion. Even in the darkness, Theon could see the nine-headed serpent embossed upon his armor. Lord Donnor Saltcliffe, he knew. But he supported Euron...?

‘Ayes’ and shaking heads followed the statement and continued as he spoke, ever presented as the sound of waves against the ship’s hull. “The realm, you promised us. The Vale. The rainwood and the Riverlands and the Rock itself. Where are they, Greyjoy? Tied up below deck with that niece of yours?”

“Wars take time, Saltcliffe,” Euron replied. “Even Aegon did not conquer the kingdoms in a day.” Theon could hear the anger in his voice. It sounded like the low rolling thunder that comes before a summer storm.

“We raided for months and for what? Stone and rocks and rusted axes?” another lord added his voice to the growing clamor. “You would promise us the Reach, but it is out of your own. You are weak, Greyjoy, and no king of mine.” Theon watched as Euron buried his great axe in the deck
planks and started toward the man, pushing his way through the crowd.

“Weak, am I?” he asked through bared teeth. “Yet I have strength enough for this.”

He drew a steel dirk from his hip and thrust it into the man’s eye. His body convulsed and went limp. He dropped to his knees as Euron withdrew the blade. Blood poured from the wound. Euron laughed savagely and wrenched the man’s jaw open, pulling on his tongue with one and cutting it free with the other.

He held it in his hands for a moment, cutting the thing nearly in two. Then he threw the bloody appendage at Lord Saltcliffe as a boy might throw bones to his pet.

“Here, Saltcliffe,” he laughed. “Another forked tongue for your sigil.” Euron moved back through the crowd. All let him pass now. He retrieved his axe and hoisted it upon his shoulder as he resumed his place atop the sterncastle.

“Ironborn, hear me now. I promised you the realm, aye,” he began. “For months we reaved and raided our enemies’ shores. Her enemies,” he lifted his arm and pointed west toward where the capital lay, perhaps just over the darkened horizon. “For the promise of another crown and another throne.”

Theon peered through the slits in his helm, trying to see the reactions of the captains. *He’s failed, then… and he’s failed them.* The ironmen could unmake a king as easily as they could make one. They did not bow to blood. *And the Silence is only one ship. He’ll need the others.* Surely, his uncle had realized this too.

“Promises are wind and words,” he too spat upon the deck now – an odd gesture for the ship’s own captain and master. “I’ll make no more promises to you – save one.”

It was so silent now that Theon could hear only his own breath echoing inside his helm. The captains stood transfixed by their commander and king. *Though through greed or loyalty or fear I know not.*

“I’ll not bend the knee in marriage or fealty, not to any queen. Nor will I set the ironborn to raiding ports and raping fishwives. No, I mean to take the realm to wife and blood will be my bride price.”

Where there had once been murmurs of discontent, a wave of approval now swept over the assembly. Theon watched as the captains and lords nodded their heads. Every eye was fixed on Euron.

“You, Saltcliffe, for you we shall take The Arbor,” he pointed his axe at the lord. “Color Lord Paxter’s halls as red as his wine.” Laughter rang out and carried clear across the water. “For you, Stonetree, the Stoney Shore and all the North beyond it. You might make corpses of any man who survived the blue-eyed ones.”

Theon felt himself tense as the laughter grew, now intermingled with eager words. Euron had found himself now. The wind was in his sails and a fire was lit in his eyes. *This is the man who could convince raiders to conquer the realm or sail to furthest Asshai and back again. Who might rip out a man’s tongue but still take his oath of allegiance. But he was not done yet.*

“And you Maron,” Theon watched as Euron pointed his axe at the young Lord Maron Volmark. “You have yet to take a salt wife. Did the none of the Dornish suite you?” Maron only laughed in response and shook his head as if embarrassed at being addressed so. “Take Maidenpool and all its maidens, then,” Euron said. He paused and looked over the men. Theon saw his lip curl upward in
a cruel smile.

“Winter and war have fallen upon the land. Let us follow them. Let us carve a kingdom from the realm’s corpse. On the morrow, we shall slip around this isle and make for the Blackwater again. We shall paint the streets of that city as red as its keep. I mean to take the Iron Throne,” he climbed atop a wooden wall and grasped a rope for support. He raised his voice as he raised his axe high. “And I shall pay the iron price.”

The captains cheered. The sound was deafening aboard the Silence. *He’s won them over with not but a few words,* Theon thought. His chest felt tight and his hands cold. *They’ll follow him to war and worse. Or some would…*

“And what of the Golden Company? Are we to fight thousands of sellswords in the streets?” one voice cut through the laughter and cheering. Theon turned his head and saw Lord Orkwood pacing across the deck toward the front of the crowd. *He commands nearly thirty ships,* Theon knew. *Euron would sooner remove his crown and head with it than remove the lord’s tongue.*

“I would not worry about Strickland,” Euron laughed. *Why?* “Men who demand the gold price will fight fiercely for the promise of still more of it.”

“And you mean for us to lay siege to the city from our ships?” Lord Orkwood pressed him.

“Siege? Are we thralls? Will your ironmen hew the logs for stakes and toil in the dirt digging trenches?” Euron laughed again. Many of the captains laughed with him. “The dragon queen has already set her armies outside the walls. Her slaves will lay siege, but the Iron Fleet?” he grinned. “We will take the city the same way the Lannister queen’s own father did some twenty years ago.”

Chapter End Notes

So you know how Zuko wears a firebender's mask to hide himself aboard Admiral Zhao's ship? Well I stole that idea.

Not including Theon until now was probably a mistake, but on the flip side his rescuing her in the show took like 2 minutes. That said, his death defending Bran was great and wraps up his story in a great way. It'll obviously be different here.

Once again, leaks are leaks. If they're true, that's a bummer, but honestly they've lowered my expectations to the point that anything else would make me stoked. Keep in mind that Season 6, Episode 8 was followed by two of the best episodes in the series. It totally changed Season 6. Perhaps we'll see the same thing in the next two weeks.

Tyrion is next.
I lied. Tyrion will be Chapter 69 (nice). Wrote this today because there was a slightly misplaced piece I thought deserved its own bit of writing. Happy weekend.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You’ll have to be quicker than that,” she smiled as she danced away across the training ground, tourney sword in hand.

Training was always a pleasant way to burn away the boredom of an army on the march. It was especially pleasant with Gendry. They would spar, then laugh, then break for a time before resuming. She was better than he was, of course, but she wanted him to be better too. Just in case.

“It’s not always about quickness,” Gendry replied through labored breaths as he picked up his war hammer once more. He had insisted on not using it – for one misplaced blow would surely have shattered ever rib she had – but she had assured him otherwise. I just won’t let it hit me.

“Oh?” she teased, spinning again as he took a few hurried steps toward her. He jabbed at her, perhaps too softly for his own good, and missed. She danced around and rapped him behind his knee. Just enough to mark him. “Have you tried moving at all?”

Gendry scowled. He doesn’t like getting beaten, especially by me. “Here,” he said, holding out the hammer with one arm. Her eyes found the bulge of his straining muscles. “You try the hammer and I’ll take the tourney sword.”

“I can’t even lift your hammer,” Arya told him.

“And here I thought it was all about quickness,” Gendry replied with a satisfied smirk. “Go on, then.”

She tossed the sword aside and grasped his hammer with two hands. Then she pulled. Her arms strained and her back ached with the effort. The weapon would not move. It might have been sunk into stone for all the good it did her. At least I can drag it around, she mused as she pulled the weapon through the snow and dirt.

“Alright then, and I’ll use the sword,” he smiled, picking up her tourney sword and assuming the stance she had taught him. “Ready?”

She nodded. He lunged at her. She dodged. Then he swung – always slower than he should have been – and the dull blade smacked against the handle of the hammer. She danced around it like it was some tree trunk and Gendry a wild beast.

He tried to mark her, but he could not. She dipped and shifted and ducked, dodging every swing and thrust. Then she saw her chance. Arya dropped low and kicked the base of upright haft toward Gendry. The end of it caught him where she had not intended… and right where she knew it hurt.

“Sorry!” she yelled. “Sorry!” Gendry groaned and fell back out the ground with a dull thud. She ran to his side. “Really, I am sorry.”
“S’alright,” he hissed through his teeth as he slowly got to his feet. She helped him up and let him leaned on her shoulder for a moment. Slowly, his breathing returned to normal.

“So…” she said, looking right into his bright blue eyes. “Do you want to go at it again?” Gendry laughed and so did she.

“Fuck’s sake,” someone rasped from behind her. She spun swiftly, only to see Sandor Clegane standing near the edge of the training grounds shaking his head.

“What do you want?” she asked in a fierce tone. Clegane’s left lip turned upward.

“You going to kick Cersei between the legs, is that it?” he asked as he paced forward. No, not exactly that.

“You going to kick Cersei between the legs, is that it?” he asked as he paced forward. No, not exactly that. “And you,” he turned to Gendry. “Still with this damned forge scrap. Lost one beyond the Wall. Another in some battle. Another at Winterfell. Stick to swords, boy.”

“The one I lost beyond the Wall I gave to you,” Gendry replied.

“For all the good it did me,” he grunted.

“Are you here to train? Or are you going to insult Cersei to death?” Arya asked, an odd mix of tenderness, amusement, and annoyance coloring her words.

Clegane looked at her then at Gendry. “Would need someone a bit taller for it to be training,” he said.

“It’s not always about size,” she countered. “You could try to strike me.”

“I don’t think I’ll have any problems hitting who I’m after,” Clegane said, his eyes narrowing and stare growing distant.

“Alright then,” Arya shrugged as she gave Gendry a gentle nudge. He stooped to retrieve his hammer and picked it up easily, giving Clegane a sheepish look. The older man scowled but said nothing else.

“Pleasant as always,” Gendry joked as they made their way back through the queen’s camp.

“That’s just him,” she assured him as they turned a muddy corner and found their tent. He entered just after her.

Arya loved the camp. She loved the chaos of it. The training, the clatter of steel and thunder of hooves in the distance. She loved moving from place to place with her dagger on one side and Gendry on another. It felt right.

And it felt like a lie. A game. Like she was playing at being a soldier back in her father’s godswood. I cannot stay anymore. I need to go. Soon.

Jon was a prisoner of that woman. He’s alone. Her brother did not get to sleep beside someone he loved. He did not get to laugh or drink or walk in the pale winter sunlight. He was a prisoner – a true prisoner whereas Bran had been trapped in ways she could not truly understand. He’s down in those dark cells just like father was. She put him down there. She killed his dragon. I’ll kill her.

That is what she had wanted to do – had planned to do days ago. Arya has spoken with Daenerys about her plan to slip into the Red Keep, kill Cersei, and rescue Jon. She had seen the hope in the queen’s eyes when she told her. And the fear.
“If something should happen to you…” Daenerys had said. She had been expecting that argument. Jon’s little sister. What would her brother say is he knew? Nothing Arya had said in response swayed her – and she had been commanded to stay. Even though I know it was a lie. She wants me to go. She wants him back.

Not that a royal command meant anything, of course. No, there was something else holding Arya back. Someone else, who was currently removing his muddied boots beside her.

Gendry looked up at her and smiled and it was only then that she realized she had been staring down at him for longer than she even knew.

“You alright?” he asked. She smiled softly and nodded. Am I? Having him here beside her felt so strange. As if I could steal someone else’s memories along with their face. It felt odd. It felt wrong. It felt like true happiness.

Happiness was just a word, she knew. It did not mean anything more than a moment of laughter or storm clouds briefly parting to reveal the sun before the storm came in force.

Everything could fall to pieces in an instant, and yet this moment of happiness beside Gendry had scrapped and clawed its way forward through winter and war. It had survived.

_Just like me._ She knew how, but not why. She did not know what came after this war, after killing Cersei and saving the only brother she had left. She did not know what Gendry wanted. She did not even know what she wanted. The only thing she knew was that she did not want to leave now. _But I have to._

And so she put off the inevitable, if only for a few more hours. Gendry laid back on their bedroll and complained about the bruises she had given him while she threatened to give him more for complaining. They laughed, they kissed, and they spoke distant memories and still more distant places.

“Volantis?” he asked her, propping himself up on his elbow while furrowing his brow. “Why there? What’s in Volantis that you could possibly want to see?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged as she sat up to mirror his posture and position. “That’s the point – to see it.”

“And then what? What comes next after you see it?”

“I’ll go somewhere else,” Arya said.

“Where?” Gendry pressed her.

“Anywhere,” she said, starting to grow annoyed with his questions. She looked at him again and saw something curious in his eyes. _He looks disappointed._

“So that’s it? Travel around across the Narrow Sea? That’s all you want to do?”

“I don’t know,” she said. That was the truth. Every choice she had made, to sail east, to ride north, to spare her brother still more pain, they were all in the past now. Her future, the horizon she could not see beyond, was marked at Jon’s rescue and the queen’s death. _I don’t know what comes next._ That, more than anything, scared her.

“Well I do. I know where I want to go,” Gendry said, a determined edge to his voice.
“Where?”

“Storm’s End. That’s where my father grew up. That’s the Baratheon keep.”

“You want to be the lord of Storm’s End?” she asked, and at once saw a glimmer in his eyes like bright sunlight on a calm southern sea.

“Bastards can’t be lords,” he replied.

“Tell that to Jon,” she said. Or Joffrey. Gendry laughed softly, but his expression remained a curious one.

Arya could see the longing in his eyes. For home… and something more. She knew that feeling for she had felt it once too. She had returned home and fought to save it. But now?

She thought of her conversation with Daenerys and the queen’s teasing. But it wasn’t. It was an offer. Arya knew what that meant. A true surname. A lordship and titles and lands… and I know what he’ll want. She was not certain she wanted it too… and she could not tell him.

Her thoughts scattered as Gendry wrapped an arm around her and pulled her closer to him. She might have struggled and escaped if she wanted to. After all, she was far quicker than he was, but he was strong and warm and the cold was beginning to seep in from outside.

“Storm’s End or the end of the world, all I know is I want to be by your side,” he said, placing a kiss on her brow. She felt herself grow warm and pressed herself against him, enjoying the feeling of his beating against her and his arms wrapped around her. It was one last moment of peace.

…

Gendry slept soundly that night, but she did not. The warmth she had felt earlier in the evening had been slowly sapped away by the cold dread of the task before her. It must be tonight, she knew. We’re a day’s ride from the city, maybe less if the weather holds.

She had to get there before the army did. Before they’ve got soldiers on every wall and gate and window. By tomorrow night, when the sun sank behind the western hills and walls of King’s Landing, Arya might well be safely inside the city. But wearing different clothes… and a different face.

She rose slowly and packed what she needed into a simple satchel. Then she slipped on her fur-lined boots, but left her cloak behind. Even with the way I’m going, it would be safe to ride in on the queen’s dragon than with a northern wolf pelt. Finally, she checked to make certain the dagger remained at her side.

All was ready for the task ahead. Arya looked down at Gendry, his chest rising and falling slowly in the peace of sleep. She sank to one knee and leaned over him, placing a kiss upon his brow before rising again.

She did not want to leave him. She wanted to climb back onto the bedroll and into his arms and wake with him when the sun once more rose over the east.

But Jon’s not seen the sun in days. Her brother needed her. Her family needed her. And I need to end this. All of this.

She turned, left the tent, and made for the horse lines just a few paces away.
Chapter End Notes

Like I said, wrote this today. Tyrion's next chapter is a bit longer and quite a bit of fun, so it needs time to mature (and be written). Maybe this weekend, maybe not. Maybe never if I run myself through with Longclaw after episode 5.
Tyrion VIII

Chapter Notes

If you'd like something happy, I wrote this
(https://archiveofourown.org/works/15367398) last summer.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tyrion stood watching the procession of Reach lords as they rode into camp. Their proud banners snapped back and forth in the fierce winter wind. Ashford. Florent. Merryweather. Oakheart and still more…

There had to be two thousand southern horsemen riding into the Targaryen camp. Add them to the other southern lords that rode in two days past, he thought bitterly, his lip curling in a sneer. And the spears Lord Yronwood has pledged to bring north with him just in time to reap the fruits of victory.

Dorne and the Reach had pledged themselves to Queen Daenerys in the south before that terrible northern war, yes, but their support had withered away with their ruling houses.

Where had these proud lords been in the dark of the northern winter, when dead men slaughtered innocents by the thousand? Where had they been only weeks ago when their numbers might have driven Cersei’s armies from the field? Daenerys would not have lost a dragon – or her royal husband. I might not have lost my position.

They found my offers suitable only after news of our victory spread southward. His eyes found each banner in turn. Each felt like another insult. Their allegiances all shift as suddenly as their banners in this wind. And each requires a princely reward.

The Reach – or those houses left unbroken by his sister – had proven easy enough to win over. Highgarden and its attendant lands. What lesser lord wouldn’t send his sons to fight for it? The Dornish lords had required something else. A princely reward in its own way, I suppose. Yet now they had all come to pledge their support for Queen Daenerys of House Targaryen and King Aegon, even though the latter rotted in a cell far below the Red Keep.

Jon Snow was the queen’s goal now – her only ambition. And she would risk anything for him. Even herself. Had she not proved that beyond the Wall and then countless times in battle? Even the babe in her belly is not enough to sway her. Love, Tyrion noted, was a curious thing.

The queen – his queen – was determined and headstrong. And she was in pain. And is in love. She will risk whatever it takes to get him back. She will risk everything and put everything at risk. That could not happen now. If I cannot be her Hand, I shall be her mind instead.

He thought he could still feel the sting of the badge of office being ripped from his breast. Perhaps it left a scar, he mused. One to match the last time I crossed a queen. Still, Daenerys was not his sister – and he knew his sister. And know what she might do to me… and what I might to do her.

He looked up as the last of the southern knights processed by. Then he turned and looked the way they had come. Thousands of spearmen and men-at-arms will soon follow, he knew. Soon we will
have the men to force Cersei’s hand and her surrender.

A lone rider appeared where the knights had just passed through. He wore a black cloak with the hood drawn up. No polished plate was visible, nor did he have a sigil or banner that Tyrion could clearly see.

And yet there is something oddly familiar about him. The rider drew up beside Tyrion and removed his hood. Tyrion recognized his features immediately. Oh, this must be some jest.

“My lord of Lannister,” Bronn inclined his head.

“What in seven hells are you doing here?” he asked, struggling to keep his voice from rising in both astonishment and rage.

Bonn looked around before dismounting his horse. “Your royal sister tasked me and one hundred of my men to raid this camp. Your Dragon Queen’s camp.” He laughed and looked around. “Can you believe that? One hundred men against this?”

No, I can’t, not even from her. She’s grown desperate. “And so where are these one hundred men now?” he asked the sellsword.

“Not here,” Bronn shrugged. “Gone to sell their swords elsewhere, or spend their gold in a brothel that’s not about to go up in dragonfire. Told them there’s no need to follow me here.”

“And whys that?”

Bonn shot him a conspiratorial look. “Lannister, you once told me that whatever your enemy’s price was for my sword, you’d double it.”

“I did,” Tyrion agreed. “And what has Cersei offered you?”

“Harrenhal and the lordship of the Riverlands,” Bronn said smugly.

“Even after this lovely raid of yours?” Tyrion smiled and looked around the camp as if astonished to see all the tents still standing. “I’d imagine that price has fallen quite a bit, perhaps to nothing at all.” Bronn’s smile slid from his face. “I would happily offer you double that.”

Then Bonn’s eyes fell to Tyrion’s chest and he found his savage smirk once more. “Are you certain you’re in a position to offer anything? You seem to have lost your Hand, Lannister, same as your brother then.”

Don’t insult the only friend you have left, fool. “Her Grace and I have had our… disagreements. However, when she sees how many houses and swords I have brought over to her cause she’ll certainly—”

“Did you? Convince all those fancy folks? Was that you with the ravens too? Aegon Targaryen come again?” Bronn laughed.

“He is Rhaegar’s son,” Tyrion insisted.

“Aye, and I’m old Aerys himself. Just colored my hair dark to make sure no one would spot me,” Bronn laughed.

“He rode a dragon,” Tyrion countered.

“I lost my Handship for advising Queen Daenerys to spare my brother’s life. You know, the one who crossed into your camp to save you from burning in your sleep.”

