Knights of the Nightingale

by SerGoldenhand

Summary

PART THREE OF THE CHANGING OF SEASONS. UPLOADING AGAIN SOON.
Winter is here. AU continuation.

The knights of summer are dead. The Long Night is upon Westeros. Left in disarray in the wake of the last war, the forces of Targaryen, Lannister, Stark and all the other Great Houses are spread far and wide, broken by incompetent and stupid rulers entirely ignorant to the disaster bearing down on them. They will feel the brunt of the northern invasion worst of all. And in their absence, it falls to the outcasts and madmen of the Seven Kingdoms to hold back the night and bring the dawn.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Prologue

Chapter Summary

“They called it the Tower of Joy... but there was no joy in that room.”

Chapter Notes

This is the third instalment in the series entitled THE CHANGING OF SEASONS, following A COAT OF GOLD and THE SUNSET KINGDOMS. It is highly recommended that you read ACOG and TSK first.

LINK TO PREVIOUS PART: The Sunset Kingdoms

INFO FOR READERS: KNIGHTS OF THE NIGHTINGALE is a story taking place in an alternate universe, where the point of divergence is Tyrion Lannister being freed from his trial for King Joffrey’s murder. Though set in the universe from the books, younger characters are typically aged up about 4-5 years to their show counterparts, though this is not consistent for all characters. The year is 302AL, roughly seven months in. Not all chapters take place in chronological order.

DISCLAIMER: I do NOT own A Song of Ice and Fire, nor the show Game of Thrones, which are the property of George R.R. Martin and HBO respectively.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

KNIGHTS OF THE NIGHTINGALE

Now let us sport us while we may;

And now, like amorous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour,
Than languish in his slow-chapped power.
Let us roll all our strength, and all
Our sweetness, up into one ball:
And tear our pleasures with rough strife,
Thorough the iron grates of life.
Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

- Andrew Marvell, *To His Coy Mistress*

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**PROLOGUE**

They were seven against three.

It was always the same in his remembrances. You could explore the past in whatever way you wanted, but you could not unwalk roads you had already walked, could never choose paths that you had never taken. Every breath, every footfall, every burst of flower blossom and drift of falling sand was the same. Everything always started the same, ended the same, and went the same way.

Yet though things always were the same, they sometimes seemed different. Sometimes the crannogmen felt a chill in the air despite the Dornish sun, and sometimes he felt that time was running slow, or fast, or not at all. And sometimes, once in a hundred times, or mayhaps more, if you listened just right and dreamed it hard enough, there was a song.

The three waited before the round stone tower, the red mountains of Dorne at their backs, their white cloaks blowing in the wind. The crannogmen had not forgotten any of them: Ser Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning, with his fabled greatsword Dawn slung across his back. Ser Oswell Whent, sharpening his blade on a whetstone, inscrutinable eyes peering out beneath the wings of the black bet on his white helm. And between them, Ser Gerold Hightower, the White Bull, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard.

The words were the same as they always had been. Lord Eddard Stark stepped forwards, with one hand on the greatsword Ice in his scabbard. As the crannogmen stood watching, he could help but feel the sense of heavy resignation again. *Seven against three. Now I am the only one that remains.*

“I looked for you on the Trident,” Eddard said to them.
“We were not there,” Ser Gerold answered.

“Woe to the Usurper if we had been,” said Ser Oswell.

“When King’s Landing fell, Ser Jaime slew your king with a golden sword, and I wondered where you were.”

“Far away,” Ser Gerold said, “or Aerys would yet sit the Iron Throne, and our false brother would burn in seven hells.”

“I came down on Storm’s End to lift the siege,” Eddard told them, “and the Lords Tyrell and Redwyne dipped their banners, and all their knights bent the knee to pledge us fealty. I was certain you would be among them.”

“Our knees do not bend easily,” said Ser Arthur Dayne.

“Ser Willem Darry is fled to Dragonstone, with your queen and Prince Viserys. I thought you might have sailed with him.”

“Ser Willem is a good man and true,” said Ser Oswell.

“But not of the Kingsguard,” Ser Gerold pointed out. “The Kingsguard does not flee.”

“Then or now,” said Ser Arthur. He donned his helm.

“We swore a vow,” explained old Ser Gerold.

The Northmen moved in closer, all ghosts. Five of them were doomed to fall before the hour was up. Their swords came screaming out. Ice reigned among them now, a brand of proud blue steel. They were seven against three.

“And now it begins,” said Ser Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning. He unsheathed Dawn and held it with both hands. The blade was pale as milkglass, alive with light.

“No,” Eddard said with sadness in his voice. “Now it ends.” And they came together.

The crannogman knew each and every beat now, parry for parry. He knew when each man fell, and he felt the pain and the loss as he always did. Such was his curse; such was the pain of never letting go. Because if he did, the Tower of Joy would be forgotten, and then they were all doomed.

After, Ned went ahead up the steps, to where the faint screams of “Eddard!” were chanted through the stones. Howland let him go alone, lingering to say a brief prayer for the dead. The prayer was not enough, but for now, they could not afford honour. That would come later, when they brought the tower down and gave the eight fallen men their burials under the stars and moonlight of Dorne, as the wind laughed and sang cruelly through the gaps in the stones.

At the top of the steps, he found Eddard Stark leaning over his sister’s body. The bloody sheets were flecked with rose petals, swimming in blood. In the corner of the room, a Dornish wetnurse stood away from the Northmen, some brave defiance in her eyes. Ned turned, and when he did, the bundle was in his arms. “Promise me,” she said.

“A day,” said the wetnurse, making them both look up. “The boy and your sister have been here for a day, not more. She was holding on for you. But she could not hold on any longer. I am sorry.”

Ned only gave her a sombre, dark look, so it fell to Howland to ascertain the girl’s name – Wylla –
and what she was doing here. “They brought me in to help deliver the babe. And to give him milk. She fed him from his own breast, but he will need milk now.”

“Does he have a name?” Howland asked. It only dawned on him then who the babe’s father might have been. *Rhaegar wanted a Visenya for his Aegon and Rhaenys… perhaps it was best that the babe was a boy after all, considering how Aegon and little Rhaenys fared.*

“Not yet,” said Wylla. “All I know is she didn’t want to give him a name like his. Not a dragon’s name.”

“Aye,” Ned said at last, looking down at the boy in his arms. “A Northern name. A Stark name.” There was a long, helpless pause. “Jon. For Jon Arryn. I… I thought about Brandon, but…”

“Sometime later, mayhaps,” said Howland. “Brandon may suit for one of the children you have with Lady Catelyn.”

*How right I was.*

The crannogman could feel the tower starting to shake around him. The fields of red grass outside were turning to dust and ash. The world was starting to break. “What did she say?” he heard himself say, in the past.

“Promise me,” said Ned, “she said, promise me, Ned. She said that Robert must never know. That I must keep the boy safe. The vow will trouble me, and Catelyn, I have no doubt of that…”

“What will you do?”

Ned’s face was impassive. “Be troubled,” he said, “and keep my vows.”

And then he was back in the forest, staring at the snow. He steadied himself on a branch, stood up, and with dreams of Dornish sunlight still stinging at his eyes, Howland Reed set off through towards the woods.

*Back to the castle. Yes.* Howland was certain there was something waiting for him there, though he could not say why. He followed the winding path through the trees, taking right turns and left turns beyond counting, a careful sequence which only he could remember. He climbed a rock ladder, passed through a tunnel of grasping vines, and soaked his boots to the ankles as he waded through a low, chilly river.

Then Greywater Watch surfaced through the gloom, a cluster of ramshackle wooden towers on the edge of the tepid lake, strange and twisted. Howland crossed the rope bridge that bound the floating island to the wooded mainland – the ropes could be cast off at any point, to let Greywater Watch float with the currents – and passed through the doors.

The Reeds kept no true garrison of guards as the other Northern houses did. Here, if a man protected his home, his home would protect him. The crannogmen protected themselves from the enemy with pitchforks and blowdarts and long-bows, but did so in a solitary fashion. They came together when they had to, but for the most part, they lived their lives separately from one another, much as they as a people preferred to live separately from the world. The Lords of Greywater Watch were not iron-fisted rulers. They were leaders whenever one might be needed. They were brothers to their people, not masters.

It was warm inside the castle. The walls were veined with dark moss and capillaried in vines. The entranceway opened out into Greywater’s main hall. Pale light blossomed from the candles on the table.
One figure stood waiting: his wife, Jyana. “Howland,” she said with a twinge of disapproval. “I was about to send a man out to find you.”

“I sensed I might be needed back here.”

“Indeed.” She frowned. “There is a visitor for you.”

“Here?” The lord of Greywater Watch did not get visitors.

“Aye. Here,” She frowned some more. “Isn’t that why you came back here?”

“I sensed that I was needed.” Howland allowed himself a small smile. “I never claimed to know why.”

“So be it. And who are these visitors of mine?”

“Old friends.” He knew from his wife’s tone that she did not entirely mean it. “I took them to your solar.” They shared another smile. Howland Reed had no solar. Only this floor, and one hall. As they emerged into the candlelit room, he saw the figures sitting by his hearth. One a woman, the other a young man. Both of them were unsettlingly familiar.

“Lord Howland.” The woman rose at his approach. The candles dimmed around her, and the shadows moved their fingers away from her face. So here we are, thought Howland heavily. Ghosts of a time long past, reunited at the end of the world. The crannogman, and the lady from Starfall.

“Lady Dayne,” Howland said. She was not unblemished by the years, but time had treated her much more kindly than it had him. Her shoulders did not stoop, her limbs were not crooked, her hair was raven-dark without even a suggestion of grey. She was no old widow, but that was not to say that the years had not touched her in their own way. No longer was she the carefree companion of Princess Elia and Ned and Brandon. No longer were they knights of summer.

“Lord Howland.” She gestured to the young man by her side. “May I present my nephew, Edric, the Lord of Starfall.”

Howland returned the boy’s nod. “I am pleased to meet you, Lord Edric.”

“And you, my lord.” The boy had a slight fearfulness in his eyes. Most likely he had been raised on tales of bog devils. Many of the Northern lords thought Howland Reed ate frogs for every meal, that he was half a frog himself. They were wrong, but Howland saw no need to correct them. A reputation could be a good thing. Roose Bolton had the right of that, he thought, quite sadly. And he was right to see that Robb’s campaign was doomed from the off. That I would fail Ned’s son, as I failed Ned.

The thought came to him suddenly. “You’re named for Eddard Stark, aren’t you?” he said to Lord Dayne.

The boy nodded. “I was, my lord.”

“An odd choice, if you don’t mind me saying. Considering…”

“We don’t hold grudges,” said Lady Ashara. “We of House Dayne know where the real war lies. Though we must apologise for the time we took in getting here.”

“Better late than not at all. But I must ask, why did you come here? The bulk of the Northern force is with the Manderlys, in White Harbor—”
“—where we have sent what few forces we could spare,” Ashara said. “But as you know, Lord Reed, we have… particular matters to discuss. I would sooner do it away from prying eyes and walls with ears. This may be the only place in the Seven Kingdoms free from the Spider, or from Daenerys’s spies.”

“The Tower?”

“The Tower,” Ashara confirmed.

Of course it was. Howland glanced towards Lord Edric. “How much does he know…?”

“I think all of Westeros will know soon enough. If everything goes according to plan. As for Daenerys…”

“I contemplated following her, and trying to convince her. But I think she is a lost cause, for now. Last we heard, she has returned to Dragonstone with her two remaining dragons and the ashes of her armies. The Tyrells and the Martells are penned up in Highgarden. Lord Willas and Princess Arianne might be captives of the queen. Or they might not be.” She shrugged. “The southerners will be of no help to us.” She paused, and wet her lips. “There was Ser Barristan Selmy. I had hoped he would come with us. But he chose to die with honour rather than live without it.”

As I have, thought Howland.

“He was an honourable fool.” Lady Ashara sighed. “But his star will shine brightly in death, I think.”

“But not as brightly as it might have shined in life.” It was Jyana who spoke, from the shadows; Howland thought she had gone away. “But that chance is gone. We must turn our attention to what remains.”

Howland nodded. “I have not heard from the Wall in months. Not from Winterfell in weeks. Jyana possesses some greensight, but the clouds are so thick that she cannot see through it.”

Jyana nodded. “Whoever leads this ironborn invasion, be it Euron Greyjoy or some other, they are consort ing with powers far beyond their control or understanding. And even further beyond ours.”

“What about the Stark boy?” asked Ashara. “Brandon, that is. I have heard he has the sight—”

“The boy is the most powerful of all the greenseers, or has the potential to be that. But even he cannot speak with us during this. It is like being in the midst of a dark ocean, and you have no energy to do anything but tread water. We have expended nearly all our efforts trying to stop the dark getting in. We may have to surrender Greywater Watch to the enemy soon, and retreat to Moat Cailin and White Harbor.” He saw the worry on the younger Dayne’s face. “Have no fear, my lord. It has been done before; we just rarely speak of it. As you may have seen, Greywater Watch does not have the defenses to resist a vast invasion.”

Ashara nodded. “Well, we will not object to that. I imagine you have the right of it.” She fell silent stared at him for a moment with those dark purple eyes – eyes that had made Starks swoon and fall in love at first sight. “The Tower, then. And the boy.”

“Not now,” Jyana said, firmly. “You have had a long journey. You should rest first. We should all rest.”

Howland nodded. “My wife has the right of it. Be welcome under my roof, and accept my hospitality as guests. But I beg you, take some rest now. Winter is coming, and sleep may not come
Lady Ashara did not resist. She allowed Jyana to lead her off to her duty. Edric followed the women out.

A few minutes later, Jyana returned to where Howland sat in his chair beside the newly rekindled fire. Nightfall was fast approaching; the first and brightest stars specked the faraway horizon.

“Howland.” His wife took her seat. “I am worried.”

“About what?”

“That you are not fully considering what you plan to do. If you go through with this… if the boy agrees, and does as you intend him to, it will be war. She will claim the throne, and if it goes wrong… even if it goes right, and she comes north, these lands will burn.”

“I know this—”

“More than that,” she pressed on. “This will be a war you have started. Thousands will die, burned to ash. Thousands more will lose fathers, brothers, sons and daughters… Even if she comes for the Others, she will come for us, too. She will come for the lord of Greywater Watch, who was the first to speak out against her.”

“If my death is needed to stop the Others, then so be it.”

“Daenerys is the Mad King’s daughter. You know what she did on the Blackwater. It will not just be you she comes for. It will be our people, and our…” She swallowed. “Meera, too.”

“Meera is safe in Winterfell.”

Jyana frowned at him. “You don’t believe that.”

She was right. He didn’t. *Meera should have come home by now.* They knew that Jojen was lost; they had known that he was journeying north to his death. “I will not see you again, Father,” the boy had said that day, as they stood together away from Meera and Jyana. The snowflakes tangled in his hair, white and grey wisps among the brown, the ashes and dust of Greywater Watch attaching themselves to him one last time. His little old man, with the tortoise-wise eyes, with his strange stubborn streak of bravery. “It is alright, though,” he said. “I know where I am going.”