Bronn’s face fell again. *He looks genuinely upset.* Tyrion could not recall seeing the man like this before. *I didn’t know he was even capable of the emotion.* “I’d thought to thank him again when this is over,” he said. “He’s not…?”

“Her Grace ordered him imprisoned,” Tyrion said.

“Ah, that’s good. Same as your Aegon, then.”

“Have you seen him?” Tyrion asked after a moment. *If I can deliver Daenerys news of her husband, well, it would be start.*

“No,” Bronn said. “But I know where he is.”

“The Black Cells,” Tyrion said. “A true spymaster, you are ser. Where else would my sister keep a prisoner? Some Fleabottom brothel?”

“I’m not sure which is worse,” Bronn said. Tyrion glared at him. The gesture did not go unnoticed. “So, she’s got your queen’s lover and you’ve got hers. Knives at each other’s throats, it seems.”

“So it does,” Tyrion agreed without truly considering the man’s words.

*Jaime...* Perhaps he could convince Cersei to yield? Would she listen to him after he had left her to fight in the North? *Is there another way? Save storming the walls and hoping we can secure the keep before she drives another dagger into Snow’s heart. No, I think not. Unless…*

“My queen – our queen – still sees you as an enemy,” Tyrion said. “But perhaps if you were to render her a service, one no one else can, she might be willing to pardon your crimes. You might even earn yourself that castle.”

Bronn began to shake his head. *Too clever for a common sellsword, as always.* “Oh no, Lannister. I’m not going back in there. Not while your eunuchs and knights are readying themselves for a siege.”

“Yet as you’ve just said, she has the king captive. We both know Daenerys will not commit to battle while he is in chains. We both know what my sister would do. If he were to be freed…”

“And what? Escorted through the streets of the capital? Your sister still has thousands of soldiers!” *That’s true.* Bronn looked around the camp for a moment, considering his options. This far out of the way, they were alone. Still, he bent lower and whispered. “You’re as mad as she is.”

“Am I?” Tyrion asked. “Ser Bronn, rescue Jon Snow and you shall have that castle of yours.” *And I shall have my station again.*

“Double,” Bronn insisted. “I’ll take one payment for getting into the city and one for getting him out alive.” *Very well, then.*

“Double,” Tyrion agreed.

Bronn looked surprised, but naked desire shone in his eyes. “And a proper wife. None of this Stokeworth business.”

“A highborn beauty from the songs,” Tyrion agreed.
“Aye. And one more thing,” Bronn said.

“And that is?”

“I’m not going in there alone.”

He had expected this. Names and ideas rushed through his mind. Who might join him in this? He wondered. I cannot send men eager to prove themselves. It must be swift and decisive – and they must know the city.

“I shall find you the men you need,” Tyrion said. “And once I do, you’ll ride for King’s Landing and bring me back Jon Snow.” Bronn nodded, his eyes glimmering. “Now, let us find you a tent.” And then I have others to visit.

…

“You must be joking,” the spymaster said in a hushed tone as they walked among the tents toward the center of the camp. Trumpets blew around them, summon the lords and councilors to another war council.

“Not at all, my friend,” Tyrion countered.

“To sneak into the city would-”

“Require a knowledge of its passages, sewers, and tunnels. Yes, I’d thought as much,” Tyrion said.

Varys stopped for a moment, ostensibly to let two southern knights ride by in the opposite direction. Or perhaps to simply glare at me, Tyrion noted with some amusement.

“Even if I could find an unguarded entrance, my skills would not help you rescue the king,” Varys hissed.

“No, they would not,” Tyrion agreed. “You’re quite the wrong sort of eunuch for that.”

Varys shot him an annoyed look. “And so who are the mighty heroes who will break into the Black Cells and rescue Jon Snow?”

“Ser Bronn of the Blackwater will lead-”

“A sellsword in your sister’s employ until this very morning,” Varys’ whisper was harsh but quiet. Of course he knows already.

“Tell me, my friend,” it was Tyrion who stopped walking this time. “You can name every knight who rides into camp but tell us nothing of my sister’s plans?”

“Plans seems a generous term for the wild swipes of a cornered lioness,” Varys chided him. “Still, it seems this Qyburn has my old flock in the city itself singing a different song.”

“Wild swipes? The last time Cersei was cornered, she left that corner as the only thing untouched by the Mad King’s wildfire,” Tyrion said. “And then slaughtered those that spoke out against her. I would feel far better if some of your little birds could bring us word of Cersei’s actions and movements. Barring that, I thought it wise for you to guide the men who will rescue Jon Snow into the keep.”

Finally, Varys assented to his plan with a long stare and quick nod. Then he looked up. “We should make haste. Our queen will be waiting.”
Tyrion noted that they were among the last to enter Daenerys’ tent. They entered together and tried to push their way toward the low table covered in maps of the Crownlands and the capital itself. The lords and councilors parted for Varys easily enough, but no one moved for Tyrion nor did the queen herself make any gesture to beckon him forth. *Though I saw her glance my way.*

A bitter taste rose in his mouth as he wove his way through a forest of scabbards and dirty cloaks, around the outer edge of the tent to where he could at least see and hear the goings on. *Of course the swords I won to her cause now block my way to the queen herself.*

It did not matter. He knew Daenerys would see the wisdom of his plan. *She wants him back… and I can get him back to her.*

“You have my thanks, my lords, for riding with such haste to my banners,” Daenerys began courteously. “Though your strength was sorely missed outside the walls of Harrenhal and in the North,” her tone became cooler - and the lords of the Reach seemed to stand more rigid.

“We answered when called upon, Your Grace,” a deep voice said from across the room. Tyrion could not see the lord’s face. “You will forgive me, but with the Lannister’s execution of Lady Tyrell and the Tarly’s, ah, falling in battle in defiance of your rule, there has been no Lord of the Reach no Warden of the South.” *Which is why I summoned all of you.*

“Forgive, my lord….?” Daenerys paused to allow the man to introduce himself.

“Ah, I must beg Your Grace’s pardon,” the man said. “I am Orton Merryweather of Longtable.”

“Welcome, then, my lord,” Daenerys replied with regal courtesy.

“If I may, Your Grace,” the bold lord spoke out once more. *And now it begins,* Tyrion thought. *She’ll not know how to fend off these brazen plays for power.* Tyrion pushed through a few men to get a better view of the exchange. “The South needs a proper warden and Highgarden a stern lord, as you noted in your raven scroll. I might note it was my own grandfather would served your father as Hand for a time. It would be my honor to serve you and hold those lands in your royal name.”

“I’m sure that’s an honor many of your fellow lords would enjoy,” Daenerys countered. “Of course, not all of those lords are here.”

“Lord Redwyne is bringing one hundred of his fastest ships around Dorne to the Blackwater,” Lord Merryweather added.

“I see,” she said. “And what of Lord Tarly?”

An unsettled silence filled the room. Lord Merryweather cleared his throat pointedly and spoke once more. “It is as I said, Lord Tarly and his son died on the field of battle against Your Grace’s forces, I believe. He left no heir.”

“Lord Randyll Tarly died a traitor’s death by my command, yes,” Daenerys replied icily. Tyrion could not help but smirk, for the threat was clear. *And so shall you if you betray me now.* “It was his trueborn son I was speaking of. Is Samwell here?” she looked around the tent, though in truth a woman of her stature could not have truly seen over these lords’ helmed heads any more than Tyrion could.

“Here, Your Grace,” Samwell squeaked from a darkened corner. His advance toward the center table was painfully slow. He seemed to shrink in stature before the lords of the Reach. *Yet in the eyes of the queen he stands far above the others.*
“The boy sworn to the Night’s Watch?” Lord Merryweather asked. “He cannot possibly claim the Tarly lands nor any others.”

“Lord Samwell of House Tarly,” Daenerys said with an odd smile, “fought the dead at the Wall, beyond it and then helped defeat the threat for good at Winterfell. Perhaps you might have known that if you had seen fit to join us in that fight, my lord. I should think to hold his Night’s Watch oaths fulfilled and offer him a reward for his services to the realm.”

“I…” Lord Merryweather paused and looked around at the assembled strength of the Reach. Better to enjoy her Grace’s favor that suffer her displeasure. “Of course, my queen,” he dipped his head and took a step back.

“Then I name you, Samwell Tarly, the Lord of Horn Hill,” she said. Samwell bowed low. A fitting reward for the boy – and a proven loyal lord.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” he said, his voice shaking as much as his knees. He can battle dead men and ice demons, but a lord’s title has him quaking in fear. Still, as Lord Samwell Tarly retreated into the crowd Tyrion saw a smile flash across his face.

“And you, Lord Merryweather,” Daenerys continued. “You shall be the Warden of the South, at least for the duration of this war. You will command the Reach’s men. Prove yourself capable the appointment might last.”

She is handing out titles quicker than a sellsword rids himself of coins in a brothel. Yet she’s buying their loyalty. Tyrion knew that, despite the fate the of the man’s father and brother, Samwell Tarly was loyal to the queen. If only because his dearest friend is. Lord Merryweather, of course, would see this appointment as only the beginning of his own climb up the vine-covered walls of Highgarden itself.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Lord Merryweather bowed even lower than Samwell. “If I might-”

“The matter of Highgarden will be decided once the realm is at peace,” Daenerys finished, her fiery gaze finding Tyrion in the crowd. “Now, for other matter at hand. Ser Jorah Mormont will discuss our plans for the siege of King’s Landing.” She took a step back and ceded the floor to her friend and protector.

Mormont… Tyrion watched the old knight step forward. He’s ever been my ally. And of course he truly betrayed her where I only aided her cause. Surely Daenerys would see the truth of the matter soon enough. Perhaps Mormont would help her. And if not? Well, his other plan was no certainty, but it if worked…

“When the Dornishmen arrive in force, we’ll-”

Mutters of ‘Dornishmen?’ swept through the tent like a sudden gust of wind. I thought we might arrive here, though I suppose it’s better they greet each with harsh words rather than harsh blows.

“The lords of Dorne and the Reach have been steadfast allies of House Targaryen,” Daenerys raised her voice to silence the stirring dissent. “I would expect them to remain so.”

Tyrion saw Ser Jorah smile before he continued. “We shall march together in force and surround the city,” he said. Simply brilliant. “With the Redwyne fleet, Dornish ships and Her Grace’s dragon, we’ll close the harbor as well.”

“We must force her hand,” Lord Merryweather said firmly. “Why not storm the walls of the city and the keep? Westermen and broken sellswords will not long hold the walls,” he looked around
with a foolish smile on his crooked face. *Eager to prove his worth already,* Tyrion noted cynically.

“Cersei Lannister has taken King Aegon, our queen’s husband, as her prisoner,” Jorah explained. “Should we attack the city, we fear that she might…” he left the rest unsaid.

“Then negotiation and mediation,” Lord Merryweather said, as if he had not just been the one to suggest storming the walls. “Surely you took some westermen of value when you broke her forces by Harrenhal?” Tyrion rolled his eyes. As they settled back, he found Daenerys staring at him again.

He looked away quickly, knowing that his queen must certainly be furious at his summoning these southern lords without her consent or knowledge. *And after forbidding me from even touching a raven scroll or quill. When she finds out what I’ve offered the Dornishmen…* Well, perhaps Jon Snow would be safely amongst their ranks once more before Lord Yronwood and the others arrived.

“Perhaps,” Jorah countered and continued. “But first the city must be isolated and secured.”

“We should muster the men of the Crownlands to our banners too, then,” Lord Merryweather said. *Has she named you Warden of the South or Master of War?* Tyrion wondered at the man’s confidence, though he could not help but admire it.

“I fear many of those lords and ladies face the same predicament, my lord,” Varys said. “Cersei Lannister seized on Her Grace’s absence from the south to seize many of the castles and holdfasts closest to the city itself. She holds their heirs hostage within the walls of the Red Keep.” Lord Merryweather grunted and shook his head in response.

Trumpets and horns sounded outside the tent, shattering the momentary silence the spymaster’s proclamation had brought about. They grew louder. *And closer.*

A moment later, the small crowd of lords stepped aside as four Unsullied and two Northmen entered the tent. All were armed, save the lead man who held a white banner of truce in place of a spear or sword. Tyrion spied the Lannister rider in their midst. *My sister’s response, he knew.*

Fear shone plain on the youth’s face as he was shunted forward and before the queen herself. He struggled to keep his hands locked around a sealed scroll…*and a box?*

“What is this?” Daenerys asked.

“I-I-I bring word from the queen,” the Lannister lad shook at he spoke.

“You *are* speaking to the queen, boy,” Lord Merryweather puffed up his chest and sputtered, suddenly outraged. *Ah, yes, even the noble defender of Daenerys’ claims and titles.* It seemed Lord Merryweather might have marched north to fight for the Night King if the being had offered him estates in the Lands of Always Winter.


“That’s quite all right,” Daenerys said, though with a tone that suggest quite the opposite. “You bring word from her?”

“I do, Your Grace,” the messenger said. *You won’t want these fools to hear it.*

Daenerys turned and looked to Jorah, then Varys. Both men nodded in silent agreement. Then she addressed the lords of the Reach. “You must pardon us, my lords. You will be weary from your
travels and we’ve some other business to attend to. My men will see you fed from our stores.”

The lords and knights muttered and bowed and then swept from the tent. Lord Merryweather lingered for a moment. “A courtesy we shall return in good time when our own supply wagons can better travel these winter roads, Your Grace,” he flashed his smile again and bowed.

Tyrion was certain he too would be sent out, yet no dismissal came. She simply ignored him. Daenerys stood across from the Lannister messenger, flanked by Varys and Ser Jorah. Tyrion could see now that the tent had been filled with other familiar faces: Davos and Missandei, Brienne and Podrick, Gendry and Sandor Clegane. Allies, of a sort, he thought.

“Well, what does Cersei want with us?” Daenerys asked the youth. Still shaking, he placed the sealed scroll in Varys’ outstretched arm. The spymaster’s eyes went wide as they shifted back and forth, reading Cersei’s word. Or threats. “And?”

Varys cleared his throat and turned his body toward Daenerys, though his eyes lingered now on the box the rider had brought with him. “Your Grace I-

“Read it,” the queen commanded.

“To the Would-Be Usurper,” Varys began, his eyes finding Tyrion’s own for a moment. “I have your bastard husband. I offer you this one chance for peace. Disband your armies and return to the North where you and your kind belong – or else return across the Narrow Sea,” Varys cleared his throat again before continuing. “In time, I shall return your false Aegon to you whole and unharmed. March any closer to my gates, and I shall offer you a different sort of piece. You shall find with this letter a token of that promise – and the promise that a Lannister always pays her debts. Signed, Queen Cersei of House Lannister, First of Her Name, titles…” Varys finished, eyes the Lannister man.

“Let me,” Daenerys said, extending her hand to her spymaster. She took the scroll and read it quickly. Her hands began to shake. Her eyes went wide in rage and in worry. “And what is it you have there?” her voice shook as she looked at Cersei’s messenger. He knelt and offered up the wooden box. Tyrion saw it clearly now, a finely engraved piece that would not have been out of place in a spice merchant’s manse.

Ser Jorah took it and opened it, then immediately closed it again. “What?” Daenerys demanded. Tyrion could hear even now her temper rising in her tone. “You will show it to me.”

“Daenerys…” Jorah said.

“Now,” she commanded. Jorah nodded his head in a bow and opened the box for her.

An odd, anguished gasp escaped her lips. Color drained from her face, making her eyes stand out. Then Tyrion saw her anger rising. Perhaps I should not have stayed. Unleashed on its own it was horrible to beyond. But tempered and directed, it is a powerful
thing. We might yet forge the realm anew from it.

Jon Snow, he knew, could temper it best. All of him though, Tyrion thought, not just his finger.

“Get out,” she ordered the Lannister man. “Ride back to your queen and tell her I shall pay my debt in full.” The terrified youth fled. She waited a moment before continuing, though Tyrion saw that she could scarcely contain her own fury. “I’ll take Arya’s advice and fly tonight, then,” she said. “Descend on the Red Keep while it sleeps and burn Cersei.”

“And burn Jon Snow with her,” Jorah shook his head. “This is a finger, not a head. We must keep our own clear, Khaleesi. We have a plan.”

“A siege,” Daenerys leered at her knight and protector. “You want me to strip away our army’s strength while she strips away pieces of Jon?”

“A siege is the right course of action, Your Grace,” Davos offered his advice.

“No, I don’t think it is,” Tyrion found his voice and stepped forward. Daenerys whirled and glared at him.

“I was not aware I was to heed the advice of a landless lord,” she said. I would note the Rock is mine by rights, yet doing so might see me thrown from the top of it.

“Then perhaps you might summon Lord Merryweather once more? I’m certain his vast holdings are matched only by what his mind holds,” he said. Daenerys glared at him.

“We don’t have time for your clever turns of phrase.” Or the patience.

“No, and yet perhaps there is time for a clever plan,” he said. “March on the city and surround it at a distance, yes, but I propose a more elegant assault on the Red Keep.” Varys wore a look of resignation on his face. “Lord Varys shall direct a few of our finest fighters into the city and the Red Keep. There, they shall free Jon Snow and see him safely back across our lines.”

There was utter silence for a moment. “And when the alarm is sounded?” Davos asked. “And thousands of soldiers descend on these mighty warriors of yours?”

“Quite simple, ser,” Tyrion replied. “We’ll feign an assault far across the way. The Gate of the Gods, perhaps. That’s far, far away from the keep itself and near the goldcloaks’ barracks besides. By the time my sweet sister tries to take another finger, she’ll be left wringing her own.”

“Might work,” Davos shrugged.

“And it might get whoever we send killed,” Jorah replied. “Not to mention the men who die in this false assault.”

“Jon would not want that,” Daenerys shook her head. I suppose he’s not here to offer his royal opinion on the matter. “But there may be another way…” Daenerys hesitated and looked around the room. “Where is Arya?”

“Your Grace,” the boy Gendry stepped forth from the side of the gathering. Tyrion noted his clear blue eyes. Baratheon eyes. Robert’s eyes. Not that Robert ever wore that look of worry. “She wasn’t here this morning when I woke.”

“And?” Daenerys’ question fell quickly on the end of his own admission.
“And we share a tent, Your Grace,” he said. “I’ve not seen her all day… nor are her things where they were. I think she’s gone—”

“To the city,” Tyrion finished. “She sees it as clearly as I do. This is the way.”

He saw an odd mix on emotions play across the queen’s face – panic in one heart’s beat, hope in the next. *Hope. The girl might be able to free Jon Snow, but she’ll never see him safely past the…* his own thoughts stalled and sank. *That’s not who she’s after. He knew the girl’s stories and had listened to her words. Arya Stark meant to kill Cersei. And the babe.*

Cersei, he thought bitterly, could hang. *But the child is innocent. Jaime’s child and my own niece or nephew.* He would see the babe survive, even if it meant suffering his sister. *And perhaps it might bring her to negotiate. We could offer terms. She could flee across the Narrow Sea… else the child might be raised at Casterly Rock. I would be a proper father for it, until I sire cubs of mine own.*

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“Then I say we take to Lord Tyrion’s plan,” Gendry said, looking around the room impatiently. *Oh? We? Of course the Baratheon youth would march on King’s Landing himself to win back his Stark woman. Robert’s son indeed.* “We need to,” he added. Others added their voices before Tyrion could say another word.

“Aye,” Sandor Clegane agreed from behind Gendry. “We’ll fetch these damned Starks,” he grunted.

“I would go as well, Your Grace, with your blessing,” Brienne stepped forward, her hand on the pommel of her Valyrian steel sword.


“Sit down, Podrick,” Brienne snapped.

“No, my lady,” Pod replied simply. “I fought beside you countless times. I’ll do so now.”

“You’ll never find a more loyal squire,” Tyrion quipped. Pod smiled at him. Brienne grimaced and shook her head. “And, of course, Pod has slain a knight of the kingsguard in battle before.”

“Four of you against the keep’s garrison and the city’s guards?” Daenerys asked, choosing her words and expression carefully. *Torn between saving her lover and saving these loyal retainers.*

“Five, if we find Arya,” Gendry added. *Six, counting the man I’ll not mention here.*

“And I might as well send you bound in chains to Cersei,” Daenerys countered. “Even with this… plan, I will not risk it.”