“But you do not know why,” said Howland.

“I do. *The Song Must Be Sung.* Those are our words.”

*But they are just words, child. Words are wind.* “You do not. And that is a terrible unfairness. If I could go in your place, Jojen…”

“But that is not the way things are fated to be.” Howland still wondered: when Jojen spoke those words, was he afraid? On the face of things, he seemed proud of his destiny, but he must have been afraid of dying. They all were. Even Ser Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning, had been afraid. The rest of the day passed in a murky confusion of stars and time. Jyana went away, at some point, but he stayed alone at his table, thinking. The dreams did not come to him, not here. Greywater Watch was built with spells and runes, same as the Wall and Winterfell, to stop the darkness getting in, but they also stopped the green from getting out. Though it might not seem like it from the outside, and though nature had overcome the surrounding lands, Greywater Watch was firmly in the
realms of men.

The Reeds had first come here long ago, when the world was still young. Reed, Stark, Flint: those were the names of simple men, who were untroubled by the complicated lies and politics of the south. And the First Men came north, and the Children of the Forest brought the hammer of the waters down upon the Neck, in their attempt to break the world in two. But the Children had failed then as now, and were forced out of their lands, into the distant north, where the Others walked. While the First Men continued north to ensure the totality of their conquest, the Reeds had stayed, as a rearguard against the Children who still populated the newly swamped land. And so all the enemy had been destroyed. Or nearly all of them. What the Starks didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them. And what the Starks did not know, they rarely cared about.

Moonrise brought the Daynes back to his table. Jyana found one of the few bottles of good wine they had. “Where did you get this?” asked Edric, politely. “Forgive me, but it must be difficult to bring in supplies to a place such as this.”

“There are those who are willing to bring trade up the Blue Fork from Fairmarket and Seagard, and up the Green by way of the Twins, now that the Freys are dead and gone,” Howland answered. “But yes, it has been difficult.”

“Then I thank you especially for your hospitality.” The Dayne boy offered a smile. “I… I have never tried crocodile steak before.”

“Nor should you have. It is a little tough, even I think that. Fear not. Once we get to White Harbor, you’ll find that Lord Manderly is no stranger to southern fare. I have it on good authority that his feasts are excellent.”

“And far more lively than the feasts in the south, I do not doubt,” said Lady Ashara. “I still remember your table from the tourney of Harrenhal. In the twenty years since, I have never experienced such hospitality.”

So: the conversation had turned to Harrenhal already. Howland drew a breath. “Yes. And we will probably never experience hospitality like it again.” He did not want to talk about the tourney. But Ashara Dayne had come a thousand miles to do just that, and he dare not refuse her.

But he would talk on his terms.

Howland set down his knife. “Forgive me, Lady Dayne. I know you must be very eager to discuss the events of Harrenhal. But I fear I can shed no light on the subject that has not already been offered to you.”

“True. I have talked to Oberyn Martell, to Jon Connington, to Barristan Selmy – all dead now – and Edric has interrogated Jaime Lannister. But in twenty years I have never spoken to anyone who was at that table.” For half a second, her violet eyes flashed with cold anger. “Or are you going to tell me that you don’t remember, my lord?”

“Of course I remember. That doesn’t mean I want to. But I will never forget it. Ned, Brandon and Benjen in their southern garb for once, and me in one of Ned’s doublets from when he was a squire. More finery than any of us were used to. And then there was Lyanna. Clad in… it was silver and blue. Silver like the clouds gathering to the north, and blue like the midnight sea. The lace and the trim wove together, like waves, capped with pale white foam. But the sea could not contain her, because she was more than that. A storm in a cauldron, alive. When you looked close, you could see that there were veins of red running through the silk. Red for Rhaegar, mayhaps. But I saw it as the sap that runs down the heart tree’s grim face whenever it laughs. And how the trees were laughing
that night.

“And then there was Rhaegar. The thing is, I don’t remember Rhaegar, or how he looked.”

“He was in black,” said Ashara, absently. “He was always in black.”

“Yes, I think you’re right. But even so, that wasn’t what mattered with Rhaegar. What I remember is the music. The song he played… it was so much like the tourney, I suppose. A song of patience and heroic martyrdom unsung, of tilting furniture, emblazoned shields… but that was only the surface. Bases and tinsel trappings, nothing more. Beneath the still waters of that paradise, artifice and intrigue, miles of it, like the part of the iceberg that lurks beneath the water. Seven hells and seven heavens fought within that man, and within the people in that hall. Lannisters, Baratheons, Starks, Arryns, Tullys, and Rhaegar Targaryen in the midst of it all. He was always where the occasional bubbles were, spitting venom to the surface. One spark in that hall, one tiny flame, would have set it all off.”

“Yes,” said Ashara. “And he did.”

“Aerys—”

She shook her head. “The spark was not Aerys, or Robert Baratheon. The spark was Brandon Stark.”

The table had darkened to just the two of them. Jyana and Edric were there in the sidelines, listening intensely, but they did not matter now.

“That night,” Howland said, “they say you—”

“A truth for a truth, my lord.”

“What do you want to know?”

“You know my price.”

The Tower. Seven against three. So be it.

“I was with Brandon that night,” she said simply, “and I lost the child. That is all there was to it.”

Howland did not think she was telling the truth, not entirely. Ashara had lost the child, but he was not sure that it was entirely accidental. The bastard child of a Stark and a Dayne would have posed all manner of problems for its mother. Perhaps it was better not to ask.

“And now your part of the bargain, Lord Reed. Wylla told me some of it, but not all.”

“If you have to question it, then you already know. But… I swore you a vow. Aye, as I made a vow to Ned that I would never tell any soul living. He took promises seriously, Ashara, and even for you he would have made no exception. If you doubt that, remember how long he kept it from Lady Catelyn. But the time for secrets is over, as you said.”

“We were seven against three,” he told her. “The seven: Ned, myself, Ethan Glover, William Dustin, Martyn Cassel, Theon Wull, and Mark Ryswell. The three were Ser Gerold Hightower, Ser Oswell Whent, and your brother, Ser Arthur. All good men.

“We rode hard from Storm’s End when we received the news that Lyanna was there. How Ned learned it I will never know, though I doubt it came of his own initiative. The south is full of men
who know things that are no business of theirs. Anyhow, there we were, at the Tower, in the baking red sunlight. And they spoke…” Now it begins. No, now it ends. “…but words came to naught. And so—”

“Was… was Arthur…?” Lady Ashara swallowed. “When he spoke, how did he speak?”

Howland closed his eyes, but he did not have to. The faces and the memories haunted him every night. “He was reluctant, I think. Whent was ever enigmatic, but I believe he had resigned himself to death then, and Hightower… I sense that Ser Gerold truly believed in what he was doing, even if only out of some misplaced sense of love and duty for his prince. As for your brother… well, if any of the three had their doubts, it was him. But brotherhood is a curious thing. He might not have died to keep Lyanna imprisoned in that tower, or even to ensure that Rhaegar’s will was kept, but he would have died for his brothers, and for his honour, even if it was not what he wanted.

“So,” he went on. “We fought. Hightower was the first to die. Maybe it was some attempt at a valiant charge, or to secure some glory in his prince’s eyes. He killed Mark Ryswell, but after that, he was slower than even he had been expecting. Ned and William Dustin surrounded him and made a swift end. Then it was Whent and your brother against the six of us who remained.

“Ser Oswell and Ser Arthur… when they fought, it was as though the Age of Heroes had come again. I will admit that your brother held back somewhat in that first part – if he had not, we would all have died then and there. But as it was, Ser Oswell slew Ethan Glover and Theo Wull. Then he turned into me, and we fought, and Ser Oswell knocked me to the ground with a slash across the breastbone, and I fell into the dirt. When I looked up again, though, he was dead, impaled on William Dustin’s sword.

“And then there were three: William Dustin, Martyn Cassel and Ned, all against Ser Arthur. I was lying there in the mud, and they must have thought I was dead. I never saw much of it, only heard their swords, and Dawn… it does not cut, so much as it hums through the air, and dances, and sings. William and Martyn fell down like flowers with their stems cut, felled so fast that I did not even see any blood.

“By then I was staggering back to my feet, but neither Ned nor Ser Arthur paid me any attention. Ice and Dawn… they did not strike one another so much as they danced, and the blows came so fast and precise that for a moment, it seemed as they were not using swords at all. Your brother was the greatest fighter I have ever seen, Lady Ashara. Maybe the greatest fighter the Seven Kingdoms ever saw. It seemed to me like hours then, but I know now that it was only moments before he had Ned on the back foot, and bleeding from a dozen wounds.

“I knew I had to do something. It was him or Lyanna, you understand.” He took care not to look away from Ashara’s eyes. “So I took my dagger, and I stabbed him in the back of the neck, above his gorget. He fell to one knee. And Ned took Dawn and—”

“—made an end of it.”

“Yes. It was a craven’s move, but—”

“I understand.” She didn’t, he knew, but so be it.

“Ned was sore wounded then, and he should have taken a few moments to rest, but Lyanna was screaming up in her tower. And so he climbed those steps like a man possessed, and it was left to me to say prayers over the dead. When I reached the top of the tower, Lyanna was dying in his arms. She was lying in her bed of blood, surrounded by blue winter roses – the same that had made up the crown Rhaegar gave her at Harrenhal. Death was in that room, and descending fast. They called that
place the Tower of Joy, but there was no joy there. Only blood.”

“And Jon Snow,” said Edric Dayne. “Blood and snow.”

“Yes,” he replied, “it was Jon Snow. She begged Ned… she made him promise. Promise me, Ned, she said.” Those words had scarred him for years. “Promise me, Ned. She made him promise to claim the boy as his own, and never tell Robert Baratheon of his heritage – or Jon himself, I think. If he knew that Ned was harbouring Rhaegar’s son… then that would be an end to peace. Tywin Lannister would have sided with Robert and Hoster Tully with Ned, and Jon Arryn would be caught between the two, unable to do anything, and the realm would have torn itself to pieces.”

“Small mercies,” said Ashara. “Lyanna’s death, I mean. I bore the girl no ill will, but if she had returned to King’s Landing alive, that would have been an end to everything. Both to peace and to… whatever Rhaegar was trying to build.”

“A saviour,” said Jyana. She had been very quiet, so when her voice came in, it was a knife. “He was trying to find our saviour. Our saviour. Not the false Aegon in the south. But the true one in the North. Rhaegar wanted a Visenya for his Aegon and Rhaenys. We have Jon Snow.”

“I must go north,” said Ashara. “I must go to Lord Snow, at Castle Black. Lord Reed, would it be possible for you to take care of Edric while I—”

She would have said more, but then Jyana stood up abruptly, nearly knocking over the table. Her voice was a whisper, but still loud. “Someone approaches the castle.”

“Foe or friend?”

Jyana considered for a moment. “Friend. Nay, more than that. I think…” Her voice dropped even further. “Meera…”

Meera. The prince that was promised and all of Rhaegar’s prophecies were forgotten. Howland stood up, and, a little dazed, made his way towards the entrance of the castle. And there, sure enough, he made out a few dozen figures, armed with torches. Meera led the way, stumbling beneath her heavy pack, nearly lost in all her furs. And behind her… Howland was dizzied by the light, but he thought he saw the giant Hodor, and there was someone pulling a sled, and could that even be Jon Snow? Had he come all the way south with them?

When he saw Jojen among them, he realised none of it was real. It was Meera, all right, but these people around her were no friends of hers, not Northmen. Instead he spied fish scales on their breastplates, axes and cudgels instead of spears, and their cloaks had krakens on them, not wolves. But Meera was here, and she was falling into his arms, and it was all right. He tousled her hair, rested her against him. She was taller than him, but she was shuddering, saying, “Oh, Father, oh, Father,” over and over, and he had to support her.

At last they moved apart. Meera moved to embrace her mother, then made to introduce her companions. “Father, these are… well, Greyjoy soldiers. I met them in the forest. And this is their leader—”

A young woman clad all in leathers stepped forward. She had scars on both cheeks, and her eyes had seen things they should not have seen. “Lord Reed,” she said stiffly. “My name is Asha Greyjoy. I am the queen of the Iron Isles. Or I would be, if my uncle Euron had not usurped me.”

Howland nodded. But his eyes and ears were for his daughter. “Meera. Are you… are you alright?”

“I am,” she said, and swallowed deeply. “But… but…”

“He stayed,” she said, and then tears were coming out, tears of exhaustion and elation and pure, unstoppable sadness, like he had never seen. “I told him to go, but he wouldn't listen. He stayed. He stayed.”

Howland felt his stomach clench. Oh, Ned. I am so sorry. “What happened?” he asked, already knowing. “Meera, what happened? We have had no news from Winterfell in weeks—”


Chapter End Notes

Thanks very much for reading. If you liked it, don't forget to follow and favourite, and to leave a review if you want to. Let's get off to a good start.

I promised you November, and I promised you Meera. So you should take this as proof that I never lie...

The show has a tendency to take the wind out my sails with these sorts of things. Fortunately, they haven’t gotten round to Howland Reed yet, and maybe never will. So even though we're all familiar with the TOJ story, I hoped you enjoyed your first (and only) look into the mind of this enigmatic character.

Howland was enjoyable to write as far as he's mysterious, but damn, that man is depressing.

So, now onto general things:

You'll have noticed that I went with Knights of the Nightingale as the title rather than Hour of the Nightingale. Mostly because I had all my files labelled as Knights from a while back, and it felt strange to change them, but also because I liked the stupid pun. So, yeah, it's "Knights". Either way, it's a better title than "The Sunset Kingdoms", which was a bit lifeless.

On the epitaph: I was tempted to go with the bit from Thomas Babington Macaulay on Horatius: "And how can man die better..." and all that, but the Marvell just stuck out to me. Ostensibly it's about sex and carpe diem, but at the same time, I think it has weird thematic appropriateness, especially in the last couplet: "Thus, though we cannot make our sun / Stand still, yet we will make him run." Which is an all-around great line.

But you don't care about the epitaph. It could be "you want the good girl, but you need
the bad pussy," for all you care. Andrew Marvell didn't win any Emmy awards, did he?

(I'll hold back on my criticisms of D & D before I hyperventilate. Since I've stolen bits from their work for KOTN, it's kind of hypocritical, anyway.)

For ye literary folk, there's some Paradise Lost hidden in here, specifically when Howland's talking about the Tourney of Harrenhal as some sort of conventional epic, and I stole a few bits from the opening of Book IX. That bit of description - Lyanna's dress and the pageantry of the tourney - is my favourite part of the chapter. And most of it isn't mine.

Moving on to stuff you probably actually care about:

When will more chapters be coming out? Not for a while, I'm afraid. The prologue will stand alone for a bit, but you shouldn't expect anything else until the end of this month, or until early December. I hope to get chapters 1-10 up by Christmas, though, as they act as a sort of prologue to the action - the first of seven loosely defined parts into which the story is broken up. There's a fair bit of talking in there, but on the whole the plot gets moving much faster than it did in TSK - in particular, I'm thinking of a few early skirmishes against the wights.