“Forgive me, Your Grace,” Missandei of Naath said. All eyes turned to her.

“What is it?” Daenerys asked, her tone calmer than it had been just a moment before.

“When Your Grace’s armies took Yunkai and Meereen, it was in much the same way,” Tyrion saw a sadness in the woman’s amber eyes. *When Grey Worm took those cities, if I recall the recounting. “If some of the Unsullied or even the northmen were to open the gates…”*

*That would certainly draw her forces to the walls, Tyrion knew. But if was she clever enough to secure her prize, too? Varys, it seemed, had the same reservations.*
“And should they raise the alarm before Jon Snow is safe?” Varys asked. No one answered. “Either way, there would be a slaughter at the gates of the city or the keep. I’ve oft found a few great whisperers are mightier than a great many good ones. Yet we take Lord Tyrion’s advice and draw her forces away…”

“Take his advice,” Daenerys laughed harshly. “Were it not for him Jon might still be here, or the city might have fallen already. Perhaps this latest ploy is simply a deliver more of my men into Cersei’s clutches…”

Tyrion’s temper flared. You fool. You would blame me for your failures and ignore my successes?

Did you miss the southern lords that left here mere moments ago? He clenched his fists to restrain his anger. Thankfully, the gesture went unnoticed. He calmed himself before speaking.

“Your Grace, I know we have had our disagreements—”

“Disagreements? Your sister sends me my husband’s finger in a box and you speak of disagreements?”

“My sister, yes,” Tyrion’s voice cracked with the strain of emotion. “A phrase you often repeat, Your Grace. I did not choose her as mine no more than you chose your brother. We once spoke of terrible fathers. I have a terrible sister as well. And Your Grace will note it was I who summoned these lords of the Reach to your side and camp—”

“Without seeking my counsel,” Daenerys countered. “And promising lands to which you have no right nor claim.”

“Yes, without your counsel,” Tyrion agreed. “I was your Hand. It was my duty to win you allies and conduct your affairs. It might be still.”

“It is not,” she said. “And these southern houses are ones you lost to begin with.”

“And yet thousands of southern soldiers have marched to join their queen,” he said simply. Heed my counsel or enjoy still more fingers from your husband.

“If your sister holds to her word, they will not help in this fight,” she said.

“But this plan will,” he said, his expression begging the queen for understanding despite his stoppered anger. “Send Clegane and the others. Varys will show them the safest passage. Let them free Jon Snow and find Arya.” Before she finds Cersei.

He saw the glimmer of hope in her violet eyes – eyes that fell to the box upon the table. After what might have been a lifetime, she nodded. “You’ll ride at daybreak,” she said, looking at Gendry first before the others.

Clegane, Brienne, Podrick and Gendry bowed low and exited the tent. Varys joined them after a moment, perhaps to plan the specifics of this infiltration. He looked into the Spider’s eyes as the eunuch left. Find Bronn, he thought. To his surprise, Varys nodded his head ever so slightly.

Tyrion looked up at his queen, who had eyes only for the box containing a bit of Jon Snow. It must be now, he knew.

“Your Grace,” he said.

Daenerys turned and leered at him. “Only royal councilors are welcome in my tent at this late hour,” she said. And you want to be alone, yes. And yet...
“Indeed,” Tyrion replied courteously. “Yet if I might have a word about my brother—”

“The brother who betrayed me?” She was close to yelling now. “Who aided an enemy army?”

“The very same, I think if you might—”

“Perhaps I should have done more than remove you from my council,” she said. “Perhaps I should have you thrown in the pens beside your brother.”

“Your queenly prerogative,” he said. “You might even send bits of me back to Cersei. She might like that.”

“She might,” Daenerys said coolly.

“You accepted my advice on rescuing your royal husband, though. Will you accept another suggestion?” She glared at him but said nothing. *I suppose silence is consent.*

“Release my brother. Send him to treat with Cersei – or at the very least distract her – you might—”

*Release him?*

“Lannister,” Ser Jorah chided from behind their queen, shaking his head.

“I only mean that—”

“Perhaps I *should* send a piece of you,” she said.

“Fine ornaments for the keep you mean to take,” Tyrion replied. “Yet fire and blood will do you little good now,” he said, far more firmly. *The time for courtly courtesy has passed.* “Unless you mean the win the throne with empty threats and insults, I bid you listen. She is my sister. I know her. We must push her off balance and scatter her thoughts. Sending Jaime to her will surely to that.”

“Or, perhaps, your sister might learn of your plan? Some new plot?”

“Have you, per chance, counted how many swords each raven has returned in kind?” he asked.

“Not enough to return Jon Snow to me or bring my slain dragon back to life,” the queen countered. She sighed and turned away, but Tyrion could see the pain evident even in such a simple gesture. His earlier thought echoed inside his mind. *If I cannot be her Hand, I must be her mind.*

“Of course, Your Grace,” he bowed low and he took steps backwards. “I bid you a good evening and night. And you, Ser Jorah.”

The old knight bowed. The queen did not meet his gaze. Her own was still fixed upon the fine wooden box. Tyrion left the tent then, but thought he heard a choked sob behind him as he did so.

It did not matter now. He knew what he had to do.

…

He had thrown the torch aside and made haste away from the scene. The northmen’s tent caught fire quickly enough – perhaps too quickly for the fire to seem like some hapless levy’s foolish mistake.

*Doesn’t matter now,* he noted as dozens of men rushed past him to the shouts of ‘attack!’ and
‘fire!’ Fewer guards, I suppose. He arrived at the camp’s pens a moment later.

The camp’s makeshift prison was a sorry sight. Through effective enough, I think, given the dragon lounging somewhere beyond the tent lines.

The prisoners themselves were few, for the Targaryen host had taken only a few men outside the walls of Harrenhal. The rest fled, Tyrion recalled. Sellswords true to their nature. He glanced around the confinement as he approached. At least we did not have to stable their elephants. Though the meat might have fed the men for a week.


“I’ve only come to make certain the prisoners are secured,” he panted as is out of breath. “Our camp burns, ser,” he said as he pointed to the rising column of smoke that quickly disappeared into the black night sky. “Enemy spies, I think.”

“Your spies, dwarf?” the youth kicked at him and drew his blade half out of its scabbard. A clever guard, I see. Very well.

“Not at all,” he assured the northern youth. “I am our queen’s loyal servant. Though should you find these assailants I’m certain our queen would reward you handsomely.” He saw the glimmer of greed in the lad’s eyes. “Just think, when we take the city… the gold and jewels, the glory, the women… what seeds of valor might be planted this very night? Should you emerge the hero who seized these enemies.”

“I…” the lad’s voice cracked at his will faltered. “Watch the prisoners, then,” he said before drawing his sword and running off.

Tyrion found the flimsy iron keys on a nearby stool and then went at once to his brother.

“Tyrion?” Jaime rasped, his throat parched and voice hoarse.

“It is,” Tyrion could not help but smile.

“What’re you doing here?” he asked.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” he said, reaching behind Jaime to fumble with the bindings and bonds.

“Struggling to undo my chains,” Jaime tried to laugh. It was an odd, hacking sound.

“And yet succeeding,” Tyrion huffed as the iron bonds came loose. “I have a knack for it.”

“I take it this is not by Daenerys’s order,” Jaime stated plainly.

Tyrion shook his head. “It is not,” he said. “Her Grace still holds you in low esteem.”

“And that fire,” Jaime jutted his chin toward the ongoing commotion. “Was that you too?”

“I never was much a cook,” Tyrion quipped as he undid the heavy iron collar. “Come now.” He helped his brother regain his feet and exit that shit prison.

Shouting echoed across the camp. Tyrion looked at his brother. “We don’t have much time,” he said.
“Why? Jaime asked. “Why are you doing this?”

“For you,” he said. “For her – or her child. I would see you survive this.” He placed a hand on Jaime’s shoulder. “You must convince her. To surrender. To make peace or make terms. To flee. Whatever it takes.”

“Cersei? Make peace?” Jaime shook his head. Tyrion caught it in his own two hands.

“You must,” he insisted.

Jaime stood as tall as the pens would allow him. “And what of your Jon Snow?”

“Whatever you do, do not mention the man to her,” Tyrion replied. *Telling him anymore of that plot may doom the others.*

“She will execute you for this,” Jaime said.

“Perhaps,” Tyrion shrugged. “But then I’ve been sentenced to die half a dozen times.” He stared into Jaime’s eyes. “It’s not my death I’m concerned with now. It’s yours. And your child’s. Bronn has a horse for you at the end of this tent row,” Tyrion instructed. “And your sword too.”

Jaime looked around as if an answer to all their problems would emerge from the camp. Then, finally, he looked down at Tyrion. “I suppose this is goodbye, then,” Jaime said, kneeling into the mud.

“Farewell, big brother,” Tyrion said as he wrapped his arms around the man. “If only for a time.”

Jaime stood, nodded, and paced off into the darkness. Tyrion hurried away into the night, a growing sense of guilt weighing on him.

I've used my brother as a pawn in this game. The thought troubled him for the rest of the night.

Chapter End Notes

Well, Tyrion’s motivations are tough at this point. I guess I'll say that he does care for the child and for his brother, but he also cares for himself. He enjoys the game and enjoys playing it. He wants to be Hand. He's also arrogant - like the rest of his family - and that is both a strength and a weakness. His scene with Jaime was a bit different in the outline but with last week's episode it felt a bit too similar.

Anyway, hope you enjoyed it! A short Jon chapter is next... before everything goes to shit.

As for Episode 5 (I fully expect 80% of these comments to be about it), I'm not going to beat a dead dragon here. I will say that it's not honest to say that the Daeneryys we saw is a part of her character. The turn was poorly executed, but to deny that is to not really understand the nuances of the character (outside butchering innocents just because). On the other hand, I chose to explore the other side of the coin. What happens when she gets her family and home? Well, we get the Daenerys with a good heart.

The thing I will complain about is her relationship with Jon - or lack thereof. He says he loves her but doesn't go to her right after hitting the shores of Dragonstone, even
though he knows she's lost Rhaegal (his dragon) and her dearest friend? He doesn't
comfort her or anything. That's not love. Maybe he's lying. Maybe it's trash writing and
editing. Whatever it was, it made me sad. That's not love.
Jon Snow stared into the darkness before him. There was nothing down here, no torches to cast dim firelight on this grim cell. There was no light of any kind. He was not certain whether it was day or dusk. For him, it an eternal night.

Dreams came to him in his restless sleeps – dreams filled with pale, northern sunlight and friends’ laughter. And her.

He had dreamt of her again just now. It was the same dream, always the same. She had been beside him in bed, her silver hair unbound and unbraided as he remembered it in the evenings, just before sleep. Her eyes had shone with that soft joy she seemed to savor and yet save only for him. Her lips had been full and soft… and he could almost remember their taste. He missed her. All of her.

“Dany…” her name escaped his lips as perhaps the first word he had spoken in days. The darkness swallowed the sound. Rats scurried away, the scraping of their claws on the stone floor an awful sound. Somewhere further away, chains rattled.

Jon wondered whether he would ever see her again. Or our child. He wondered where she was and if she was safe. He wondered about others he loved, too. Arya and Samwell and the rest. Are they near? Outside the walls? Or has Cersei slain Drogon too?

He did not know. The uncertainty was like to drive him mad. Oft times he tested his chains, trying to shatter the bonds and break free. What would come next he did not know. But I would rather die fighting to get back to her than wither here.

And yet here he withered. Like Lord Eddard before me and his brother and father before him, before they burned at the hand of my other grandsire.

Perhaps this winter war had been a mistake. Perhaps we should have stayed in Winterfell. Had our child there, rebuilt the cities and keeps that fell to the dead.

It was folly. A fantasy. He knew they would not have been safe. Even with the dead defeated, northern winters were harsh and hard. Winterfell would not have had the resources to support thousands of soldiers and two dragons for much longer. And Cersei would have fallen upon us before the late spring thaw – with the marshaled strength of the south behind her.

He balled in fists in rage at the very thought of that woman. Her betrayal had cost them thousands of innocent lives in the North, but that had been only the beginning. She sent cutthroat to murder Daenerys. She abandoned the south when the dead crossed the Neck. And she slew Rhaegal.

His connection to the green dragon had been strong and growing stronger. Oft times he felt as the dragon did. Or else he felt as I did. In those moments of flight and fire, he had known what Daenerys once meant when she called them her children. Rhaegal’s death had left an emptiness
Another presence filled it now. *Ghost*. Even here in the darkness he could feel his direwolf. Where Rhaegal’s presence had been hot and volatile, Ghost’s was cold and steadfast like the Wall itself. It filled him not with fiery rage but with cool purpose – like a wolf on the hunt. Jon tested his chains again and snarled. They did not give.

He sat back against the cold stone and looked ahead, though he could see nothing at all. *I am the sword in the darkness,* he mused bitterly. *Though without a sword at all for I lost it on the field.* Longclaw could have cut his iron bonds like they were spun silk. *Were I armed, I could fight my way out of these dungeons, perhaps the keep itself. I might die fighting to return to her – to all of them. Like my sire before me.*

Jon sighed and closed his eyes. Sleep did not return to him then, so he contented himself with the memory of his wife’s warmth at his side and the memory of her smile. It gave him hope.

…

He woke some time later to the sound of footsteps echoing through the cells. Perhaps a day had passed. Perhaps it had been only an hour, he was not certain.

Yet he was certain who it was who was coming ever closer. *She’s come again,* he knew. *And not alone.* He glanced up as the footsteps grew louder and the hallway outside his cell grew brighter.

The torchlight was dim, but to him it was blinding. He blinked rapidly as he stared at the flickering flames, then his eyes found the massive form of Ser Gregor Clegane… and then Cersei Lannister. She looked down at him and smiled cruelly as one of her men unlocked the cell door.

“I told you I have nothing else to say to you,” he said, his throat dry from thirst and disuse. That was no lie, but it was not the truth either. *She knows what happening out there. Where Daenerys is, and the others.* He would have fought the mountain of a man at her side to know the truth.

“I remember,” Cersei said, still smiling. “Just as I remember Lord Eddard Stark in these cells so many years ago.” She laughed – a high, false sound that echoed eerily off the walls. “I offered him peace once, too. When he learned the truth about my children. You’re as foolish as he was.”

“He was no fool,” Jon replied.

“He was,” Cersei smirked. “And died a traitor’s death. But I know you’re as foolish as the man who sired you and the one who raised you. You’ve rejected my terms. Your queen has too, though I extended a hand of peace.” Jon wondered exactly those terms had been. “It may give you hope to learn that she and her savages and slaves arrived outside my walls this morning.” Jon sighed in relief. *She’s all right. They all are.* Yet Cersei was still smirking.

“Then perhaps you should surrender. You…” he paused. Was this wise? *What would Lord Eddard have done? No… what would a king do?* His eyes found her swollen womb. Perhaps a king would be merciful. “You should surrender. Daenerys and I will allow you and your child to live in exile once you’ve renounced all claim to the throne.”

The offer sounded false. The words tasted bitter in his own mouth. Jon was not certain if it was the truth or if the black walls of this place were turning him into another southern schemer.

Cersei laughed again. “Perhaps I shall surrender,” she said. “Or perhaps I shall meet the girl’s forces with fire and blood.”
“You don’t have the men,” he said. We don’t, either.

“Fire, then,” Cersei nodded and held up her hand, waving her fingers twice. One of her guards emerged from the darkness. Jon examined his black hair, youthful face and black armor. He’s terrified. The guard carried something – he could see that clearly now. A cask? “Set it down over there, on the other side of the cell,” Cersei commanded. The man did so, taking great pains to set it down gently as if it were a sleeping babe.

“I promised you once before that your wife and child would die long before you,” she sneered. “I lied. She might take the walls. She might even take the city, but should she make it to the Red Keep, well,” her green eyes found the cask again and she smiled cruelly. “Sleep well, King Aegon. Sleep well knowing that even if the city should fall, you shall never see her again.”

Chapter End Notes

So yea, pretty quick. There’s not a lot for Jon to do down there in the Black Cells. This wasn't in the original outline but I figured it would be interesting to have Jon's POV of being down there. Also I had originally thought this story would lose all relevance once Season 8 was out. That does not seem to be the case, so I'm adding in a few more chapters, mostly on the end of the story but before the actual ending I've written.

I think you'll all enjoy the coming chapters!

As always, comments are appreciated.
Arya IX

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Her name was Lanna. A maid of six and ten from Maidenpool. Maidenpool, she thought. Lords? House Mooton. Sigil? A red salmon. Any Maidenpool girl would know that.

Though of course she could scarcely remember her own home or her own father’s face, save that he had brown hair likes hers. And kind brown eyes, like mine. She had not been to her home in years now.

Lanna had hidden when the lions sacked her town and killed her father, orphanning her. She had fled south to the capital, surviving the grim autumn years by begging and stealing and doing what she needed to do to survive.

Lanna is not so different than Arya Stark, Arya thought as she wove through the crowd on the Street of Sisters. She wore the face of that same Frey serving girl she had slain when she had returned to this country. No one else remembers who she was, she knew. She had seen to that herself.

Indeed, nothing of Arya had entered the capital, save her Valyrian steel dagger and her desire to free Jon Snow. It was the poor orphan girl Lanna who had entered through the Old Gate and begged for the guards’ pity at the gates of the Red Keep…and been denied entry. It had been Lanna who had tested those old, secret ways into the castle, only to find them no longer secret.

Cersei has locked herself away in her tower. There had to be some way inside, something she was not thinking of. That I have to think of, and quickly. Her brother was rotting in those cells.

Arya continued walking south and west along the cobblestone Street of Sisters. The crowd grew thicker the closer she drew to the central square. And the people are growing thicker too. Just a few moments ago, outside Flea Bottom, she had seen starving orphans and women begging for scraps of bread from passersby for the benefit of the gaunt babes clutched to their breasts.

Here though? One of the merchant’s bellies could feed half of Flea Bottom. The thought made her sad.

She passed a baker’s stall and remembered to look longingly at the fresh-baked loaves steaming in the winter morning’s chill air. The baker met her gaze and shook his head, drawing his shoulders back as if the gesture would frighten her. It took Arya a moment to remember that it would indeed frighten Lanna. She turned away and hurried further down the street.

There were other stalls packed against either side of the street. Merchants sold spun wool and called into the crowd about the quality of their goods. Arya slipped to the side and plucked a gold dragon from a man’s purse. He did not notice. She clutched the coin tightly as she moved around him and deeper into the thickening crowd.

Then she too jumped aside with the crowd as the sound of boots on stone and the sound of the clattering mail grew. After a moment, she watched perhaps two hundred men armored in enameled Lannister steel plate march by, followed by another hundred in plain steel, though each of those soldiers wore gold bands around his sword arm. Sellswords, she knew. The same we fought outside Harrenhal… When they took Jon.
Cersei still has her armies then, she thought. Jaime Lannister was to thank for that. Arya had told the queen how to kill the Lannister men. In the darkness. Where you can fight them and they can’t fight you. That had not worked. Thousands of Lannisters had escaped to man the walls of her brother’s prison. At least she imprisoned the kingslayer. She supposed that did not matter now. Now it will only take one blade.

Arya waited for the last of the soldiers to pass before moving on down the street. As she entered the central square, she looked up at the ruins of the Sept of Baelor. Where she killed father. Even the thought of that day caused a bitter taste to rise in her mouth.

She turned and looked toward the Red Keep again. That’s where he is, she reminded herself for the thousandth time. And that’s where she is too. She killed father. Tormented Sansa. Helped kill mother and Robb. Tyrion had asked for mercy for his sister. The mercy of a quick death, maybe. Cersei would die. Once Jon is safe... and once I have a way inside.

She turned back toward the ruined sept. That side of the square, in the shadow of Visenya’s Hill, seemed less popular and populous. Probably because Cersei burned half the houses and all the people. Still, she walked toward it, remembering her days as Arry the orphan boy, who slew pigeons and stole sweet rolls and scraps to eat.