What will happen? Well, obviously, I can't tell you that, but I consider it to be closer in style to ACOG than TSK, just bigger and better. It's a lot faster paced than TSK. And a lot shorter, probably coming in at around 350K-400K words (though we know how I am with estimates). I'm looking at 80-90 chapters. In terms of big battles, I can count four that will be on the scale of "The Dance of Dragons" from TSK, with multiple POVs in one chapter, and a lot of smaller skirmishes. In terms of POVs, we had a minor purge at the end of TSK. You should expect to see a lot more of the "classic" POVs, though the new ones will come up and of course, we will not lack for non-POV characters.

I like to think it will be pretty great.
Icicles were forming on the ceiling of his cell, each as long and pale as a corpse’s finger. Theon sat far away from them, cringing in the corner among the folds of the cloak Euron had given him. The cloak was fine wool, with stitching in silver thread, and sable around the collar. A proper princely cloak for our Prince of Winterfell, Euron had said.

Theon refused to wear it. He was freezing, but whatever smidgen of honour he had left prevented him from putting on clothes that had once belonged to the Starks. And especially not this cloak. It had belonged to Ned Stark once, and that was reason enough not to wear it, but Euron said his thralls had found it beneath the heart tree when the siege was over. Where they found Bran.

Sometimes he tried to convince himself that he had done all he could. I told him he should have run. But he could have done more, if he hadn’t been so afraid. I could have died for him. I should have died for him. I should have died for Robb, too. I should have died a long time ago.

But Euron refused to let him die. “I think you should suffer,” his uncle said. “Don’t you think so, too? Don’t you think you should suffer for what you’ve done?”

Theon could not deny it, but he’d learned under Ramsay Bolton’s tutelage that you did not have to mean something to say it. “Yes,” he said. “I should suffer.” But he didn’t dare let himself believe it. If he did, he would become Euron’s pawn. I have to remember who I am. I have to remember that I chose to go to Bran, to beg him to surrender, that I still have free will. I know my name.

“Theon Greyjoy,” he would say to himself when he could not sleep. “Theon Greyjoy. My name is Theon Greyjoy.” It wasn’t that he feared forgetting it especially, but he feared that the other one might come back. The other, whose name rhymed with freak and weak and meek…

I was never him. I was me the whole time, I was just too scared to remember it. I am me now. He hugged that fact close to him. It served him better than any cloak could.

He was never entirely alone down here in his cell. Most of the time his company were rats. He could hear them scrabbling behind the walls. There was a whole other Winterfell back there, a warren of corridors and stairways and cubby-holes. Yet those secret ways were not known to Theon. Those were for the Starks alone.
On the stairs above, he heard footsteps. Someone was coming. Maybe it was time for Euron’s visit. He wasn’t quite sure if the visits were regular, since he had no way of telling time, but Euron didn’t leave him entirely alone, lest he go insane. His uncle didn’t want that.

*Which means he still needs me for something.* Most of his time was spent wondering what that something was.

Pushing with his arms, Theon stumbled to a standing position as the footsteps passed through the door at the bottom of the stairs. And then there was light, and two of Euron’s mutes emerged into his cell. Theon tried to meet their eyes, but they did not even spare him a glance. They grabbed him up by the arms, and dragged him along, driving him up the stairs as you might drive a herd of cattle. And then, simple as that, they were out in the courtyard.

When the Boltons had ruled in Winterfell, there had been a sense of something not being right, as though the stones knew that the castle’s inhabitants were usurpers, and had turned cold in response. But now, the castle walls were not icy and hostile. They were just dead. Euron’s assault had left the walls mostly untouched, but this was not the Winterfell that Theon Greyjoy had grown up in.

Likewise, the man sat at the high table in the great hall could claim to be many things, but never lord of this castle. Euron Crow’s Eye sat in that stone seat where Ned Stark had once sat, and Robb after him; the seat where, only a couple of weeks ago, Bran had received the turncloak, looking so much like his father that night. Three boiled eggs were set before the king. He was busy knocking the top off one, with much pleasure, as the mutes led Theon up to the dais.

Euron wore his Valyrian steel armour, black and strangely supple-looking. He had a new crown now, too. It was, he claimed, forged of bones he had taken from the dead Starks in the crypts. In the middle was Ned Stark’s skull, he said, though Theon did not think that was true; he vaguely remembered Lady Dustin saying she had intercepted Lord Eddard’s bones in the south, and fed them to her dogs – or intended to. But there was part of a skull there nonetheless, and fingers, and a bit of jawbone. Euron’s men had spent days opening up the old tombs and ransacking them.

“The prince of Winterfell!” Euron called. “Come, beloved nephew, and sit by my side.” He motioned to the nearest chair. Theon sat. “It has been a few days since we last spoke, hasn’t it?” said his uncle.

“I don’t know,” said Theon.

“I think it is. We must do this more often, truth be told. Though we will be seeing a lot more of each other anyway on our way north.” He grinned at Theon’s expense. “Yes, nephew. We are leaving, and so soon, and in a blizzard at that. It will be an arduous journey up to Castle Black, but I imagine you’re more than used to a little discomfort.”

“Yes,” Theon said quaveringly. On the one hand, the road was a place away from his cell. It led to light, and hope. But on the other hand, he did not want a part in any plan of Euron’s. “Why are we going to the Wall, Your Grace?”

“I said we were going to Castle Black.” Euron smiled, at some joke only he knew. “Not to the Wall. But since you ask, we are going north to meet with some allies. Someone who understands our cause. Someone to whom I made a promise, a long time ago.”

Theon shivered as he stared at his uncle’s smiling eye. *What are you?* He knew that he was not looking at a mere man. Ramsay Bolton and his father had been merely cold, and disposed to cruelty. Euron was something far beyond that. *He is not a man at all,* thought Theon.
“Perchance you have heard the story,” said Euron, breaking open an egg, “of how I lost my mind during a storm near Valyria. Of how I had my men lash me to the mast of the Silence, and afterwards, I had their tongues cut out so they would not tell of my misdoings.”

“I have heard that tale, Your Grace.” With Euron it was always best to tell the truth. Except when it wasn’t.

“Oh, you have? And did you think it was true?”

“I… Your Grace, I…”

“I won’t leave you to agonise over what to say, dear nephew. I’ll put you out of your misery.” He winked. “It isn’t true. But there’s a reason why that tale has spread… come now, Theon, if I truly had lost my mind during a storm, and I didn’t want anyone to know, my crew would have had their throats cut, not their tongues. No. So what happened, hmm? What do you think?”

Theon shivered again, the spasm racking him to the bones. Euron gave him a piteous look, then called to one of his guardsmen, “Fetch my nephew some hot wine. He looks like he could do with it.”

“I…” Theon’s mouth was dry. “I’m not going back to my cell?”

“No. I am prepared to grant you the Stark boy’s former chambers. As befits the prince of Winterfell.” The cruel smirk again. “If you perform one task for me, you shall sleep in a warm bed tonight, with a hot fire and a hot meal in your belly. Even a girl, I think. That can be arranged. I imagine we can find a girl who will want a hot bed for the night, too.”

“What task?” asked Theon.

“I’m getting to that. Have you thought of an answer yet?”

With Euron, you always had to consider the absurd first. So Theon said, “They cut out their own tongues, Your Grace.”

Euron laughed. “Well done, nephew! See, we are finally beginning to understand one another! Yes, they cut out their own tongues, and willingly at that. It had to be like that. My men fear me, but if I went round cutting out tongues, even they would not be above mutiny. So: why do you think they cut their tongues out?”