Arya passed the Guildhall of the Alchemists as she slowly climbed the hill. The great oaken door that guarded the entrance to the hall was itself guarded by no fewer than thirty Lannister levies and as many goldcloaks. Something she wants to hide, thought Arya. The guildhall was as protected as the Red Keep itself.

Awful scents of sulfur followed her as she strode onward, past the blackened ruins of the sept and down along the Street of Steel. It might have been winter in the rest of the realm, but among these forges it was as hot as the Dornish sun. Masters and their apprentices worked iron into steel and steel into weapons for the city’s armies.

As Gendry did, once, she knew. She missed her, well, companion. Yet she felt no guilt at having to leave him in Daenerys’ camp. I know what I have to do now, and he’ll know that. Still, she much preferred their tent and his warm embrace to the cold alleys of the capital. I need to find somewhere else tonight. Somewhere closer.

The answer presented itself around the next bend in the street. Arya saw the weather-beaten sign hanging from the post. The Black Horse Tavern, she read the faded paint, though she easily might have guessed the name by the now grey stallion galloping across a field of chipped white paint.

She entered the tavern cautiously – just as Lanna would. It was warm and boisterous inside. A fire burned in the massive hearth, but she could not hear the welcome crackling of logs above the hearty laughs of crimson-clad soldiers. Lannister men.

She looked them over. Two were young lads, not unlike the levies she had met while riding north to Winterfell after returning to Westeros. Two more were older men, though they wore the same armor as then younger lads. There, she knew. The fifth man’s golden lion pauldron upon his left shoulder was a mark of higher station. I can use him.

Just not yet, she knew. A lowborn girl approaching a Lannister captain might be beaten and sent away... and while Arya knew she would have little trouble cutting the man’s throat, she also knew Lanna was not so skilled. Better to wait. To eye him. To play a game. Five years in the House of Black and White might not have taught her this particular trick, but five months or more with Gendry had.
Arya crossed the lowered center of the room and made for the higher wooden bar. A fat tavern 
keep eyed her suspiciously, but when she produced a gold dragon his suspicious eyes widened in 
greed. “Ale, if you have it please,” she said sweetly. “And beer if you don’t. Make it two for now. 
Mine uncle will be along in a moment.” She said the last bit loud enough for most around her to 
here. *It’s dangerous to go alone as a girl,* she remembered one of her earliest lessons.

The tavern keep produced two tankards of ale and shoved them both toward her alongside a pile of 
silver coins. “M’thanks,” he grunted and nodded at her. “But mind your own uncle comes quickly, 
hmm? This lot is like to see you and those pretty brown eyes of yours as their final drink of the 
night.” Arya nodded at the tavern keep.

She took one of the tankards in her hand and brought the brim to her lips. Frothy foam and cold ale 
mixed in equal measure as she drank deeply. The liquid seemed to wash away the filth of the past 
few days. Still, she needed to keep a clear mind. *And open ears.*

After all, there were more than Lannister men in the Black Horse Tavern. She spied three 
goldcloaks deep in their cups, two more sellswords of the scattered Golden Company, and a dozen 
common folk besides. It was their conversations that interested her most.

“Dragon Queen’s brought her armies against the city then, eh?” one fat, balding man said a bit too 
loudly. Arya turned her ear toward him and his two companions. “Eunuchs and Dothrakis and 
Dornishmen and Northern savages. We’re to give our city over to that lot?” *They’re already here. I 
need to act soon. Tonight. Or in the morning. It can’t wait longer than that.*

A thinner man smiled and shook his head. Arya noticed his missing teeth. “I’ve heard this Dragon 
Queen means to sell our daughters to them Dothraki and make our sons soldiers in her cockless 
army.” Two of the other men in the small gathering grunted and shook their heads.

“Gods protect us,” the fat man said.

“Gods?” a third man stiffened his spine at the word and set his drink aside. Arya noted the 
weathered lines on his face and his short grey hair. “Was it not our own royal lioness who 
desecrated our gods?” *It was.*

“Quiet, Hewett,” the thin man hissed. “Mark the soldiers.”

“Aye, Hewett,” the fat man nodded as fully as his chins would allow.

“They know same as I,” the man called Hewett muttered as he shook his head. “The Seven have 
abandoned this city and this queen as sure as the Iron Fleet has fled the bay. We’ll not stand long 
against the Dragon Queen’s men.”

“That’s treason,” hissed the thin man again. “You’ll shut your mouth.”

Hewett looked around and locked eyes with Lanna’s brown owns for a moment. Then he looked 
away and muttered “aye, that I will.”

“Still, he’s right,” the fat man said. “If only Lord Tywin were here to save the city again.” *He’d 
burn with the rest of you.*

Arya knew that for certain. Tywin Lannister had proved himself a clever lord, but even he could 
not have withstood Daenerys’ fury. *He didn’t even withstand Robb’s. He had him murdered.* As 
she took another sip of ale, she lamented the fact that Lord Tywin Lannister would never have the 
chance to bathe in dragon flame.
She quickly cast an eye toward the drinking Lannister soldiers. Her gaze lingered on one of the youths for a moment, then found the commander’s eyes. His gaze met hers. He smiled. Lanna smiled too and turned away, pointing her ear toward the conversation once more.

“Even Lord Tywin could not have driven back dragons and Dothraki,” Hewett failed to keep his lips shut. “If the queen has any godly sense left in her she’ll sue for peace and abandon that ugly iron chair.”

“Hewett,” the thin man began. “Were I not your brother-by-law I say you were trying to get us all killed this night.”

“Far from it, brother-by-law, I hope to see our family survive this war,” Hewett said, anger coloring his tone. “But am I wrong? It’s said Daenerys Targaryen conquered Slavers’ Bay and destroyed an army of dead men in the North.”

“Dead men!” the thin man chortled, but his mirth rang hollow among the hollow stares of the others.

“They marched as far south as Rosby…” the fat man said grimly.

“Blue eyed corpses,” Hewett added. “Dead men to be sure. Rotting and growling like beasts. I’ve heard the stories…” And I’ve seen them.

Arya felt her pulse quicken at these tavern tales of wights and White Walkers. I fought them. My family. Bran died trying to stop them. Perhaps they should have let that Night King pass to the south. Then they would have known how many tens of thousands of northmen died for them. She stopped herself and took another sip of ale. After all, what did a Maidenpool orphan know of dead men and ice demons?

“Still, whatever they were, they’re gone now,” the thin man reasoned.

“Thanks to this Dragon Queen, some say,” Hewett shrugged. “I say we owe her some-”

Arya did not hear the rest of his words, for a thick and mailed arm had been clapped around her.

“Pretty thing, you are,” a deep yet handsome voice said. Arya looked up to see the Lannister captain looking down at her with a grin. You are Lanna, she reminded herself, suppressing the urge to cut the man’s throat and gouge out his green eyes. Lanna is flattered.

She forced herself to blush and giggled girlishly. Ugh. “You’re too kind, m’lord,” she sighed and looked at the still full tankard. “Mine own uncle was meant to join me here, but I fear he has lost his way. He’s no stranger to ale you see…”

“Nor am I,” the Lannister captain said as he took the spare tankard in hand. “Though I know how to hold mine.” He smiled at her. Lanna smiled back. “Tell me, have you ever seen the inside of the Red Keep?” Yes…

“No, m’lord,” she said.

“Oh, I’m not a lord. Not yet, anyway,” the captain laughed.

“Then beg pardon, m’… captain,” she finished lamely. That should work.

The captain laughed again. “Tytos, you can call me. After the queen’s own grandsire,” he boasted as his he were the man himself. “But tell me, what is a pretty brown-eyed thing like you doing in
these parts?” His armed wrapped tighter around her. “And what is your name?”

This is my chance, Arya knew. “I’m Lanna, if it please,” she said innocently. “But without mine uncle I’m in want of a place to sleep, captain ser.” She bowed her head and looked up at him like some shy maiden. Take me behind those gates. She set her own tankard of ale aside on the bar.

“Oh…” the captain called Tytos smiled. “I think I can find such an arrangement. If you’re willing to walk a bit of course? The views from the walls of the Red Keep are ever so pretty, not unlike yourself,” he smirked. She forced herself to blush again and smile.

“I should love to see them one day,” she said coyly.

“Perhaps that day might be tonight?” Tytos looked at her for a moment before drinking deeply from his cup.

“Is it warm there?” Arya asked, brushing her long brown hair aside like some foolish maiden from those awful songs.

“Very,” Tytos assured her.

“And in your bed? Is it warm there too?”

“Warmer than anywhere else in the city,” he smirked. Arya might have smirked too, but that was not Lanna’s way.

She stood and took his course hand in hers, but stopped, feigning foolishness. “I should hate for good ale to go to waste, especially in this winter,” she sighed. eyeing her abandoned tankard.

Tytos smiled and took it from the bar top. The Lannister captain drained it in a few heartbeats, burped, and smiled at her. She smiled back. “Shall we, m’lady?” he slurred his speech as he escorted her from the tavern. She turned and gave the tavern keep and apologetic look as she escorted the captain out. The other four Lannister soldiers gave whooping cheers and hollers as their captain left the tavern.

The walk back to the Red Keep itself was long. Arya could feel the extra ale take effect. Tytos’ footfalls became heavier, his gate unsteady and uneven. Yet curiously he maintained his course. He must have done this before. Many times.

He guided her and she him through various alleyways until they emerged onto the Muddy Way, and thence the Hook. A few struggled steps later saw the pair approaching the Red Keep.

“Tytos!” the man beside her cried out as he approached a side gate. The four guards did not move, though the two in front of them did – lowering their spears at the newcomers. Arya kept one eye on their gleaming steel points.

“Drunk again,” one of the guards muttered and shook his head. “Perhaps we should leave you outside to teach you a lesson.”

“A gamble!” Tytos grinned savagely. “Assuming I won’t remember the insult. But if I do, Willem? What then?”

Arya watched as all color drained from the guard’s face. “Beg pardon, it’s been a long night and all,” he mumbled.

“I thought as much,” Tytos smirked. As did I. “Come, Lanna,” he pulled at her wrist and dragged
her along.

Arya’s shrouded eyes watched as they passed under the side gates of the Red Keep. I’ve made it. I’m here. Jon was close now – closer than he had been since those sellswords had taken him. Now all she had to do was dispose of this captain.

They walked along the wall for a time. She kept her hand in his and her body pressed close to his mail. She offered comments and compliments on how hard his armor was, how he commanded the respect of his men, and how he must surely have mastered his own sword. Each nicety earned a smile and a nod.

“Mine own tower here, Lanna. The highest room in the tower,” he wavered on his feet as he approached the door. “Not to worry now though. No more foolish guards. Just you, me, a fine bed and a flagon of red waiting upstairs…. Now let me finds the damned keys…” he turned his back to her as he fumbled at his side.

Arya drew her dagger. She silently stepped forward and drew the cold Valyrian steel across the man’s throat, feeling how deeply the blade cut. It felt good. She caught his keys as they fell from his limp hand.

Then, she pushed with all her might and dumped his body into the moat below. It landed with an oddly dull sound and quickly sank beneath the black surface of the moat.

Arya hurried inside the tower and sped down its stairs, eager to escape any connection with the corpse in the moat. Soon enough, she found herself on familiar footing. The courtyards, the grounds, she remembered them from her youth, and perhaps the catacombs below them. She would find a place to sleep tonight – mayhaps within the skull of Balerion the Black Dread Himself. And then… in the morning. Well, she had a brother to save… and a queen to kill.

…

Arya rose before the sun did – not a difficult feat in the dead of winter. When she emerged into the yard, the sky was grey and heavy. Snow had begun to fall on the keep and the city. Winter has come, she thought as she walked across the walk. Winter is here. And so am I.

Yet Jon was in the Black Cells, deep beneath the keep itself. A royal prisoner was like to be well guarded. Lanna cannot pass prison guards, Arya knew. There needed to be someone else.

And so Lanna found her way into the bowels of the Red Keep. It was not hard for a girl with a pretty face and prettier brown eyes. Most guards did not care. The ones that did were won over with a smile. Idiots, Arya thought.

She wandered the deeper levels, wondering exactly where the Black Cells were. There were plenty of empty rooms and chambers, for surely Cersei did not have so many loyal men as to fill the entire keep. There were other chambers too, chambers filled with awful screams. Chambers leaking awful scents… and chambers leaking most interesting conversations.

Then she found a thin oaken door. Muffled voices sounded from within. Four voices, she counted from the odds tones. This was important. She pressed her ear to the space between the wood and stone to listen.

“… seven thousand, my Lord Hand. All where Her Grace has requested them,” a shrill voice said.

“Good,” a calm but quivery voice responded. The Lord Hand? Arya wondered.
“And another five placed along the streets. Should the Dragon’s Queen’s armies enter the city, well…” there was an odd chuckle.

“And indeed, my friends,” the calm voice answered. “See that the rest of the stores are prepared and distributed, yes?”

“Of course, my Lord Hand,” one voice said.

“Yes, Qyburn,” another replied. Qyburn. Arya had a name.

“Very well then, idle no longer here.”

Arya scurried away as feet scraped against stop. The oaken door opened and three thin, elderly men walked out… though none closed the door. I’ll see for myself, she decided.

The door was open and the steps were slick but even. She made her way down half of them before stopping to gaze at the horror before her. Bodies, she realized.

These were not like the corpses at the House of Black and White. There, the bodies had been blessed and washed and cared for – their faces removed with respect. But here? Arya saw countless limbs piled in the corner, alongside countless other organs.

Her gaze lingered on one corpse on the table, a lad, it seemed. Yet with four arms where there should be two... One of the hands was missing a finger. Bile rose in her throat at the sight of it. It’s foul. The very thing we fought to destroy.

The man Qyburn did not turn as he spoke to her. “Where did I send you, my girl? The Flea Bottom stores?” He asked and yet did not wait for a response. “Yes, that was it. How are they?”

“Ready, my Lord Hand,” she lied.

“Good… that’s good,” Qyburn mused as he turned and retrieved another limb from his awful pile of corpses.

Arya wanted to leave. She wanted to flee. Yet she could not ignore the golden sigil on the elderly man’s chest. The Hand of the Queen. His was a face more valuable than any. And he’s alone. Down here in his chamber... She took a step forward and fiddled with her knife.

“Yes, very good,” Qyburn mused as Arya drew closer. He cocked his head in confusion as his eyes met hers. “But did I not send you to Cobbler’s Square?” he asked, backing away slightly.

Arya walked down the rest of the steps and closed the distance between them. She smiled – and so Lanna did too. “I suppose you did,” she said as she pulled the girl’s mask from her face. The sensation was odd – like water running upward from her neck. She reach down and drew her dagger with her other hand.

Yet the man before her seemed utterly perplexed. “How curious…” he muttered, starring right into her grey eyes as she cut his throat.

Arya let the blood spill onto the floor. There was enough of it there already. She was content to divide this man’s parts among the others he had collected. After all, she only needed one.

Chapter End Notes
Well, thank you to all my readers - the old timers and the newcomers.

Initially, "Home" was a one shot about Daenerys feeling at home beside Jon Snow. After some encouragement, I decided to explore the world of fan-fiction story telling. I had, of course, hoped to finish this story by the beginning of Season 8 (operating under the assumption the season would put this story to shame). That, sadly, did not happen.

So here's the plan. The upcoming chaos in Kind's Landing lasts about 11 chapters. They'll all be shorter though. The "Episode 10" download chapters will run another 8 or so, depending on style and substance. I've had my ending written for a while now and will stick to it. Though I'm considering a short "post-credits" scene... All in all, my vacations considered, this will be done mid-July. I hope you'll all stay with me that long after this series finale.

Otherwise, yea, Arya's faceless training comes into play here and it will in future chapters.

As always, comments and critiques are welcome.
Daenerys XVI

Chapter Notes

My lords. MY LORDS! Here's what I say to these two writers. *Spits* Dan Weiss is nothing to me, nor David neither. Why should their ending rule over me and mine from some flowery seat in SoCal? What do they know of character development or decent battle plans? Even their plots are wrong! Why shouldn't we write for ourselves again? It was the author we bowed to and now the author is dead (productively speaking). There sits the only writer I mean to bend my knee to: the writer who publishes!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The wind off the bay was cool, but not cold. It caressed her tired face and plucked at the loose strands of her silver hair, making them dance and twirl about. *Like hands running through my unbraided curls just before bed. Like Jon's hands...*

He had always liked doing that. *More than liked it,* she reminded herself as the breeze picked up again. Even on that northbound ship he had taken to her hair, holdings a lock of it and twirling it absently after they had made love. She inhaled the salt air and tried to remember the feeling of his fingers through her hair and the sweet sensations of his fingers brushing against her scalp.

Bile rose in her throat. *His fingers...* Cersei had sent one back. *She has maimed him as a threat.* The lioness was vicious. *But her kin are more jackals than lions,* Daenerys thought. *Liars and traitors.* At least Cersei was true to her own nature, however foul that nature was.

Tyrion had been chained and thrown in the pens for freeing his brother. She had promised him as much. The man she had trusted as her Hand had grasped a blade and plunged it into her heart. *All his schemes and betrayals, I could forgive them.* That twice damned foolishness with the ravens had won two score houses to her side, if not more. That was true. *But this?* It could not be forgiven.

She opened her eyes and glimpsed the darkened towers of the Red Keep against a reddening eastern sky. *I've sent four warriors to their deaths.* For surely Tyrion had betrayed her yet again. He had told his brother and, by now, Jaime would have told Cersei of that foolish plan. Jon would remain in his chains. *Cersei might send me another finger in warning.*

*House Lannister.* Ever had it been the bane of her ambitions. Tyrion had called himself a gift in that fighting pit outside Meereen. A gift! What had his advice wrought but the deaths of those who served her? Yara Greyjoy's fleet scattered. The Martell ships destroyed. Highgarden lost. *At Jaime Lannister's own golden hand. Now that's somewhere inside those walls too.*

Daenerys looked over the black outlines of the capital from the hillside. *My family's city.* What had been here before Aegon set down his banner? A market town? A fishing village? Nothing at all? House Targaryen had built it all, before it had been brought to near ruin.

*By another Lannister. My father's own Hand for twenty years.* Aerays had deserved his death, she knew, but Tywin had sacked the city and sent his dogs to butcher Aegon and Rhaenys. *He might have hunted Jon too, if he knew the truth.*
Yet doubts lingered, faint as morning fog in summer. *Ser Jaime saved my life,* she thought, but stronger voices shouted their objections. *Saved your life from cutthroats that Cersei sent to kill you and your daughter.* Cersei had betrayed them. Jaime had betrayed her. And now Tyrion had betrayed her just as his father had so many years ago.

Daenerys knew the truth now. *If there is to be a future for House Targaryen, then there cannot be one for House Lannister.*

She knew what had to be done. She knew the punishment for treason. Still, it was more pleasant to linger on this hillside in the predawn light and look down at the city as it slumbered, if only for a moment.

*How many Targaryens had walked those silent streets?* She wondered. *And how many might still?* Jon’s child grew inside her. In time she would birth a healthy little girl and hold her in her arms. Yet that would be only the beginning. *I would bear him sons and daughters beyond counting. A family so large it would be like to drive him mad.*

She imagined her Jon beset by wild daughters and wayward sons. A silver-haired princeling hanging from his sword arm here, a raven-haired and violet-eyed little girl clinging to her father’s leg opposite the boy. The thought made her laugh.

And the sound made her sad. Jon was chained beneath the Red Keep. His companions were likely betrayed and doomed. *Perhaps I should simply take the city with my dragon and my words.* Her armies would follow her, even those that had only followed her for a day. Yet perhaps there was another way…

*She’s in there, though,* Daenerys thought. *Her hatred for Cersei is iron, I think. But tempered and forged into a weapon. A dagger in the dark.* Perhaps only a few days ago she would have bid Arya Stark show mercy. *But now?* The thought echoed in her mind like the steady thrum of a dragon’s wings. There could be no future for House Lannister.