The answer was obvious to Theon’s mind. It was the same with me, when Ramsay flayed my fingers. “Because they were afraid. And in pain. And cutting out their tongues was the only way to make the pain stop.”

“Very good,” said Euron, smiling. “And what sort of fear and pain would have led them to that?”

The same thing that makes me afraid of you. “Something otherworldly. That… that horn of yours, Your Grace—”

“Yes!” Euron clapped his hands together. “I must confess myself impressed, Theon. I didn’t think you had it in you. Thinking like that, I mean. Your sister certainly didn’t.” He must have seen Theon flinch at the mention of Asha, for he smiled. “Oh, the wonders of having no cock, Theon.”

What did you do with Asha? he had asked, the first time Euron brought him up into the great hall. What did you do, not what have you done, because, in truth, he already knew. It made things easier when Euron told of how he had bound her hands and feet together, and tossed her overboard
“Where were we?” said Euron. “Ah, yes. The Horn. Oh yes, it gives me command over the dead, and a few other things, as the Night’s Watch will have discovered, but really it is little more than a trinket, like all of the metal and stones I discovered in Valyria. No, Theon. It was not what we found in that storm that haunted me and drove my crew to madness, Theon. It was what we did not.

“Alas, Valyria! A mighty civilization destroyed by the madness of a few warlocks, perhaps on purpose, depending on who you ask. Thousands of men, women and children, dead, thousands of thousands. So where were all the bones? Where were the fallen temples and the towers, preserved in ash for ever more?

“They were in the water, Theon. The years had changed them, turned them into dust, and then into nothing at all. They were in the sea, all the magic and sorcery of ages past, in the bones, in the stones. They were in the salt water that splashed onto our decks, into our eyes and mouths. And sorcery, like a fine wine, only ripens with age. By the time we left Valyria, my crew was mad, spouting prophecies at one another, screaming, burning. They cut their own tongues, ears, fingers, slit their own throats. I alone endured. Well, almost.” He pointed to his eye, the one hidden under the patch. “Days and nights of prophecy and secrets and horrors. It was like… you know when a woman rides you hard and angry, and suddenly you can take no more, and there is that tremendous release, especially when you have gone so long without… it was like that, for days on end. I fell into the sweet embrace of Lady Prophecy, and she lay upon me and fucked me till I was on the brink of death. When I could finally endure it no more, I put out my own eye, and the pain drove the madness out.”

Except it never truly left you, Theon thought.

“By then I had seen all I needed to know. I sailed to Braavos and hired a Faceless Man to throw your father from a bridge. I won the kingsmoot. The Damphair and his wet god put up a feeble defense, but I won all the same, and sacrificed both my brother and the Drowned God to the storm. I sailed into Oldtown and received the Horn the Faceless Men had procured for me. Victarion’s vengeance came at exactly the right time; both his fleet and mine burned to ashes on the Honeywine. I had never really expected to take Oldtown, nor did I particularly want it, so that was no great disappointment. It might even be of help. The lords of Westeros think I am doomed and gone. When the Iron Fleet sails into Lannisport and Seagard and up Blazewater Bay, they will shit their breeches.”

The doors of the great hall opened, down the far end. Euron tapped hard on his egg, breaking its bald skull. “I promised you hot mulled wine, but I fear it will have to wait. One of my wholes has returned.”

The boy who approached them now was no more than thirteen years of age, but he carried himself with an arrogant confidence far beyond that. He had Euron’s look, tendrils of greasy black hair falling from his brow, and ice blue eyes.

“The gods erred,” Euron whispered to Theon, “when they chose the terms of sacrifice. They loved their sons and daughters, and they assumed that men would love theirs. But I have sired tens of sons and daughters, and the only love I feel for them is the love for what their sacrifices have brought me.” He smiled through chillingly white teeth. “And I do love them for those sacrifices.”

Theon shivered again. On the march from the coast to Winterfell, he had overheard the tale of how Euron had sacrificed thirteen of his sons and daughters in a ceremony on Pyke, in order to raise the dead to march alongside the living.

“Harlon,” greeted Euron, in that mocking tone of his. “My beloved son. I was just talking with my
nephew here. You needn’t worry, I’m not seeking to replace you. Theon and I are quite done.”

Theon managed a nod. “You… you said you had a task for me?”

“Ah. I almost forgot.” Euron beckoned over one of the mutes who had brought Theon into the hall. “Wulfe will take you out to the kennels. There’s something there I need you to take charge of. From there, you’ll go out of the gate, and you’ll put some distance between yourself and the castle. The wolfswood should do nicely. And then you will hide this object I am entrusting you with somewhere not even I could find it. Simple as that. You understand?”

“I understand.”

“And when you come back, you can have a hot bath, and a bed, as I promised. I keep my promises, Theon. You’ll soon find that out, to your benefit. Go now, with Wulfe.”

Theon went, following the mute. He tried to make out what Euron was saying to the bastard boy, but his uncle was speaking in a soft, fervent voice, so it was impossible to know what he was saying.

The mute, Wulfe, led him out the way he had come. But instead of turning towards the First Keep and descending to the cells, they went along the walkway, up one short flight of steps and another, making their way through the warren of interlinked passages and bridges that tied the castle of Winterfell together. At one point Theon stumbled, his legs unused to the strain, and had to grab a stone banister for support. The surface was colder than any blizzard he had ever known, rejecting the warmth of his skin and his touch. Droplets of meltwater crawled like beetles over his hand.

And then the mute abruptly stopped, in a small yard. Theon faintly remembered he had once waited here for a plum-breasted washerwoman to finish her work so he could take her up for the night. But the washerwoman was long gone, and so were her plums, and so was Winterfell’s beating heart. Instead, one thing waited for him in the courtyard. A hand-pulled cart, its contents covered by a sheet of tarpaulin.

The mute jerked his head towards the cart.

“What’s underneath?” asked Theon, as he hobbled towards it. But of course the mute could not answer, and did not. And he didn’t have to, not really, because Theon already knew. He could have lifted up the sheet to look, but what was the point, other than to remind him that he had failed?

Once he had picked up the cart, the mute ushered him out of the yard, and across the castle, bumping up and down stairs and through narrow passages until they made it back to the main gate. “Who goes there?” a voice called down from the towers. That’s strange, Theon thought, as he always did whenever this happened. Euron’s army still had living men with voices, reavers and sailors who might well have served on King Balon’s warships in the past. Why did they stay with a man who fought alongside the dead?

“Who goes there?” the voice shouted again.

“Th-Theon,” he called up, quavering. “Theon Greyjoy.”

A gob of spittle flew down from overhead. “Theon Turncloak, you mean,” said the man.

“Theon Turncoat,” said a second voice, that of his companion. “Theon Turncunt.” There was a bark of rough laughter.

Theon cleared his throat. “King Euron wants—”
“Aye, we know what he wants.” The portcullis was already rolling upwards. Theon did not understand how they could now – unless Euron shared his plans with everyone nowadays – but he was not about to question them. He took the cart’s handles and dragged it out of the gates behind him.

Outside the walls of Winterfell everything was silent. The winter town had been burned and ransacked. The brothels where he had spent many nights as a youth were now ashes and cinders, and all the whores were long fled. I was in there with Ros once, he recalled, looking up at the ruins of one tall house. And again, when I took Robb to see his first girl. Tears pricked at his eyes. After he passed the house he did not dare to look back. I made my choice. This is my penance. To always seem free, but to never truly be so. Sometimes he wondered whether his brief spell of freedom had been the gods’ continued punishment. Had they given him Asha back just so they could tear her away from him again?

I deserve it, he thought. No amount of time can erase what I did. Nothing can erase the stain. It was ingrained in the way he walked, the way he spoke. Turncloak. He was broken, and could never be fixed.

It was a hard climb to the hill where the wolfswood started, but no harder than anything else. Theon dragged the cart, continuing in his shambling, proud step, till he reached the top. The mute, Wulfe, had abandoned him, and there was no one else out here. The sentries on the castle walls were fading into the fog. If he fled and hid, they probably would not catch him. But he did not dare. And even if he did run, where would he go? He was alone now.

Then the growling started, from the thicket to his left, and then the wolf came out. Its fur was grey, so it did not blend in entirely with its surroundings, but it was easy to see how it had hid here so long. The eyes were yellow, with a hint of blue at the very centre: like the blue spark that burned at the very heart of a flame.

Direwolf, not wolf. Theon licked his cracked lips. “Summer,” he said, in the quietest whisper. “Summer, I—”

The wolf bared his teeth, but did not spring. Theon held his ground as Summer came closer. Partly because he was too afraid to move, but partly because he did not think he should run. When Summer was only a couple of feet away, he suddenly turned his head to look at the cart, sniffing faintly. He knows, too. And he doesn’t have to look, either. A low growl rose in Summer’s throat as he pawed at the frame of the cart. Then he directed it towards Theon, more loudly this time. The meaning was clear.

“I can’t,” Theon said. It might be mad to talk to a wolf, but he was certain Summer understood him, somehow. “I have to bury him. Euron said—”

The growl again. This time the meaning was plainer. He is mine. I am his. Leave him with me.

Euron would know, of course. He would know that Theon had not done his task properly… but had he done anything wrong, in truth? Hide him somewhere I will not find it, he had said. If Theon did not know where it was hidden, then Euron would not know either.

And the wolf was right. This is not my place, thought Theon. He stepped away from the cart.

Afterwards, he remembered watching as Summer pawed beneath the woollen sheet, and he remembered turning away and listening as the body was dragged off. But he remembered little else. And as he set off down the hill back towards Winterfell, he did not look back.
Euron was true to his word. He put Theon up in the Great Keep, in the bedchamber that had once belonged to Eddard Stark, a place he neither belonged nor deserved to be. But after supper and his first hot bath in years, as he settled down among the wolfskins and the hard black wood and the dusty grey tapestries, the door opened, and Euron entered.

“Nephew,” he said, “come with me. I have something I would like to show you.”

They went back out to the yard, Theon shadowing his uncle. As they descended the stairs of the Great Keep, he wondered whether Euron had tricked him again. Had he shown Theon this brief taste of luxury, just to have him thrown back into a cell?

But instead they went out into the godswood. The night was very cold, and very quiet; where ravens had once stirred in the bones of the heart tree, there was nothing at all. Only silence.

Half a dozen figures waited in front of the tree, all cloaked and hooded. Theon’s heart thumped with terror when he saw them – an audience – but they were not waiting for him. Instead, it was Euron’s mongrel son they dragged out into the courtyard, handled by two burly mutes. The boy had been beaten, there was a crust of blood on his lips, and his hands were bound. Harlon, remembered Theon, you have to know your name. His eyes, which had earlier been so defiant, were bright with tears. This time, he truly looked his age.

Euron greeted the boy with exuberance. “My beloved son!” he called. “We meet again! Twice in one day!”

“Father.” Harlon was quivering on his knees, shaking. Fool, Theon thought, that is what he wants.

“Father, these men, I’m sorry, I don’t know what I did.”

Euron knelt beside the boy, and placed a hand on his cheek. “You did nothing wrong, my boy. Nothing wrong. I was just a little unsure, that is all. Of your loyalty.”

Harlon shivered. “My… my loyalty?”

“And of your love for me.”

“I… but Father, I… I do love you.”

“Of course you do.” The Crow’s Eye stretched out his arms, and the boy fell into them, still shuddering a little. Euron tousled his hair, and kissed his brow, and squeezed him tight, and Theon knew what was about to happen, and so did everyone except the sacrifice himself.

The first thing he heard was a wet gurgling noise, which seemed to come from far off. Then Harlon seemed to slump, and then he fell in his father’s arms. When Euron stood up, the boy fell back onto the ground, still convulsing a little, spitting up foam. Euron did not even wait for him to die; instead, he turned and addressed the crowd. “Another blessing upon us. That should appease the god while we march to Castle Black, don’t you think?”

“Aye,” answered one of the figures. “That should suffice.” She had a woman’s voice, but it was lower than it should have been, and harsh as a knife scraping along bone, and deeper still. “For now.”

Just then the moon stared out from behind the blindfold of clouds, and Theon caught a glimpse of her face. Instantly his legs went to water, and he fell down, as the air turned to ice around him, as he stared up into those blue blue eyes. He had heard the stories, of course. Once, when he was a boy newly arrived to Winterfell, he had asked as Old Nan why the Starks kept the crypts so securely locked and bolted all winter. “It’s not them that’s trying to get in that they’re worried about,” the old
woman said, “it’s them that’s trying to get out.”

She was an Other.

But that was not what frightened him.

He knew, now, why the Starks of Winterfell buried their ancestors with iron swords across their laps. He knew, too, why they only buried their men. He knew, too, that Ned Stark had broken that rule, without ever knowing the cost. And he knew that face. He had only ever seen her in stone, or heard of her in stories, but he knew that face.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for the fantastic response to Chapter 1. Hopefully, we can keep this going as we continue through the story.

***

So...

...zombie Lyanna. Which lends some support to a certain theory, which I alluded to way back in the good old days of A COAT OF GOLD.

I have to say that Euron is a hell of a lot of fun to write for, even if he is completely horrifying. Hopefully, I can do justice to his character, and to Theon's, as I sort of failed for both of them in THE SUNSET KINGDOMS - in my defense, neither of them had much of a story to tell.

(On that note, much as I think Euron was a lot better in Season 7 than the travesty we got in Season 6, he's still not *the* Euron. So you should consider the Euron in this series to be book!Euron, who is one... uh... uh... strange guy.) Yeah.

Anyway, this should act as a taster for all the creepy stuff that’s going to be back in this final part of the series, so you can expect quite a few chapters like this.

***

This chapter had a child sacrifice, and I think there are implications that a lot of rape and violence has happened in the scarred Winterfell. Which makes it, I think, appropriate for this (possibly patronising) disclaimer: KNIGHTS OF THE NIGHTINGALE is not going to be all sunshine and flowers. Parts of it get very, very dark. Major characters will die, some of them for no reason at all. There will be rape, torture, and heavily sexualised content, and graphic violence that may and probably will disturb some viewers - both implicit and explicit. While I have no intention to create controversial situations for shock value, I don't intend to tell this story through rose-tinted glasses, as it does not warrant this.

***

Next chapter: we go up to the Wall.
As he watched, a great piece of the Wall’s façade detached itself, and came raining down on the stables where they had been mere moments before. Sam quickened his pace, following the vague light of Melisandre’s torch. *Just a little further,* he told himself, *just a little further.* “Just a little further, Jon,” he called out. But Jon did not respond. Either he could not hear him, or—

No. I will not believe that. Because if he is, we are all doomed. Sam stumbled forwards another step, then collapsed onto a deep pile of snow, landing on his arse with Jon’s head lolling against him. He nearly sobbed with frustration, but then found his feet again, and turned to Melisandre, calling over the wind. “Where is it? Where’s the tunnel?”

Then he realised the red woman was gone. The sunlight was gone too. Thick clouds descended overhead. Grey shapes emerged on the edge of his vision, ragged and tattered, shambling closer with every second that passed. Beside Sam’s left leg, Ghost bared his teeth. Sam clasped shivering fingers around the hilt of his sword. *They are here.* Melisandre had left him, everyone else was fled or dead, and—

“Tarly!”