Her hand fell to her womb as she felt her daughter kick. They felt harder now, as if she too wanted to escape and help her mother free Jon. *No daggers in the dark for you, little one. Only sweet songs and sweet dreams and the love of your father and mother and little brothers and sisters yet to come. We shall keep you safe.*

How long had it been? Six moons? Seven? Time had lost all meaning in those cold, dark northern months. *Missandei will know. She will have counted properly.* And yet it would all be over by the time she gave birth to her daughter. *I will have made the world safe for her. We will have.* Daenerys could make safe a home for her family.

*“Your Grace?”* a gruff voice behind her disturbed the predawn silence.

She turned and saw Lord Anders Yronwood standing at a distance. Two knights stood at his side, wearing steel armor that seemed woven in amongst brilliant amber and orange cloth. Daenerys had seen much of the same when some two thousand Dornish knights and mounted sergeants had ridden into camp two days past. *But we exchanged only courtesies then. What is it now?*

*“My lord,”* she said. *Perhaps he seeks some honored command.* Daenerys was already tiring of these southern lords and their false praise. Where had they been when death marched down from the North? *Yet each thinks himself Aegon come again.* No doubt Lord Yronwood was here to suggest the proper course of action. As if I have not taken a city before.

*“I had hoped we might speak in private, Your Grace,”* he said, meeting her gaze intently.
She looked around the hillside. Her Unsullied guards stood some distance away. The Lord of Yronwood had brought only two of his household guard. “Is this not in private?” she asked.

Yronwood coughed awkwardly and cleared his throat. “Of course, Your Grace.” He nodded to his men and they turned and walked some distance away, further than her own Unsullied. She waited for the details of their armor to fade in the predawn gloom before continuing.

“What is it??

“Concerning the ravens, Your Grace. The letters you sent summoning us to your banners.” Tyrion’s ravens. Tyrion’s plot. Tyrion’s betrayal. Yet it would not do now to display her own ignorance of the matter. If these men sense discord in my camp and court they might demand still more of me.

“Yes?”

“The lords of Dorne are of course honored to serve you in all things,” Lord Yronwood began. “And are in turn honored by your offers of lands and titles as befitting our contributions to your cause… only I had hoped to speak of your most generous offer to my own house.”

“Do continue, then,” she said. What offer? What is it Tyrion promised you to ride with such haste to my side?

“You have honored me and my blood by raising House Yronwood up to lordship over all Dorne… and I look forward to the day where we can toast to the union of House Targaryen and House Yronwood.”

What?! Her fingers curled into fists. Fire rose in her chest. A great gout of flame shot up her spine and burned away all other thoughts. Her shoulders stiffened, as did her legs. Daenerys fought to remain calm.

“I am already wed, my lord, to King Aegon of House Targaryen,” she kept her voice even and regal.

Lord Yronwood’s heavy brow furrowed. “I… of course, Your Grace. I did not mean to offend. I only spoke of your offer to wed your child to one of mine own house. My own grandson, my heir’s firstborn, would make a suitable match for a Targaryen Princess, and I’m certain there will be a daughter in due course should you produce a son. A Prince or Princess of Dorne matched once more with a Prince or Princess of the realm,” he smiled. “Just as it was before the Usurper’s time.”

Every breath demanded more of her. My child. My daughter. Tyrion promised an unborn girl’s hand in marriage for the promise of an army. He would tear my family apart before it is even made whole. Daenerys struggled to contain her rage. To the east, the sky was a brilliant shade of red. Yet red was all she saw now.

You are a queen, she reminded herself. His queen. “Now it not the time to discuss such arrangements, my lord. We shall discuss the lordship of Dorne when the realm is at peace.” She made no mention of marriage pacts as she spun and began to walk away, forcing herself to quicken the pace back toward her own tent, thence to the prison pens. Behind her, Lord Yronwood muttered some quiet courtesy before he too retreated from the hillside.

The camp came to life around her as she stormed through it. Unsullied spearmen stood at attention at she passed, while Northmen bowed their heads. She paid them no heed.

Daenerys passed by her own tent and saw Ser Jorah standing just outside the it. “Khaleesi,” he
sounded surprised. “I thought to-”

“Come,” she commanded without breaking her stride. He did.

The prison guards parted as she approached. The foolish northmen that had manned the pens for weeks had been dismissed. Her Unsullied would see to the prisoners now. *One in particular.* Stalwart Shield’s sentries would starve at their posts rather than disobey their queen’s command.

She passed the outer pens where the captured Golden Company men and Lannister levies lay sleeping in chains, but there in the center, in a pen all his own and a situation of his own making, sat Tyrion.

“Your Grace,” he inclined his head. *There’s no remorse there at all.* She glared at him. “Fine accommodations, if a bit draughty.”

“I told you that you would take your brother’s place here if he escaped,” she said, unable and unwilling to hide the anger in her tone.

“You did,” Tyrion agreed.

“And you freed him after I forbid the notion.”

“I did,” he replied.

“That is treason.” Her tone was flat and devoid of emotion. *It is what must be done.*

“Is it?” Tyrion sat up straighter against the central pole. “Summoning the south to your banners is treason? Sending men to rescue your husband is treason? Freeing my brother to convince my sister to lay down her arms is treason? If those actions taste of treason, I shall fetch another barrel of it for Your Grace, for it seems a sweet liquor indeed.”

“And selling my unborn daughter’s hand in marriage for the promise of an army, is that sweet?” she fumed.

Tyrion raised his eyebrow curiously. “Daughter… I had only guessed, but then one was bound to come along eventually.” *Not if your sister kills my husband.*

“So you have nothing to say?”

“I never have nothing to say, Your Grace,” he smiled. The gesture seemed false. “I once ask you what you would do if forced to chose between your king and your kingdoms, do you remember?”

*That night aboard the ship,* she realized. *I remember.* “All too well.”

“And now here you are, all seven of them in your grasp, yet your king has fallen through your fingers.” He struggled against his bonds, but managed to stand. “Let me help you, Your Grace. My offenses and failures are many, I know, but all I did, I did for you. Trust in my plan. Your kingdoms and your king and your child, you can have them all – Dornish lords be damned.”

The sincerity in his voice was match only by the tender, pitiable look in his mismatched eyes. She wanted to believe him. *Truly. But I cannot.* Cersei was a traitor. Jaime was a traitor. *And so are you, Tyrion.* Lord Tywin’s tree was rotten, root and stem. *I cannot let it stand even if a single branch bears good fruit. If my house is to have a future, his cannot.*

“No.”
The word was like a dagger plunged into the man’s breast. He stepped back and sagged in his bonds. “I see… Accused of treason for a crime I did not commit, only to flee across the sea and find you and follow you back to Westeros… and be accused of treason for services rendered to the realm,” he sighed. He pursed his lips and nodded. “Fitting. Tragic, even. Mayhaps they’ll write a song for me.”

Part of her wanted to step forth and comfort him and assure him that his failures had not been so great, but the idea quickly burned away in the face of her roiling anger. He disobeyed my commands… and how many times? He offered my unborn child’s hand for untested swords wielded by opportunistic southron lords. My daughter is only a means to an end for him. As am I.

Daenerys looked through the wooden bars of the pen at Tyrion, but it was not the dwarf she saw. It was her brother Viserys, cruel and weak. It was the fat, greedy Magister Illyrio gorging on unending ambition. It was Drogo, who saw her as a vessel for his sons. And Xaro Xhoan Daxos and the Wise Masters and Great Masters and Daario Naharis and the Khals and every other man who had sought to use me for his own designs.

Only Jon had looked past her lilac eyes and fearsome dragons and proud, royal, ancient name. Only Jon had looked past her womb and her body and her barrenness. Only Jon had seen her for what she was. And I could not protect him.

“When will the trial be held?” he asked of her. Trial. She had forgotten that. That is his right. I might wish to mete out justice, but the law is the law.

“When the war is won,” she replied, not meeting his gaze.

“That might be this very day,” he said, looking upward at the lightening sky. “Should my plot work.” I expect they’ve been killed already. Perhaps it is only Arya left free and unfettered behind those walls.

“It might,” she answered both questions as she turned away.

“Daenerys.”

She spun around at the sound of her name. Tyrion was standing proud again in defiance of his chains.

“What?”

“My sister will surrender,” he insisted. “She cannot stand again so many.”

“She might,” she replied.

“She won’t,” he shook his head. “She will surrender. And when she does, you must not enter the city.”

Not enter? Not rush to the keep and have Stalwart Shield’s men storm the walls of my family’s keep to break Jon’s chains? “No?” she asked. “Why not? Did you not free your brother to treat with her? To make this peace of yours?”

Tyrion bowed his head for a moment. “I know her. I know my sister. Even if white banners are flown upon the battlements, do not enter the city. She would see your victory turn to ashes in your mouth. Even a cornered lioness still has claws. You must exercise a queen’s caution. You must wait.”
His words seemed true. *As all his counsel has… and that has all led me here.* This was just another scheme. *Some ploy to let her flee across the sea while my men circle about the walls.* She turned and walked away. She would not listen to him now. She could not. It was just another lie.

“Khaleesi?” Jorah’s question was an uncertain whisper through which she passed. She turned to her old friend as she left the pens.

“All the men for battle, ser,” she said. “All of them.”

“Your Grace,” Jorah’s weathered face creased with worry. “We’ve not the weapons nor equipment for a siege, a few ladders at best.”

Daenerys looked out across what she could see of the camps… and thence to where she knew Drogon slumbered. “It is as I said. Ready the men.”

Chapter End Notes

I suppose my story's Daenerys has focused on her motherly, good-natured side. I don't regret that at all, because at the heart of it she's a character who longs for home and family above all else - and in "Home" she found them. That said, she's not a doormat. She's a matador. Fire and blood have meaning to her. And it's fun to write in such circumstances.

In other news, I'm considering another story. Considering it... Two options on the table are 1. Jon goes to Essos in the very beginning story, which would be a large undertaking but would allow me to explore so awesome ideas (I've got an Others plot that I'm confident would blow everything else out of the water). Everyone knows the Others are awesome... and 2. A non-Home sequel that explore Jon and Dany's reign over Westeros. Happy to hear input on either.
Cersei V

Chapter Notes

So I've received a few "Where is Edmure" comments. To be clear, I had another few chapters that reintroduced him into the story, but outside his arrival it wasn't all that interested and dragged down the plot so I cut it out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cersei was the last to enter the room. The scents of roasted meats, warm breads and fresh-baked pies wafted toward her as she strode around the table. Wood scraped against stone as her commanders rose to greet and honor her. Those who are left, anyway.

One of her queensguard pulled her chair back and held it in place as she sat. Her posture was awkward now, though that was expected for an expecting mother. And not expecting for much longer. Perhaps a moon's turn more, if not less. The babe was healthy - so Qyburn had assured her. Soon the realm would have a prince or princess. The bells will ring in celebration from dawn until dusk, when this war is over. That hour was fast approaching.

Her commanders were seated around her. Strickland sat at her right-hand side, his golden armor traded for a golden doublet that seemed to glimmer in the candlelight. A coward, Cersei thought, but a well-mannered one. His stupidity had lost them control of the northern Crownlands, Harrenhal itself, and countless of his own overpaid sellswords.

At the cost of one of the last two dragons, though, Cersei considered the trade as servants slipped into the room from either end, bearing still more dishes and flagons of fine vintages from Essos. Perhaps these men pretend to think the offering one of goodwill – a taste of home – but all knew that Dorne and the Reach were closed to her now. And closer now that they've ridden to join the girl’s side. It was good, then, that some of Strickland’s men had survived. His five thousand spearmen, men-at-arms and exiled knights would fight fiercely on the walls and in the streets. If such fighting is needed.

The girl had ignored her warnings and threats – as Cersei knew she would. The Targaryen lust for blood and conquest had surely driven any other thoughts from her silver-haired head. Save her bastard husband.

Of course, Jon Snow would die before she ever set foot inside the Red Keep. By fire or a sword through the heart or the walls collapsing in on him, I know not. She only knew that the boy would die. That’s all the truth I know.

Cersei looked on from Strickland. Black Balaq sat next to the captain. The ebony skinned man was silent as his dark eyes scanned the room. They lingered on Ser Gregor in the far corner. He must see a great deal, an archer of his skill. Cersei wondered whether the man might yet be able to loose an arrow and loosen the Dragon Queen’s grip of her dragon’s back.

Their eyes met for a moment, onyx on emerald, then Black Balaq looked away. His lips formed a thin line, as if he were holding some bitter morsel of food and forcing himself to swallow. Cersei gave the gesture little further thought.
Ser Lyle Crakehall sat to her left now. He had moved ever closer to her side as other commanders died or failed or simply faded away. She had named him as the lord commander of the Lannister forces. The oaf of a knight reminded her of her late royal husband. And if he is a tenth as capable in battle as Robert was I shall rule for another forty years.

Lesser lords sat around her, Westermen of no great renown and lords dragged forth from the Crownlands and Stormlands to serve their rightful queen – if only because she had seized their heirs some months earlier.

And Bronn… That sellsword was missing. His raid had failed, obviously. Perhaps he thought to abandon her in favor of the Targaryen girl. Perhaps he had simply fled. My armies will hunt him down and hang him from the gatehouse of his promised keep when this is through, she swore.

Cersei glanced around the room once more before gesturing to the table. “You may begin, my lords,” she said. The collection of lords, captains and mercenaries charged forth with hands and forks alike. An eagerness they might have shown on the field of battle.

She contented herself to sit and watch for a moment, though hunger gnawed at her. She turned slightly and called to the highborn serving girl. “Brenna,” she said, forcing some sweetness into her tone. The little daughter of House Fell hurried over.

“Your Grace?”

“Fetch Qyburn, will you? I’ve need of his counsel after we’ve supped,” she said. Brenna’s eyes went wide and she stammered for a moment. None of the wards enjoyed her Hand’s cold presence. Still, she curtsied low and scurried away.

“His ballistae will prove useful, I think,” Crakehall spewed out bits of half-chewed bread with his half-formed thoughts.

“They certainly did in the field,” Cersei agreed. But that was a trap. She’ll know now. And if the girl decided to unleash dragonflame on Qyburn’s weapons… if the flames spread into the city? It could all be for naught. Perhaps I should order them unmanned.

“Well,” Crakehall paused to cleanse his gullet with a helping of wine. “One good shot is all it takes, no? Mayhaps the Summer Islander will catch the Dragon Queen with his goldenheart bow and-”

“She is no queen, ser,” Cersei stopped the man’s ramblings. Across the table, Black Balaq picked at a roll of bread.

“Of course, Your Grace. A traitor. I only meant to-”

“Perhaps you might tell us of our forces? Our provisions? What measures we might use against these traitors and savages?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Crakehall put down his silvered goblet and cleared his throat while puffing up his chest importantly. Cersei was reminded at once of Mace Tyrell. “We’ve twelve thousand men in full, between the levies from the Westerlands, the Stormlands, the Crownlands and those drawn from the streets of the city itself.”

Compared to what? Thirty thousand? More? Cersei knew the girl’s own forces were tired, battered, and weak. But with the remnants of the Riverlands and the treasonous snakes of the south come to her side...
“Our scouts and sentries count twice as many men outside the walls… and it is said the Dornish are bringing another ten thousand spears to the city even as we speak. In all likelihood, Your Grace, we’ve another week before they arrive and any attempt is made against our walls. Only a fool would attack at half strength,” the man finished.

“We shouldn’t wait a week for a proper plan,” Strickland said as he ripped a choice leg from a roasted chicken dripping with juices and herbs. “The Golden Company is yours, Your Grace,” he said, looking at Cersei. Because I have paid for them you imbecile. “I would take my men to shore up the defenses at the Mud Gate and along the river. Another five hundred men would garrison the Red Keep itself, with Your Grace’s permission, of course.”

“The Mud Gate?” Crakehall’s confusion was echoed around the table. “The Dragon… girl is as likely to sail back to Slavers’ Bay as attack the Mud Gate, ser. We should be fortifying the Gate of the Gods, Lion Gate and King’s Gate.”

“Queen’s Gate,” Cersei corrected him.

“Queen’s Gate, yes,” Crakehall’s chins momentarily doubles in number as he nodded in agreement. “Those must be the best protected.”

“Have you fought many wars, ser?” Strickland put down his small haunch and examined the larger lord.

“This would be my third,” he said defiantly.

“Then you’ll know the enemy rarely strikes where you expect him too,” Strickland said. “The Mud Gate is weak-”

“And shielded by the river and half a mile of wall! Our archers would rain death down upon them if they slipped to the south of the city,” Crakehall replied.

“Not if all those men were stationed elsewhere, or the dragon should be unleashed upon them,” Strickland smirked.

The coward would choose the gate furthest from the fighting. That was no surprise to her. Of course, let him keep the Mud Gate and the river and the docks. The girl’s eunuchs and savages needed to ride through the God’s Gate or Lion’s Gate.

“Mayhaps you’ll defend the walls if a kraken should swim up the Blackwater Rush!” Crakehall’s laugh was harsh and belligerent. A few of the Westerland lords joined in.

Strickland’s eyes widened for a moment and he shot a glance to Cersei, but she ignored the gesture. “You will split your forces between the Mud Gate and the Queen’s Gate, Lord Strickland, save the three hundred men you will set on my keep’s walls. You’re charged with the defense of the south of the city. Everything along the rush is yours.”

“I shall hold it in your name, Your Grace,” Strickland said.

“Good,” Cersei smiled regally as she pulled a plate of fruits and grains toward her. Her own goblet remained empty. It did not do to weaken her thoughts with wine now, not with the enemy and her own babe so close at hand. “Lord Crakehall, you will set my family’s men on the Lion’s Gate and the Old Gate north of the city, save for four hundred you will keep here in addition to my household guards.”

“You’ve forgotten the Gate of the Gods, Your Grace,” Crakehall fidgeted in his seat. “She’ll surely
strike there if she see’s it unguarded from dragon back.” *She surely will.*

“Qyburn has directed a select force of soldiers to hold that gate, my lord,” she said before driving her silver fork into a baked winter yam.

“I see…” the oaf muttered as he returned to his cup. *You will.*

“That seems a good plan, then,” Strickland said and looked around the room. “I shall have the Golden Company in place soon. This very night, if it please Your Grace.” He cast a glance to Black Balaq.

Cersei waved a hand dismissively. “Whatever you find suitable.”

They dined in silence for a time, then that silence gave way to pitiable courtly discussion about the savagery of the Targaryen girl’s men, the beauty of Casterly Rock, and the achievements of the queen’s of lord father. Crakehall’s boasts were many. Strickland’s words were few.

Finally, when the candles burned a bit lower and the roasted meats had been stripped from the bones, Cersei raised a glass. Her commands followed suite. “To victory, my lords,” she said. “There shall be many an estate in the Reach that needs a proper lord after we’ve driven off these pretenders. Highgarden I shall reserve for the man that slays the last dragon.”

There were cheers at that as the men drove their goblets together and quaffed down the rest of the eastern wine. Cersei set her own cup aside and put her right hand to her womb. One of her queensguard walked forward from behind her and gently pulled back on her finely carved, cushioned chair. She rose slowly. The lords and captains mirrored her movements – none more quickly than Harry Strickland.

“Rest easy tonight, my lords. Tomorrow there is work to be done.” She swept from the room then, cradling her womb with both hands. Ser Gregor followed after her and the other knights after him.

It was only after she had made her way down the long corridor to the royal apartments that she noticed Strickland and Black Balaq hurrying in her wake. As she turned to the great oaken door that guarded her rooms, they passed wordlessly as if eager to man the Mud Gate. Cersei let them leave.

…

She waited for an hour, perhaps two. Still, Qyburn did not come to her. *It’s not like him to keep me waiting.* She had placed great trust in her hand. The man had helped her destroy her enemies at the Sept of Baelor, orchestrated the production of those great ballistae, and seen to the care of the realm’s heir growing inside her.

*I’ve made him my Hand, though he might need a few more of his own to grasp every task I’ve given him.* That, it seemed, was the benefit of a Small Council. Cersei had not named any other lords or advisors to sit beside her. *There isn’t even a Master of War,* she thought bitterly. Perhaps it was for the best. The queen’s royal councilors were meant to be able, loyal men. *And we seem to have run short of those.*

Perhaps it was the girl’s fault. The Fell girl was a sweet thing, but dimwitted. *Not unlike her lord father.* She might have fled back to her chambers instead of seeking out Qyburn. After all, his laboratory was not the most pleasant place in the keep. *Though it has its advantages,* she thought as she looked up at Ser Gregor’s still and silent form.

*He must be busy,* she decided after far too long had passed. *His work with the alchemists must*
The winter evening darkened into a cold night. The wind picked up, blowing in from the east and sending a chill through the apartments. Cersei wandered aimlessly; to her own bed chambers, to the chamber with the painted map of her realm, and thence to the balcony overlooking the sea. She always wandered in the night. Sleep never came easy now.

The cool sea air brought her renewed vigor as it washed over her. The sky was as black as the sea, save for the few lanterns hanging on the prows of the remaining warships docked in the harbor and the bay. *Like the Rock,* she thought, inhaling deeply. *Like home.*

She promised herself then and there that she would visit Casterly Rock when this war was through. Whatever garrison the girl had left would be defeated and thrown from the cliffs into the Sunset Sea. It would make a fine retreat in the heat of summer. *The Lannister line’s own Summerhall.*

Her gaze shifted from the sea along the riverside to the city itself. She could see the ruins of the Sept high atop Visenya’s hill — a testament to her triumph. Further down the slope she saw a few flickering lanterns in the alchemists’ guildhall, where she had doubled the guard. *Their work is more crucial than ever now.*

She wondered how it would look. Of course, she had heard the reports of her younger brother’s ploy at the Battle of the Blackwater and she had watched Baelor’s creation collapse into ruin in a glorious jade cloud. *But never has there been so much.* How fitting it would be for the girl’s armies to be consumed by Lannister cunning and the remnants of her own royal father’s madness.

Cersei could not rightly say how long she stood out there. Her back ached and her knees pained her. Twice she felt the babe kick. Yet still the breeze caressed her and kept her awake. There was something in the city; something in the air. Tonight — or today, whichever it was now — felt important.

Dark clouds swirled high above the city. Once or twice she thought she saw a sliver of pale winter moonlight cut through the covering, but when she looked it was gone. The sky shifted to ever lighter shades of grey. *Has it been so long?* she wondered. *Would dawn be here soon?*

Something moved behind her. The great oaken door, heavy with iron studs, creaked open on old iron hinges. *Qyburn — at last,* she thought. She turned and hurried inside, welcoming the warmth of two torches as she passed into central courtyard and thence to where she knew Qyburn must be waiting for her.

Yet Qyburn was not there. Ser Gregor stood far to the right nearest the door itself, which was again locked shut. Two of her queensguard, armored in black steel, held a third figure between them. *It can’t be...* Cersei’s brother looked up at her, the golden flecks in his green eyes shimmering in the torchlight.

“Leave us,” she commanded her knights. “All of you. Now. And fetched Qyburn.” The two queensguard bowed as low as their armor permitted and then turned and paced away. Ser Gregor made to follow them. “Not you, Ser Gregor. Stay with your queen.” He did — and bolted the door shut as the others left.

She stared at Jaime and he at her. Her heart hammering against her chest as it swelled with sudden joy. *He’s come back to me. He’s escaped their camps and returned. To see me. To see his child.*

Yet as she looked into his eyes she saw something... *different.* There was no joy there, none of that fire she had come to love as a twin and a lover and the mother of his children. This here was a man
who had abandoned her and her child to ride north with the girl and her bastard. *And could have returned weeks before now.* A bitter taste seeped into her mouth.

“You betrayed me,” she said, making no effort to hide the bite in her tone.

Jaime’s eyes narrowed. “Betrayed you?”

“Yes, I.”

“I swore to fight for the living,” he cut her off. “I swore an oath. As did you, before you betrayed the realm even as you called yourself the queen of it. Do you know how many thousands – how many tens of thousands – died in the North? In the Riverlands?”

“Enough, I suppose,” she sneered. Ser Gregor took a step toward her brother. “Father would be proud. I allowed our enemies to destroy each other. The girl’s army is weak.”

“Is it?” Jaime cocked his head in a mocking gesture. “You did a fine job taking back the Seven Kingdoms while we fought for our lives. How many southern houses have joined her camp now? How many swords and spears have those lords brought? Twenty thousand? More? Perhaps you might have held the Reach if you’d bound the Tyrell’s in chains instead of burning them.”

Hot, raw anger pulsed through her veins. Who was he to question her? *He’s always been like this,* she tried to calm herself. *Rash, quick to anger and action.* Jaime never thought. She did.

“It doesn’t matter now. She has one dragon left.”

Jaime sighed and shook his head. “One dragon destroyed our army on the roseroad, Cersei. That same dragon would have burned the Lannister camp an all its men to ash in the dead of night if I’d not told Bronn to flee.” *Bronn, another traitor. How many men has Tyrion turned against me?*

Jaime rose and walked toward her. Ser Gregor shadowed his movements. As he approached, his eyes fell from her own and settled on her womb. They widened in surprise. Cersei saw him swallow with some effort.

“How… how long?” his question was almost a whisper.

She rested a hand beneath the babe. “Not long now, a moon’s turn at most. Perhaps less.”

“Healthy?” he asked.

“So Qyburn assures me,” she replied, tone still cool and unwelcoming.

“Cersei…” his gaze was pleading – almost pathetic. “You cannot win this war. Greyjoy has fled. The Reach and Dorne have rallied to her side.”

“I can,” she sneered.

“You cannot. Listen to me,” he stepped forward and gently placed his hand under her chin. She shivered at his touch. It had been far, far too long. “You cannot. I spent months with her people. I know them. I know her. I know she is not her father. She can be reasoned with.”

She drew away at once. “So you’ve found a queen to serve,” she sneered. “And you gained her trust? After driving your blade through her father’s back? How?”

“By slaying the assassins you sent after her,” Jaime’s voice rose in anger as he stepped away. *You fool…* Ser Gregor took another step forward. “What were you thinking?”
“I was thinking about our child,” she spat.

“Then keep thinking of our child,” he said, his eyes awash with emotion. “You cannot win this fight. Treat with her…” he sighed and drew in a long, deep breath. “Release Jon Snow and make terms.”

“Release the only thing that’s saving this keep from burning to the ground in the girl’s wrath?” she laughed bitterly.

“I told you that she is not her father.”

“And yet you’ve just said she was going to burn my men to ash as they slept!” her voice echoed off the walls.

Jaime sighed. “Release the boy – her husband – and treat with her.”

“I won’t.” Cersei’s denial was stern. *I cannot now.* “Surely you can understand the value such a prisoner holds after being one yourself for so many years.”

“None of that matters now,” he shook his head. “Robb Stark is dead. Father is dead. The Dead are dead… and you will be too if you don’t come to see reason. Make peace. Leave this damned city. Leave this all behind and raise our child in peace.”

Peace… *she’ll have my babe’s head smashed against the wall.* There could be no peace with the Dragon Queen, not now. *Surely he knows that too. This is some plot, some trick of my vicious little brother’s design. He turned Bronn against me surely. And now he’s turned Jaime. Of course!* How had she been so foolish. *Of course.*

“You didn’t escape, did you.” It was not a question. “Was it the girl or our dear brother who sent you to my gates like some whipped dog?”

Jaime looked at her with a narrowed gaze and furrowed brow. “Daenerys had me in chains for what I did to save our soldiers. Tyrion freed me to send me here. I expect he’s taken my place in the pens.”

“You’re using her name now?”

“What?”

“Daenerys, you called her,” Cersei said. *Perhaps he swore his sword to her in the North. Perhaps he’s come here at her behest. Did she take another lover in to her bed when I took Jon Snow from her?*

“Her name? Yes,” Jaime shook his head. “Forget all that.” *I cannot.* “Forget it and listen to what I’m telling you. This isn’t about the Dragon Queen and the Seven Kingdoms. This is about our child. Make peace with her. Take off your crown and live to see it and other born into the world.”

“And world with no place for it,” Cersei spat.

Jaime put his hand on her shoulder. “We will make a place for it, I swear to you we will.”

For a moment, it was all she wanted: to take a few chests of gold and Ser Gregor and her brother and flee into the night, onto a royal galley and sail for one of the Free Cities. They might live in luxury there.
It would never be enough, she knew at once. I would turn myself into a beggar queen and the girl would surely send knives after me as Robert did her and her brother. No... There was only one choice now.

“No,” she replied. Jaime bowed his head. “I’ve not held the city and throne this long to throw it all away. Did you think I was counting the stones of Maegor’s Holdfast whilst you fled north? I am our father’s daughter. I have a plan.”

“You cannot mean to fight…” Jaime said, sounding near exhaustion. As our dear brother did when Stannis sailed into the bay and as I did when those filthy Sparrows sought my head.

“I do,” she said. “I have the men and supplies. I have the Golden Company. I have scorpions and spitfires and ballistae mounted on the city walls and the walls of the Red Keep itself. And I have her bastard. Let her try me.” She did not mention her greatest weapon. She did not trust him to understand.

“Cersei you-” his words faded into the night. “It that…?”

It was, she realized as cold dread momentarily sapped her of her strength. Bells had begun to ring in the distance. She’s begun even without the Dornish… and I’ve not heard from Qyburn. Cersei met Jaime’s gaze for a moment, then hurried as quickly as she could to that same balcony where she had stood earlier in the night.

The sky was a pale red now, like the color of an old wound not yet turned a scar. Deeper colors were stirring on the horizon, yet above her there was only grey. The clouds hung low in the predawn sky, threatening a storm to come.

Jaime emerged beside her as she began to scan the city walls for signs of an attack, or dragon fire or ladders or anything else. Nothing... she realized, save the girl’s camp in the distance. Yet still the bells rang out.

“There,” Jaime gestured with his golden hand. The bay? No...

As she peered into the darkness, she saw it: a golden kraken upon a massive black sail. More krakens appeared behind it, as did the other two dozen houses of the Iron Islands all sworn to Euron Greyjoy.

Her chest swelled in triumph. Hundreds of ships. Thousands of men. This would turn the tide... and perhaps drive her from the city or into it... She focused on the captain’s ship, watching as the sail was furled and lowered and the oars extended into the Blackwater. I knew he’d return, the fool. He could not refuse the promise of a queen.

The Silence led the fleet of three hundred or more. The ships cut through the fog gathered on the calm bay water. The sky above began to turn a brilliant red. The bells continued to ring.

“Send a runner,” Jaime said. “Close the Mud Gate. Close all the gates.”

“And allow my only ally to fend for himself against your dragon queen?” she sneered. “I think not. And Lord Strickland will have the gates secured. He’s no fool.”

“And you are if you think Greyjoy has come back to fight for you,” Jaime said, whirling on her. “Close your gates and send your men down there at once.”

“So you can direct your men to another gate?” she asked harshly.
Jaime sighed and closed his eyes. The bells still rang. More of them joined in the awful cacophony, stirring the city into a growing, frenzied panic in the predawn gloom.

“Cersei, listen to me…”

“I won’t,” she turned away toward the bay. *Three hundred ships. Three thousand men or more. Enough to control the rush and make safe the city.* She wanted more ships. More men. She ignored her brother as she began to count them, eyes drifting from the Silence making its way toward the docks to the countless ships behind it.

“Cersei…” Jaime sounded as if he were pleading with her. She ignored him. “Cersei!”

She turned toward her brother as raw anger coursed through her tired muscles and tensed around her bloodshot eyes. “Enough,” she snapped.

Jaime’s eyes were wide in shock and, as she turned, she saw why. A single, fiery orb rose slowly from the Silence. It cut through the darkness and made a striking figure against the bloodred eastern sky.

It sunk ever so slowly, like some fat flake in a winter storm. Cersei held her breath as it descended within the walls and crashed through some tiled roof. A small gout of flame rose up from the city’s wound. Screams echoed up from the city below.

Her breath caught in her throat as another ship loosed its shot. Then another. Then another. The riverside was lit by a hundred small suns rising into the sky. Then they too came crashing down upon the roofs of her city.

Chapter End Notes

Well, now it begins. For context this is the same night and morning as in Daenerys’ last chapter.

The chaos begins in earnest next chapter. I'll try to have it out by Thursday. If not, it'll have to be next week as I'm gone this weekend.

As for my last note, well, thank you for all the input. As I've thought about it some more, I think a "sequel" about Jon and Daenerys ruling would be more interesting for me and for you. It would not be a direct continuation of Home, because this story has it's flaws and so does Season 7.

I'd like to model it on AGOT, where we're led on a journey with these characters but also discovering the past events that led us to the current point in time. I'd get to dream up another alternate ending to canon and continue it from there, and you'd be assured a happy ending for Jon and Daenerys... until they encounter some new challenges (some fun ideas there too!)

Always happy to hear thoughts.
Euron was laughing. The lords Saltcliffe, Maron and Stonetree were at his side on the deck of the Silence. Scores of mute reavers stood behind him. *All lords he promised holdings too, though the Ironborn could never hold them,* Theon thought as he watched from the sterncastle of his uncle’s ship – and through the eyeholes of his kraken helm.

In one moment he could see them clearly, in the next they were consumed by dancing shadows. All around him, the Iron Fleet was firing great flaming stones from spitfires and bolts from smaller ballistae. There was no rhythm to the slaughter. The deadly barrage was continuous, unyielding, and unanswered by the city’s defenders.

“Again!” Euron bellowed, raising his great axe. “Let them know fear.” His attendant lords and captains cheered in response as the Silence loosed another volley. The twin flaming orbs rose high over the docks and fish markets, only to sink far beyond the walls of King’s Landing. Gouts of flame shot up in the distance. Theon thought he heard more screams.

Behind him, the sun was rising into a swirl of blood red clouds. Yet the scene before him seemed another bloody dawn.

“Maron!” his uncle shouted from below. “Take your reavers ashore. Burn what’s left of the markets then form outside the gate.”

“Shall we set men to guard the ships?” young Lord Maron Volmark asked, looking around hesitantly. *No,* Theon thought. *No guards. Send them all.*

“Guards? Against what?” Euron laughed harshly. “Do you take these men for thralls? I’ll not deny them the chance to plunder this city. No guards, Maron. Send every man with the will in him to paint this city as red as its keep.”

“And the men on the walls?” the young lord asked.

Euron clapped him on the shoulder. “What did I say about sellswords and their gold price?” He slapped the man’s cheek twice – and hard.

Theon saw Maron Volmark smirk in the firelight. “Aye, my king.”

“Saltcliffe!” Euron bellowed. The older lord eyed him warily, but stood at attention. “Get back to your own ship. I want the fleet on the docks. The others can set anchor in the rush. See the fools don’t crash into each other in the shallows.” He turned back to the city. “But keep firing. I want to see it burn, Saltcliffe.” He licked his lips. “Do you hear me? Burn.”

“Aye,” the lord agreed.

“Good,” Euron clapped his shoulder. “Whoever remains in the bay will harry the eastern walls and
“What is dead may never die,” Lord Saltcliffe clapped his own short axe to his chest in salute.

“Ha! What is dead is dead. See you’re not among them when the sun sets this day.” Euron turned back toward the burning city for a moment. Theon thought he rather enjoyed the sight. *Baratheons, Lannisters, Targaryens*... Every house that had made his own kneel. This was their city. Now it was in flames.

“Hear me!” Euron turned to face the stern of the Silence - and Theon. “Your tongues I have taken,” he began, raising his great axe high above him with but one hand. “Yet I’ve not deprived you of your taste for blood, no?” The mutes of the ship stamped their feet and pounded their weapons against each other in reply. Theon did the same, battering his sword against a still more battered shield.

Euron pointed his axe toward the city. “There lies more than you could taste in a thousand lifetimes. Weak men and their gold, their ale, and their women! Shall you taste them?” The mutes stomped their reply. “Then come with me and take this city!”

Theon watched them all descend the rope ladders into the shallows of the river. They waded ashore by the dozen without much difficulty. Others were coming ashore too, by skiff or else on the docks themselves, for the Ironborn had taken them without a fight. Hundreds of black-clad men poured ashore – shadows in the scattered morning light.

*He hasn’t brought anything with him, the fool*, he thought. *No rams nor ladders. How does he mean to take the gates?*

Yet as he watched the Ironmen storm ashore, he noticed something else too: a glimmer of firelit gold atop the walls. Ebony skinned archers armored in black leather banded in gold stood firm with their bows undrawn. Spearmen stood at ease. Some were even laughing. *The sellswords*, he thought with a sinking feeling in his gut. *They’ve made a pact.*

The city’s defenders offered no resistance as the other Ironborn came ashore, wave after wave like some summer storm on the islands. The fish markets were burning brightly. To the east, the sun cast its golden rays on the slaughter.

Theon looked behind him as still more longships, cogs and carracks made their way up the Blackwater Rush, their oars dipping into the water in unison and driving the ships forward against the fierce currents. The river was awash with golden kraken sails.

As each ship set itself at anchor, docked, or else drove itself ashore on the muddy banks, more fiery volleys were unleashed on the wakening, panicked city. They arched high in the air and landed far beyond the untouched walls. Still more men streamed ashore, their axes and swords and spears hungering for blood.

*It has to be now. There won’t be another chance.* He steeled himself for the fight ahead and made his way down the steps of the sterncastle onto the main deck. Six mutes still manned the spitfires. None turned toward him as he sped down toward his uncle’s chambers – and toward his sister.

The two brutes who guarded her had gone ashore as well. *There’s no one else.* He opened the door and found her there, alert and ready.

Yara wore thick ropes, a gag, and worn and dirtied linens. He removed his helm.

He sighed. That damned kraken helm had not come off in months, save for small morsels of bread
or sips of grog and water. Cool air washed over his pale face. It felt good. It felt like freedom. It felt like home.

“Hrrm!” Yara kicked at him and caught him in his shin. He obeyed the wordless command, drawing his knife and cutting her bonds. Then his gently removed her gag.

She spat on the floor. Then his sister rose, unweakened by the long months as a prisoner. She drew herself up and looked into his eyes… and drove a knee into his groin.

Theon sprawled back against the wall and lost his dagger as he clutched at his loins. Maimed he might be, but that pain never truly faded. Yara grabbed his knife and stormed toward him, holding the steel at his throat.

“Who are you?” she demanded of him.

“Yara… I… what?” he stammered, his voice hoarse from month’s disuse.

“Who are you?” she asked again, pressing the flat of the blade. “Reek? Or one of Euron’s mutes?”

“Theon…” he replied, forcing some fire into his tone. “Theon Greyjoy.”

“Are you certain, little brother?” Was he? Yes. Sister of Yara, Queen of the Iron Islands. Brother to Sansa and Jon and Arya and Bran. Seed of Balon Greyjoy of Pyke, son to Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell. That is who I am.

“I am yours,” he bowed his head. His sister drew away the steel and put two fingers under his chin, forcing him to look at her.

“No, you’re not,” she said firmly. “You’re no one’s man but your own. Remember that. Now, what’s happening out there?” she glanced out the window. Flames danced on the darkened glass.

“Euron’s attacking the city,” he answered. “He means to take it.”

“Does he? The fool. There are more people behind those walls than there are on all eight of the islands. He’ll never hold it.”

“He doesn’t mean to hold it,” Theon said. Yara gave him a curious look, then grasped his hand and pulled him toward the door. She retrieved a sword of her own as they sped below and up the stairs onto the top decks. The sun was shining brightly now, fighting the city’s fires for dominance over the morning sky.

He heard Yara draw in a sharp breath. “By the God…”

Theon saw it too – clearly now, without the stifling helm. Columns of amber and crimson flame danced high above the walls. A wall of black smoke obscured his view of anything beyond the riverside. Screams echoed through the cool morning air. Snow had begun to fall, as if in mockery of the fiery butchery below.

“I told you I-” he cut himself off.

The men on the spitfires turned at the sound of speech. Their black eyes narrowed at the sight on him and the escaped prisoner – a sight they knew too well. The two closest produces cruel steel daggers and jagged smiles. The other four lifted shields, spears, and axes.

“Better to die close to the sea, brother,” Yara said grimly, lifting her pilfered sword in defense.
Theon drew his own to join her. The first two mutes charged.

The one closest to his ran right for him, lowering his shoulder and hitting him in the chest. Theon sprawled back and just managed to keep his grip on the pommel of his blade. The mute grunted angrily and slashed upward at his throat – but missed.

Theon turned and brought his steel to bear, swinging the blade crosswise at the man’s head. His enemy brought his own dagger up to parry the blow, but it was no use. Theon’s sword sliced through the thin cross guard and the mute’s hand, drawing a pitiful cry from the tongueless warrior. He drew the blade back and thrust it through his throat to silence the crewman.

As he turned, he saw that Yara – unarmored – had already dispatched her first two assailants. She was dueling with the third, though he kept her at a distance with frenzied spear thrusts.

Theon charged at the man – and felt the bite of steel in his shoulder. He spun and fell upon the slick deck of the Silence, raising his sword just in time to hold off the killing blow of another mute’s axe. The sharpened edge of the weapon pressed close to him face and he turned his blade in his hand while pressing upwards on the flat with his other hand, warding off certain death.

He kicked upward then, lashing out with his foot and catching the man in his groin. The large mute double back and caught his breath as Theon regained his feet. Mayhaps a tongue is worse to lose. He shot a glance toward Yara, now halfway up the sterncastle as she fended off two men charging up the steps below.

Then, he raised his sword and shifted his feet in the way Ser Rodrik had taught him so many years ago. The mute charged and swung his axe wildly. Theon parried the below and side-stepped, kicking his foe off-balance. Then he brought his steel to bear, slashing through the boiled leather and cutting into the soft flesh beneath.

The mute might have screamed – if he could have. Instead, he dropped his axe and stumbled onto his side. Theon drove his sword through the man’s chest in one swift move, then turned to help his sister.

Yara held the top of the sterncastle’s stair against the two men. And they don’t see me, Theon realized at once. Euron’s bloodlust is set in their veins. He rushed forth and up the stair, driving his sword into the spearman’s back. The mute toppled backwards. Theon let him fall.

There was only one now. Yara parried the axeman’s harried blows, but she could not hold him. Theon rushed up the stairs, his boots pounding against the old wood.

Yet the man was mute, not deaf. He ducked Yara’s swing and drove her back before spinning toward Theon and lunging out with his axe. Theon jumped back just in time.

The mute swung at him again, just barely missing his throat. Theon looked into his sea-blue eyes for a moment… before the man’s throat exploded in a haze of crimson. Blood spattered his face. He fell to the side. Yara stood over him.

“You’re hurt,” she nodded at his shoulder.

I am, he noticed suddenly. All at once, his shoulder seemed to throb in pain in time with his heartbeat. “It’s nothing,” he assured her. Yara shrugged, though her eyes remained stricken with concern.

They stood side by side on the sterncastle and watched the burning city – if only for a moment. Thousands of black-clad Ironborn stood outside the city gates. No one fired down on them. The
city offered no resistance. *What has he done?*

Then, slowly, the gates began to open. Theon half expected legions of Lannister footman to spill out onto the shores of the Blackwater Rush and offer some contest to his uncle’s men.

Yet the men who emerged from the gate were two: a golden armored, fair-haired man and a taller figure with skin as black as Euron’s sails. After a moment, other golden-clad figures followed them out. *The Golden Company…*

Theon watched as Euron walked forward and exchanged a few words with the two sellsword captains. He saw his uncle throw back his head in laughter, then raise his great axe high above his head.

A cheer went up from the Ironborn. It was echoed on the walls. Then the crowd of reavers surged forth past the sellsword captains and through the gates, their spears and axes gleaming in the twin lights of the morning sun and the growing inferno.

The barrage from the closest ships ceased as the Ironborn stormed the city, though further up and down the Blackwater Rush his uncle’s larger ships were still hurling great flaming projectiles over the walls into the city.

“We have to do something,” he rasped and took a step forward. Yara pulled him back.

“We will,” she said, looking all around them. His sister stripped one of the smaller mutes of his armor and donned it quickly. Then, she threw her sword aside and picked up two of the fallen mute’s axes. “Our poor uncle has seen the last of his ship, I’m afraid. A pity, too, I enjoyed his cabin.”

“What do you mean?”

She offered him one of the axes in place of his own sword. “Take this. Cut the anchor line when I give the order.” Theon raised an eyebrow as he grasped the haft of the axe. “I’m going to burn away that damned Crow’s Eye from our kraken.”

She paced toward the prow of the ship where the mutes had been manning the spitfires. *The torches*, Theon saw now. He had not seen them amidst the amber glow of the growing inferno within the city walls. Yara retrieved a still-burning torch from the deck and walked back to the mast.

“Now Theon!” she bellowed as she drew herself up on a rope and held the fire to the lowest reaches of the sails. Like the fires burning on the shore, the fire on Euron’s black sails began to slowly spread, across the bottom before slowly creeping upward, turning the black-dyed linen into a sheet of fire.

He tore his gaze away and began to hack at the thick rope that bound ship to anchor and shore. His first blow sank deep into the wet, corded fibers – but it did not split. “Theon!” his sister yelled. The fire in the sails was spreading. He tugged with all his might and freed the axe for another blow. It sank deeper the second time and then on the third. “Theon! Now!”

His shoulder ached. His head felt light from the smoke and heat. *Now*. He brought the axe up above his head and drove it down with all his strength. The rope split, then slithered into the river with an underwhelming *plop*.

He looked up at his sister. Her dark eyes shimmered in the firelight. *Now*, they said. He ran to her, crouching as flaming pieces of sail began to fall on the deck.
They stood together at the edge of the Silence. The ship began to shift in the rapid currents, its stern pulled downstream toward the bay. *And the other ships.* “Jump,” Yara said. He did.

The river swallowed him. His boots sank into a thick, murky silt. The brackish water stung his wound. The current gripped him and tried to drag him off his feet. He did not give in.

Theon drove one leg forward, then the other. His head broke the surface of the river and he gasped for breath. The air was still crisp so close to the water. He felt snowflakes fall on his hair and melt against his brow. Beside him, Yara was making her way ashore. He followed her. They caught their breaths on the shoreline, small waves lapping at their boots.

“Daenerys…” he panted. “Queen Daenerys will be near. You should go to her,” he said.

Yara laughed. “Queen Daenerys has no need for a Greyjoy without ships.” The thought stirred something in her and she looked behind them into the river. The Silence was aflame and drifting steadily downstream toward the bay. Yet Theon saw what the few remaining Ironborn on the smaller longships and slow cogs could not. Their king’s ship was heading right for them.

His sister smirked then offered him a hand. “Come.”

They walked further onto the abandoned shore. The walls of King’s Landing rose up high above them. A wall of fire rose even higher. Screams rang out from the embers and smoke. Steel clattered against steel.

Grey storm clouds swirled above them as still more flakes begin to fall. The mocking rays of the morning sun shone brightly against the black columns of smoke, yet they too began to fade. Theon cast an eye toward the eastern sky to see the sun rise into the storm clouds. The fire was their sun now.

Yara started toward the gates. Theon grabbed her arm. “In there?” he asked.

She nodded. *There’s only one thing she wants now. Euron stole her crown and freedom... and she’ll pay the iron price for them.*

Her gaze left his for a moment as a great crash echoed from the water. The bow of the Silence had slammed into a longship, breaking the smaller vessel’s hull. Its deck was afire now as it carelessly drove through the shattered ship and headed for a carrack still flinging fire balls into the city. The two larger ships collided in a wonderous fireball... and continued to flow downriver toward another ship.

Yara smirked and turned away, snowflakes collecting in her untidy hair. “Come brother, let’s go find our uncle.”

Theon gripped the haft of his axe tighter and followed her. The din of battle grew louder as they approached the gates. Somewhere high above, a dragon roared.

Chapter End Notes

*Ok! Flight boards in 15. What excellent timing. Theon chapters probably are not the most popular but this was necessary.*

*Next at bat is a short Daenerys chapter, unfortunately probably in a week or so.*
Followed by Arya. Followed by.... Gendry!

In other news, I'll try this beta thing out for size for this new story because it's becoming increasingly likely. If you're interested, leave a comment here or track me on Reddit at u/RollTodd18
Daenerys XVII

Chapter Notes

"Quick one!"

-Bobby B

See the end of the chapter for more notes

King’s Landing burned. Great black pillars of smoke rose high into the air, darkening the already grey sky. Worsening gusts whipped about, scattering the smoke and forming a thick haze over the city. Bits of black ash rose upward too, swirling about with flurries of falling snowflakes in some strange dance.

Daenerys soared high above the chaos – far outside the walls and beyond the range of the scorpions and ballistae mounted on them. No doubt Cersei has hidden more on covered rooftops. She shall not kill Drogon so easily. Her last dragon was her strongest.

She could see it all clearly from his back as she could not on the ground only moments before: the buildings along the riverside were burning. Fire leapt from house to house and shop to shop. Flames were beginning to take to the roofs in the easternmost reaches of the city too, where the bay lapped against the sloped shores.

Then, peering through the haze, she saw why. This was no accident. Hundreds of ships – many bearing the black sails and golden kraken of her foe - sat anchored in the bay, flinging great flaming projectiles over the walls. Scores more had set anchor in the Blackwater Rush or else driven themselves up on its muddy shores. They too fired into the city, though with no clear target in mind.

Euron Greyjoy’s men, she knew. The false king and kinslayer had not fled, he had turned on Cersei and her city. They’ve no target at all save the destruction of this city and its people. My people, she realized, if I am to become their queen I must protect them.

Daenerys nudged Drogon with her knee and her mind, making him bank southward along the western walls to the river. Her black’s thrumming wingbeats scattered the rising smoke and falling snow. For a moment, they also drowned out the rising sound of screams.

In the city below, people were scurrying from the flames into the still touched parts of the city. Men pushed each other over in their haste to escape, women clutched babes to their breasts and called frantically for their families. Children cried. Others, unseen, screamed in pain as they were caught in the spreading inferno.

The screams woke something in her – something cold and horrible. The screams of dying innocents… White Harbor. Her breath caught in her throat. Drogon ceased flying and hovered in place. Daenerys could remember those screams, the wights being burned alongside the living…

They echoed in her mind for so long that at first she did not hear the shouts and cheers from below. What? Drogon dipped lower and moved beyond a thick black column of smoke. Here she could see the flashed of golden armor and cruel steel in the firelight. They’ve left their ships, she realized
with growing horror. *Euron is not content to burn these innocents, he’ll put them to the slaughter.* 

Ironborn reavers and eastern sellswords struck down whoever they found. Others fired arrows into the fleeing crowds or tossed torches into untouched buildings. A few Lannister soldiers and city watchmen offered contest, but their numbers were too few.

Daenerys sat up straight and made to dive with Drogon, made to burn these cowards who would slaughter a city… then she smelled the smoke and heard another chorus of screams. *Dragonfire will do no good here. It will only make it worse. There is nothing I can do from here.* The thought sickened her.

*I must do something.* Looking up again, she saw the outline of the Red Keep through the smoke. *Jon is there. I could fly across the city now and break him free in this chaos.* Perhaps Cersei would not even notice amidst the chaos and carnage.

*No,* a voice in the back of her mind told her. It sounded oddly like her captive husband. *Fire will do no good there either, trust in Arya and the others. Trust in Jon to escape.* Her desire to act, to destroy her enemies and save these people had her reaching for something – anything – to do to help.

*I cannot, but they can,* she knew as she looked back to the north and west where her armies had assembled outside the Gate of the Gods. *They can fight these men in the streets, see the people to safety… perhaps even take the Red Keep and the cells beneath it.*

She pulled hard on Drogon’s great spikes and turned him back away from the fires and over the city itself. She flew swiftly toward the western walls. Roof tops rushed beneath her. Snowflakes peppered her face. A bolt soared far below Drogon’s left wing. He roared in anger and banked again.

There were two great ballistae mounted on the city’s crenelated towers that guarded the western gate. Her lip curled upward in a snarl as Drogon made for the closer of the two weapons. Another bolt soared high above them. She could feel the fire roiling within him, heating her own legs. *No,* she thought. *Not that. Not here. Not while the city burns. We cannot risk it.*

Drogon soared over the walls south of the gatehouse and banked sharply, buffeting his wings to slow himself. The men on the towers shouted, cursed, and tried to turn the cumbersome weapons around to face their target. They moved far too slowly.

Drogon landed with a crash atop the ballista, crushing it beneath his weight. Daenerys heard the crack of wooden beams and the panicked shouts of the men as they fled. Drogon shifted on the tower and lashed out across the gatehouse at the other ballista. His tail smashed the weapon to kindling. The soldiers manning it fled. He roared in triumph.

Yet Daenerys had eyes only for the fleeing soldiers below. Hundreds of crimson and gold cloaked men were running away from the western walls. *Fleeing?* She wondered. *No… The queen’s still loyal men were running toward the fires and their formers allies. And the walls are unguarded.* She could take the city. She could save the city. *And save him…*

She directed Drogon skyward once more, flying along the nearly empty walls toward the Gate of the Gods. Ser Jorah had followed her commands, for he sat mounted in front her assembled armies. Scores of her family’s own dragon banners fluttered in the wind, accompanied by the heraldry of dozens of southern houses.

Still, she did not look for long. Her eyes were drawn back to the city and the slowly spreading fires
that threatened to lay King’s Landing low. And with every glance, they found their way to the gloomy outline of the Red Keep. *I must act now.*

She did. Drogon landed atop the Gate of the Gods and smashed the two abandoned ballistae much as he had the others a moment earlier. The shattered bits of timber clattered to the ground. Then at her command her dragon leapt from the gatehouse and landed in front of the closed gates themselves.

The impact jarred her some, but she kept her grip firm and mind focused. Drogon’s presence seared in her mind. He craved fire and blood and the destruction of those who had taken his brother from him. It took all her strength to not give into that terrible, righteous anger. Claws and tails were no true substitutes for dragonfire.

*And claws and tails will not break this gate,* she knew. She spoke the word. Dragonfire roiled deep with Drogon, then erupted from his maw in a column of crimson flame. The fire splashed against the studded iron and wood of the city gate. It began to blacken and crack from the heat. Bits of burning wood fell away in clouds of embers.

Then, entire sections fell away. Burning timbers fell to the side. Iron studs melted and poured down the fiery face of the ruined gate. Drogon ceased his assault and together they watch the gate burn and crumble into ash.

The crimson flames slowly died as the gate turned to ash. Black smoke turned grey as snow fell on the smoldering remains. The stones of the gatehouse were blackened and cracked, but not melted. The way was open.

Drogon buffeted his wings and pushed himself into the sky once more, circling around the gatehouse once before flying back to the assembled armies. She set him down some distance away from the assembled ranks and climbed down her dragon’s side as Ser Jorah rode to her own. Half a dozen Unsullied hurried behind him.

“Khaleesi,” he said. She looked into his tired eyes and saw worry there. *For me? Or the city?* It did not matter, there was little time for idle conversation now.

“The Iron Fleet is attacking the city,” she said. “Along the river and from the bay.”

“Your Grace, we should—”

“You’ll have no issue on the walls. Take the Unsullied and footmen through the gate. Open the others where you can. Safeguard the people,” she commanded. Jorah nodded. “They’re inside the city. The Ironmen and the the sellswords. Butchering people…”

For a moment, she remembered Tyrion’s words from that morning. *You must not enter the city.* The thought gave her pause. *No. When has his advice in battle led to victory? The streets run with blood and the skies fill with smoke. Homes are being burnt and mothers butchered.* Her fingers curled into fists at the thought. *What sort of a queen am I if I cannot send ten thousand men to protect ten times as many innocents?*

“Find them,” she decided. “And kill them.” *Perhaps Cersei’s men will simply flee amidst the fighting.*

“Along the river too, you said?” he asked. She nodded. “With your permission, I’ll send the mounted knights and Dothraki to ride along the Blackwater to cut off their retreat.”

“Do so. And send others around to the northern gates. See if our new Warden of the South is
worthy of his rank.” The ghost of a smirk passed over Jorah’s weathered face. It seemed an odd
gesture at a time like this.

“And the ships?” he asked.

“I will see to them,” she said, placing a hand on her friend’s forearm and locking gazes with him
for a heart’s beat. He dipped his head in understanding. “And…. if you can…”

“I shall lead some of the men to the Red Keep itself, with your blessing,” he replied simply. Thank
you.

“Then go, ser, and be careful.”

Jorah bowed as much as his northern armor would allow. He watched her as she turned back to
Drogon and climbed atop his back. Fire shot up her spine and though her fingertips as she settled in
between his great spikes.

She thought of the screams she had heard in the city and the fires burning on the rooftops. She
thought of the men slaughtering the defenseless families within those walls. She thought of Jon
Snow trapped somewhere in that keep, chained and alone as their city fell into chaos around him. I
cannot burn Euron’s men nor Cersei’s defenses, but I can burn their ships.

And that was exactly what she meant to do. Drogon roared, spread his wings, and launched them
both into the worsening storm.

Chapter End Notes

So this chapter probably isn't entirely necessary seeing as I could've just shown this
from another POV as other things were happening, but I thought it was interesting to
explore, if ever so briefly, her thoughts on the city burning (after, ya know, that thing
happened).

Next is an Arya chapter - in which the true shitstorm begins. I may try to roll my face
across the keyboard and get it out before my flight tomorrow. If not, gonna have to
wait for next week again - then its back to regularly scheduled programming.

I realized all my mentions of gates and whatnot is probably confusing as shit, so here's
the (unofficial) map I've been referencing for the city: http://i.imgur.com/rg27QuY.jpg
She ran her fingers across her face. Old. Weathered. Tired. She had been this way before, for a fortnight at the Twins. But I was a lord then. The Lord. Hiding in my chambers for hours on end was no issue at all.

There had been no one to question her missteps or mistakes there. Old age. She had waved away the Frey serving girls with lesser explanations. This city – this keep – was different. Two pages had already come calling with some business she knew nothing about. Some western lord had done the same earlier in the evening. She had sent them all away with only a few words.

I am the Hand of the Queen, she told herself as she adjusted the oddly constricting robes over her own clothes and fixed the badge of office on her breast. Yet she did not know anything about being a Hand, save vague memories of her father’s complaints.

She had not studied the man before killing him and taking his face. How does he talk? How does he move? How does he address Cersei or advise her? Is he loyal? True? Or just another false face in this city?

Now she knew why Jaqen had always bid her watch – and listen when she had no eyes. It was a simple thing to wear another’s face. It was something else entirely to become them. Only no one can be anyone.

Arya – no, Qyburn – adjusted her robes again. How am I supposed to move in these things? She reached down and within to check that her dagger was secure. It would be an odd thing, fumbling through the folds to pull it out at the right time. It was the only weapon she had brought with her, save her mind. And those might not be enough in this place.

She looked around the wretched room. The old man’s body had been disposed off earlier, carved into pieces and thrown in with the other bits and limbs he had already procured. I didn’t even have to bake them this time, she mused. The memory brought a crooked smile to her face.

Yet now, after days of waiting and hours more preparing the right face, she was here. In the Red Keep. Cersei was close. So is Jon. I could free him then kill her? Or kill her then free him as they panicked and rang the bells.

She was not sure which path was the best to walk. Her desire to save her family and avenge it pulled at her mind. In one moment she thought of nothing but running through the hidden passages of the keep with Jon. In another she could feel Cersei’s hot blood running through her fingers as she opened the queen’s throat.

Arya looked at the candles burning low on the table and at the dim torches on the wall. I’ve been
Qyburn for nearly a day. Hand of the Queen for nearly a day. Yet I’ve not been summoned to her. That seemed strange to her. Perhaps Cersei prefers the man to keep at his horrid experiments.

Even as she adjusted her robes again, the door on the stairway above creaked open. A girl, no older than Arya had been when she first left Winterfell with her father, hurried down the stairs.

She greeted with the child with what she thought was a smile, though her wrinkled skin resisted the gesture. “And what do you have for me?” she asked. The girl, a youth with mousy brown hair and blue eyes, bowed her head in fear if not in respect.

“Her Grace bids you come to her chambers after her supper is through, my Lord Hand,” she squeaked, her eyes dancing from point to point in the old man’s working quarters.

“Is that so?” Arya replied, forcing her voice to become tired and hoarse. “And what is your name… again?”

“B-Brenna, my Lord Hand,” she stammered.


“Return to our queen and tell her my…” she looked around the room. “That my work is almost complete.”

“She asked for you after supper, my lord,” the girl said meekly. “That will be soon. It seemed important. Even the captains and lords were there.” Then I cannot go yet, not when there are so many.

“And I shall go to her after supper, Brenna. Perhaps a bit later. It shall be no fault of yours,” she said, driving her lips upward against her cold and wrinkled cheeks in an odd smile. “Go now.” The girl hurried away.

She was alone again. But for how much longer? Cersei would be expecting her Hand. She had spent so much time preparing the face and disposing of the corpse she had not taken what she should have.

Arya turned back toward the wretched room and paced across the cold stone floor to the dead man’s wooden shelves, all piled high with scrolls, dried herbs and curious vials.

Poisons. She knew some by sight and others by smell. There was little enough time to spare now, but she could spare some for this. The royal store of poisons might yet prove useful in the trials ahead. They might prove useful this very night. I could slip some into the garrisons wines and ales. I could slip some to Cersei herself.

Arya faded into a trance as she sniffed and examined and tested each vial and small pouch in turn. Each vial took more than a moment to test. She had to be sure. Moments flew by as she was at her work. The candles burned lower still. The odd scents from the bloodless limbs made her work harder still.

Finally, she was done. She pilfered what she dared, making certain to take the rarest and deadliest ones whilst making sure the vials did not clink together oddly in the concealed pockets and folds of the man’s robes.

When she was certain she had enough to kill a small army, she turned away and made to leave. Arya hastened up the stairs, then slowed. Old men don’t run. She looked back at the bloody tables and mess of limbs. Does he use a walking stick or staff? Is he bent and hobbled or tall and proud?
Tall, she decided as she opened the door and walked into the dimly lit corridor. Ensconced torches flickered on the wall. She could not rightly say what hour it was. Late though. She’ll be done with supper by now.

Two more flights of stairs upward saw her emerge into a small courtyard guarded by two Lannister men. She flinched and reached for her dagger, then stopped herself as they bowed their heads silently.

The pin, she knew. The face. I am the Hand of the Queen. They know me. She walked past them and looked upward. The sun had risen and set, and though the nights were long now she could see the blackness above just beginning to give way to some distant dawn. Jon could escape in the darkness? Or…

She thought of herself as she had been years ago when her father had been called a traitor and taken prisoner. I was disguised as a little boy then – Arry the orphan. I was no one, fleeing from the Lannister soldiers and the goldcloaks.

Now she was someone else. An old man. Her eyes fell down to the pin on her chest. The Hand of the Queen. I don’t need to run. I can command them, have them walk me to the Black Cells.

“You there,” she called out, forcing an odd rasp into her words as she turned around to face the two guards.

“M’lord Hand?” one asked drearily. Tired? Good.

“Escort me to the Black Cells,” she commanded.

“The cells, m’lord?” the same soldier asked. The conversation seemed to be waking him from some sentry’s trance.

“Yes, I have matters to attend to with the prisoners. Questions.” Her voice sounded odd in the night air. Not mine, she reminded herself. His. Still, her heart hammered against her chest as she watched the guard examine her for a moment, then bow his head and strode past her. She followed him, carefully monitoring her own pace.

They passed through another long corridor, then past two more guards. Closer, Arya told herself as she marked her progress with every flickering torch on the red stone walls or every grand stone column.

Then they emerged into a large outdoor courtyard – one she remembered from her time here as a girl. It had been different then, with the late summer heat baking the red stone and dirt. Now it was heated by watchfires on the walls and marked paths.

Even at this hour, scores of soldiers hurried about, all bearing cold steel. They look ready for battle, she thought. Lannister men-at-arms, clad in their enameled-crimson armor, rushed through the gates and up onto the walls. Scores more men, perhaps even a hundred, joined them. The sellswords, she recognized their look from the battle outside Harrenhal and from the tavern in the city below.

Two in particular caught her eye: a man armored in steel set with gold and a far taller ebony-skinned archer with a spotted-hide cloak and curved bow in hand that was surely taller than Arya herself was. Both men glanced at her and began to move quickly toward the gate. Perhaps this Qyburn frightens mercenaries and handmaidens alike, she thought as the two men disappeared through the gate and from sight.
She followed her lone sentry as he cut across the courtyard and made for a small stone archway that, oddly, reminded her of the old archway in Winterfell that led to the godswood. And that leads down to the crypts. This one, she knew, housed the entrance to the keep’s cells. And houses Cersei’s prisoners – all dead men of a different sort.

“M’lord Hand,” the guard escorting her bowed as they reached the archway. He opened a heavy wooden door to reveal a long line of stone steps. The strained creaking echoed down into the darkness. “Shall I wait here?”

“No,” she said simply, forcing her voice to adopt that tired rasp of age once more. The soldier bowed as low as his armor permitted, then turned away and left her alone.

This is it, she knew. Jon was down these steps, locked away somewhere beneath the keep. In a few moments he would be free of his fetters. I’ll see how far I can get him in this face before we must truly flee. Arya cautiously placed her foot onto the first step.

She continued down into the darkness, step after step. The air was cooler down here, but not cold. The door above shut with an iron click.

Then it opened again. “Qyburn!” a voice called out from behind her. She winced. Damn.

Then she turned slowly as is troubled by age. “My… ser?” she asked as her eyes took in the odd black steel armor of one of Cersei’s queensguard. She could not see his face for it was obscured by a helm of twisted steel and an odd black cloth.

“My lord,” the knight said. “The queen herself has sent for you. Important matters, I believe.”

She searched for an excuse – anything to send the knight away. I could kill him here and now… but that would not work. A weary old man striking down an armored knight? And in sight of scores of soldiers? No…

She stared down the steps and into the gloom of the first row of cells. I am the Hand of the Queen, she told herself again. Now the face felt like a prisoner’s cell. Like an iron collar and chain leading her away from her desires and toward her false duties.

And older desires, she realized. Cersei is expecting Qyburn, not me. She ran her weathered hands down her robes and felt for the poisons and the hard press of her dagger against her side. Yes… “Yes, of course,” she finally replied. “Lead the way.”

The nameless, faceless knight did. They crossed the yard together, with Arya taking her time as she thought an older man might. She heard the gates close behind her and watched and Golden Company men took their places alongside Lannister sentries. Scores of them, though, she thought. Does Cersei truly need so many to watch over the keep and not the city itself?

She would not get her answer now. The knight of the queensguard led her down a more splendid corridor and turned left – into the throne room itself. Arya paused at the stop of the short and broad marble staircase to look at the great flickering braziers and thick columns of the room. Pale predawn light filtered through the colored glass of the great windows, casting the room in a ghostly glow.

Her eyes found the Iron Throne and, for a moment, she imagined Daenerys or Jon sitting upon it. That vision burned away as her eyes found the lion of Lannister wrought in iron above the throne. Her mind turned to the throne’s current occupant… and her fingers curled in renewed anger. She steeled herself for what she had to do.
The knight’s mail sabatons struck the marbled floor and sent odd, clanging echoes through the empty room as they walked down the length of the room and into another corridor on the left. Two flights of stairs later saw her on a familiar landing. The royal apartments. Cersei was close now, only a few steps away. Arya felt for her dagger again.

And then she heard it. Bells? They rang out, perhaps a single tower first. But after a moment another joined in, and then another. Daenerys isn’t waiting, she thought at first. She’s attacking the city even before sunrise.

Arya thought then to strip away her face and run back down to the cells to free Jon. But I’m here and so is she. The true threat to her family was only a few steps away.

“My lord Hand?” the knight turned and looked at her as he reached another heavy door studded and bound with iron. He too had heard the bells. They grew louder and more numerous with each passing moment.

“Stand guard here, ser,” she ordered. “Let no one else enter the queen’s apartments.” He nodded and opened the door, permitted her to enter before shutting it behind him.

She could not hear herself as she walked into the royal apartments. Her heart seemed to have lodged in both her ears at once, each beat like the stroke of a mallet on a mighty war drum.

She paced across the room and explored the rooms of the apartments, cautiously searching for signs of the queen. Ensconced torches cast shadows about the halls. Columns looked like more knights of Cersei’s queensguard. The bells grew louder still.

Then she heard distant screams. They rose up from the distant city – not ghostly, mournful wails, but panicked cries. Arya abandoned all pretense and rushed to the nearest window.

Great fireballs soared through the dim morning air and crashed onto the roofs of the city below. She looked to the south and saw black ships moored in the river. Dozens more were rowing up it. All flung their deadly salvos in high arcs over the walls of the waking city.

Not Daenerys, she knew at once. She would not do this. She doesn’t even have the ships. No, these were Greyjoy ships. Theon’s house. Theon’s kraken. Theon’s uncle. He’s betrayed Cersei.

Arya watched the assault unfold below. Each fireball’s crash seemed worse than the last. The screams grew louder. Columns of black smoke rose skyward from the burning houses. Arya’s eyes followed them up… and found Cersei standing on the edge of a balcony. There.

She gathered herself and became Qyburn – or close to him – once more. She hurried away from the window and down the corridor she knew would take her to the queen.

As she approached the elegant archway, a great mass of steel moved to block her path. Blood red eyes stared down at her. The massive knight of the queensguard did not speak or move. He only blocked the way.

“Ser Gregor,” Cersei called out from the balcony beyond. Her voice was tired and uneven. “Move at once. It is only Qyburn.” Ser Gregor? It was Sandor’s brother. It had to be.

The Mountain moved aside as she passed, yet he kept his horrid eyes fixed on her. Like they can see through this disguise. The thought sent a trickle of fear down her spine. Then she came face to face with the Lannister queen.

“Well?” Cersei asked. Her eyes were bloodshot, her skin pale as the snow beginning to fall from
the grey clouds above. And she’s with child, Arya realized. Just like Daenerys.

The prospect of killing her first enemy now gave Arya pause – but only for a moment. No. I knew she was with child. It doesn’t matter. It will just be another Joffrey. Another Lannister that will grow to torment my family. And what did Cersei care for innocents? The woman had sent cutthroats after Daenerys just before she had discovered her own condition. No. Cersei would soon drink from the cup she herself poured.


“I summoned you hours ago. Hours. Are the stores ready? The signals prepared? We are under attack!”

“I…” her lie was cut short as she noticed another man standing at the edge of the balcony. His body had been blocked by Gregor Clegane before, but now she could see his untidy blonde hair and unmistakable golden hand.

Jaime. Hate burned in her chest. He fled the camp… and not to free Jon. To rejoin his sister. He was a traitor. An enemy. All Lannisters were. She had to stop herself from reaching for her dagger here and now. She could kill the queen and cripple, of course, but the massive, armored queensguard was another thing entirely.

“Jaime…” she said aloud. “Ser Jaime. You’ve returned to the Red Keep.”

Jaime turned from watching the chaos in the streets below and regarded her with a curious look. “Qyburn…” his green eyes danced between respect and disdain and lingered somewhere between the two.

“Qyburn,” Cersei snapped. “The plan?”

“Ready, Your Grace,” Arya guessed at an answer.

Cersei sighed in relief. “Good, good.” She turned back toward the lightening western sky and beheld the thickening columns of smoke. “No doubt you’ve noticed Euron Greyjoy has turned traitor. The burning waterfront is no matter. Lord Strickland and Lord Crakehall will fight them off if your ballistae have not skewered their sailors already.”

She’s lying, Arya knew. She’s terrified. “We have the numbers to drive off Greyjoy’s ilk… but not the girl’s. The plans are ready, yes?” she asked again.

“Of course, Your Grace,” Arya repeated her own lie and Cersei nodded as she turned away to the edge.

Arya watched the queen paced over to the edge of the balcony. I could just push her, she thought before feeling the footsteps of Ser Gregor. The knight never strayed far from his queen.

She turned and regarded the wall of black steel. It regarded her in turn. Those eyes… They oddly reminded her of Jaqen’s eyes – always seeing through her lies, spoken or not. She could not stand his gaze for a moment longer, so she turned back to Cersei.

It will have to be quick. Very quick. There would not even be time to give Jaime the death he deserved. For if I linger a heart’s beat too long the Mountain will kill me.

She did not fear death, of course, but there was so much to live for. Jon’s life and freedom and child. Sansa back at home. And Gendry… No, she could not die here.
She stepped forward to the edge of the balcony too, to watch the siege of the city as smoke and screams rose up from the streets below. *Not a siege at all,* Arya realized with morbid fascination. Cersei had not realized it, but from here Arya could see it plain: the gate along the river was open. Men clad in black poured in by the hundred. And the men in gold *joined* them in their slaughter of the city dwellers.

“Cersei!” Jaime shouted. “There!” he gestured down toward the river and the open gate.

“Strickland…” the queen hissed. Her fingers curled into fists. “He’s betrayed me…” She sounded lost. *Good,* Arya thought. *Let her know the feeling.*

The fire raged below. Screams and war cries filled the air as smoke rose and snow fluttered down. One of the ships in the river was on fire. Arya watched its sails burn as it drifted downstream and collided with a smaller vessel, and then another.

Cersei had seen it too. She fixed her gaze on the slaughter below. Arya took her chance to move around to the queen’s other side. Gregor Clegane mirrored her movements and took a step toward it. *It won’t work, not like this.*

“Cersei,” Jaime moved to his sister’s side. His own eyes were bloodshot too, but open with fear. “Send riders out of the city to Daenerys. Make terms. Make peace. The city is burning.” *Make terms? Why is he saying that?*

“Make terms,” Cersei spat as her voice rose and cracked. “No, you fool. I told you I have a plan. Our men will secure the Red Keep and drive back the traitors at the Mud Gate, and then-”

A roar split the air. All three of them looked off into the western sky to behold a great black shape rising above the city walls. Arya’s eyes were fixed on Drogon’s form as he glided around the city for a moment, hovered over the river, then circled back toward the western walls.

“The ballistae shall reach him…” Cersei seemed to be speaking to herself. Her hands were shaking.

Drogon landed atop one distant gatehouse and smashed the weaponry there. He did the same off to the north and west a moment later. Then he landed in the distance.

“She’s making ready to storm the gates,” Cersei said. “Qyburn. The stores. The plan…” she cast an odd glance at Jaime, who seemed entranced at the horror unfolding below.

“As I said Your Grace, they are ready,” Arya said, turning back to see Gregor looming over her. *Just a moment,* she thought. *Just a step.* Her hand fell to her side as she felt for the hard lump of her dagger in her robes.

Again, Drogon roared in the distance and rose into the blackening sky, but he did not turn toward the city. Daenerys guided him along the walls then over the river.

Arya watched – utterly fascinated – as the great black unleashed a column of flame on one of the moored Greyjoy ships, and then another… and then another. Their sails caught flame at once. Their masts blackened and cracked and split. Their decks burned.

Cersei’s laugh was high and cruel. “Make peace! Our enemies are fighting each other.”

Jaime whirled on her. “They’re slaughtering innocents down there!” Gregor took a step closer to the one-handed man.

“And soon they’ll be slaughtering each other,” Cersei replied. “We should pull our own forces
back to the keep whilst the traitors plunder bakeries and brothels.” If they fortify the keep Jon will never escape. No orders could leave these apartments. Arya had to be sure of that.

The fire raged along the riverside, but the Iron Fleet’s bombardment had ceased. Its ships in the river lay in ruins. Drogon had soared off over the bay and rained fire down on the defenseless ships even as they rained fire on the eastern part of the city nearest the water.

Jaime grabbed Cersei’s arm. Arya stepped back. Gregor stepped forward. “Listen to me,” he snarled. “This cannot happen. Whatever your damned plan is, whatever your pride is telling you, it must stop. The city is burning, Cersei, and your people with it. Innocent people.”

“Innocent?” she laughed cruelly. “They raised that fanatic of theirs up and joined his ranks. They spat on me and humiliated me and showered me with insults when he forced me to walk naked through the streets. They rioted time and again and tried to kill our son. That is not innocence. If they crave blood let them have it. I’ll not stop them. It is the soldiers I’m concerned with.”

“Have you gone mad?” Jaime asked her.

“Enough,” she hissed and drew back as if burned by his touch. “I see why the girl has sent you here. Don’t worry. I’ll give her the fire and blood she so desperately craves once she’s finished destroyed the other traitor’s fleet. And if nothing else, I’ve seen to it that her bastard lover shall never leave his cell.”

Arya felt her lips curl in a snarl that she struggled to suppress. This, all of this, was wrong. I should not have come here. I should have gone to Jon earlier and freed him. If only this damned face had not taken so long and Cersei had not called on her.

Jaime stepped away from his sister, a look of sorrowful anger on his face. You cannot save her, Arya thought. Her fate would be the same as this city’s. Her hand fell to her side again to check that the dagger was ready. Soon... All she needed was a moment – a distraction.

The Iron Fleet sat burning in Blackwater Bay. Other ships had raised their sails and attempted to flee Daenerys’ wrath, but oars and fierce winds were no match for a dragon’s wings. They too succumbed to dragonfire.

In the west, great clouds of dust rose up as columns of infantry moved toward the city and lines of cavalry rode off to the north and south. Arya watched as Cersei’s eyes locked on the mass of Unsullied and southern men-at-arms. They passed through the northwestern gate without contest and entered the city, marching with all haste toward the burning sections of the city.

“Qyburn,” Cersei turned to her. “It must be soon. When they’ve entered. Give your signal.”

“Signal?” Jaime asked. “What are you talking about. Cersei, you must listen to me. Enough of this I-”

The very air itself seemed to split open as a thunderclap echoed across the city. The rush of wind tickled the whisker’s on Arya’s false face. All of them turned to see a column of jade flame rising up from an already burning part of the city. Chunks of burning debris wreathed in green fire rained down upon the ruined and untouched roofs of the city.

The color drained from Jaime’s face. “Aerys’…” he murmured. Then he turned to Cersei. “Open the gates, Cersei. To the keep and the city itself. This… I… you don’t understand.”

Arya stepped back a few paces to watch the terrible scene unfold below. The jade flames spread far more quickly than their crimson counterparts. They burned through the roofs with ease and
snaked between buildings, setting still more homes aflame.

Cersei was shaking her head. Jaime’s eyes were fixed clearly on his sister. Even the Mountain seemed distracted by the column of wildfire that had erupted from the city below.

A column of fire seemed to rush up Arya’s spine. Now. Do it now. It has to be now. Jaime was saying something to Cersei and she to Jaime. The city was burning. Jon was trapped. Do it now!

She plunged her left hand into the folds of her robes and retrieved her dagger. The obsidian handle felt right, even in this odd grip. Arya set he sights on Cersei’s pale, exposed throat and she stepped forward.

But Jaime’s eyes found hers first. She lunged for Cersei – and missed. Jaime pushed off his sister and swung at Arya with his golden hand. It caught her in her own and she dropped the dagger and watched it clatter to the floor.

She locked eyes with Cersei for a moment, who looked too shocked to speak. Arya’s eyes found the dagger. He heart was hammering in her chest. She stepped toward it, but them spun around as the rasp of drawn steel filled the air. Ser Gregor stepped toward her.

He swung his sword, but far too high. She ducked and spun away toward the archway that led to the apartments. I failed, she knew. That had been her chance. And he ruined it.

There was nothing for it now. She had to make it to Jon or else make it out of the city. She looked into Ser Gregor Clegane’s red eyes, then into the green eyes of the Lannister twins. Then, quickly, she removed the cumbersome robes and the old man’s face in two swift motions. The rough spun cloth and rough skin fell to the floor.

Both Jaime and Cersei gasped, the queen’s hand shielding her swollen womb. Recognition dawned on Jaime’s face, but his sister looked stunned. Then her expression settled into pure hatred. “Get her, Ser Gregor. Kill her!”

The massive knight started forward, but Arya did not give him the chance to swing his sword again. She fled.

Chapter End Notes

Well, here's this. Had some weird pacing issues with this one, but hopefully you find there's a good mix of character stuff and action. I'm trying to keep that balance going in the next couple of chapters which are, more or less, just people stabbing each other.

Also I was interviewed for and featured in an article about fan-fiction. https://filmschoolrejects.com/fandom-creativity-shippers-fanfic/

That is a sentence I thought I would never type. Life is strange.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!