*That’s wrong,* Sam thought, squinting at the approaching figures. *The dead can’t speak.* He held his breath, and pursed his lips in cold, silent prayer, squeezing the fingers tighter, tighter, tighter—

“TARLY!” A hand grabbed his shoulder and wrenched him round. Tormund Giantsbane, the big wildling, frost in his already frosty beard. “Stop gawping, now, and let’s get out of here!”
They are wights, he realised. Then Ghost growled again, and his senses returned. He picked up Jon’s legs. “Help me carry him!”

Tormund took Jon’s arms, and together they bore him across the remains of the courtyard, as snow and ice rained from the sky. Pieces of the wooden hoarding atop the Wall, and the scorpion defenses which Othell Yarwyck had spent so long building came crashing to earth. Men smashed themselves to red smears in the snow as they fell. The wind howled from the north, hurling angry hail against Castle Black’s ancient keeps and shaking them to the foundation stones.

Tormund pointed. “The wormway!” The door was still open a crack. When Sam looked over his shoulder, he caught a glimpse of fiery red silk and black wool. Melisandre was waiting; she had not abandoned him after all. She had brought his black brothers. Mother have mercy. And the Lord of Light have mercy too, I suppose.

They swarmed around him. Dolorous Edd’s voice was in there somewhere and Mully’s somewhere else, and Pyp’s, and Iron Emmett’s. They helped Tormund and Sam with Jon, and then, together in formation, they retreated back to the wormway. When he felt wooden boards and earth beneath his feet instead of just snow, Sam fell down and nearly wept. But he was a man of the Night’s Watch, and he could not. He looked up just in time to see Tormund and Iron Emmett wrestling the great wood-and-iron doors shut. A final glimpse of the world outside revealed an avalanche coming down, a great wave of snow and wood and stone, and everything between, barreling towards them. If they had not found me, I never would have made it, Sam thought, breathing hard.

Then the doors slammed shut, and Tormund Giantsbane brought the bar down hard, putting four inches of ironwood and steel between them and the winter. Sam had no clue if it would hold, but all they could do was stand by the door – shouldering it closed, as if that would make a difference.

Dolorous Edd was the first to break the silence. “Were there any more out there?”

No one wanted to answer that question. But Sam found himself opening his mouth anyway. “I didn’t see them. But maybe that was because I was so busy with…” He motioned towards Jon. Or, rather, Jon’s body, completely still on the floor of the tunnel.

“He is dead,” Melisandre said.

“What happened?”

Val’s question was so absurd that Sam almost laughed. “To Jon? To the Wall?” He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“We should take his body somewhere,” said Dolorous Edd.

Mully stepped forwards. “The others are gathering in the Shieldhall.”

And the Others are gathering above our heads, even now. They’re probably crossing the Wall as we speak. But it was no good to dwell on things they could not change… and if the gods were good, if they had one ounce of mercy in the hearts, then the barricade of fallen snow between the wormway entrance and the world above might stop the wights from getting through, for now.

“Not there,” said Sam. “Not the Shieldhall. He deserves to… to rest in peace.” The words felt strange, as though it were someone else’s tongue in his mouth. Yes, rest. And tomorrow, he’ll just get up, and everything will be back to normal, and—

“To his chambers,” Dolorous Edd ventured. “No one will disturb him down there. We can still get to them through the wormways.”
“They don’t know,” said Mully. “In the Shieldhall, they don’t know what’s happening. It’s chaos down there.”

“Someone has to tell them,” said Sam, and then, realising that no one else would do it, and also that he did not want to be alone with Jon’s body, he knew it must be him. Him, the craven, facing down an army of wildlings, Northmen and his own Sworn Brothers, half of them furious in their anger, half of them utterly terrified by what they had seen up above. He swallowed. “I’ll do it,” he said, first to himself, then more loudly. “I said, I’ll do it.”

“Good on you, Slayer,” said Mully. Sam stepped away from Jon’s body so Mully could lift one end of the stretcher, while Iron Emmett took the other end. Val followed them, and the three of them set off down the tunnel, their torches fading with every step.

“We’ll get everyone into the hall,” said Dolorous Edd, before departing with Pyp.

Eventually only Sam, Melisandre, Tormund and a few other brothers whose names he did not know remained.

“I’ll come with you, lad,” said Tormund. “You’ll have to do the talking, mind. He’s your crow brother, not mine.”

“He was everyone’s brother,” said Sam. But not anymore. He’s not anyone’s brother any more.

“Aye,” Tormund said, “I suppose he was, in a way. Without him…” Abruptly, he set off down the tunnel, leaving his thought hanging in the air. No one wanted to say it aloud, but they all knew that, without Jon Snow, the feeble alliance that kept them all alive was no more.

Maybe, Sam mused, they could pretend that Jon was alive, and not tell anyone what had happened. The Sealord’s steward had done that once, in Braavos; he had pretended that his master was abed with some contagious disease, and had ruled for the better part of a year before anyone realised that something was wrong. But here, we need a leader, and desperately, and now. The corpse of Jon Snow could not lead them in the fight against the Others. Tormund seemed the most likely person to take over, but that still left the Night’s Watch leaderless, rudderless in these times—

Sam put the thought out of his mind as they entered the Shieldhall. All at once he was assaulted by a wall of shouting, by stamping feet and the rolling thunder of men pushing towards the dais in their attempts to be heard. The very air stank of fear: that smell was ale drank too fast, and of sweat drying in the cold. Of fear, he thought. They are afraid. He would have to hide his own fear so as not to make those worse.

The raised dais at the front of the hall was unoccupied; this was for the Lord Commander and his companions, and none of them were there. Thus when he went up there, and stood in front of the hall, and called, “Everybody, can you just—!”, no one heard him, or cared. They were too ensnared in themselves. “My lords, will you just—!”

“QUIET, ALL OF YOU!” Sam would never understand how Tormund did it, but when he let loose that roar, the noise in the hall gradually died away. “Maester Tarly has something to say!” he growled.

Sam winced a little. They were all looking up at him, furtively, not really wanting to listen, but somehow bound to it. “Well,” he squeaked, then started again, “well, you see, it’s about the Lord Commander—”

“Speak up!” someone called.
Sam cleared his throat a second time. Now, now, I must say it now. He closed his eyes and let the words tumble out in one breath; “You see, the thing is, the Lord Commander, Lord Snow, Jon Snow, well, he’s dead.”

He expected the hall to dissolve into whispers, or maybe shouting. Part of him wanted it to, and then he would be lost among the waves of conversation.

Instead there was silence. A thousand blank eyes stared back at him.

“He’s dead,” said Sam, again. “Jon Snow is dead. He was found above in the kennels, stabbed.”

In the end it was the Greatjon Umber who asked the question, the question. “Who killed him?”

“We don’t know,” Sam said.

“Are you going to find out?” asked Tormund from his right.

“Yes. We should. We have to. We—” A thought came suddenly to him, and then, without really thinking, he said, “Whoever killed him… whoever it was, they are probably still here. At Castle Black. Maybe even in this room.”

“Why, though?” That was Alys Karstark. “Why would they want to kill him? He… he was…”

_He was the only one holding us together_, Sam thought, _and that is why he had to die_. “I don’t know,” he said, “but I think we can assume that whoever killed him is working with the Others.” The moment the words came out of his mouth they sounded insane, but when that hiss settled over the room, he knew that he was not alone in thinking that. “Whoever killed him is our gravest enemy, especially with—” He made a vague motion.

“—with the Wall coming down,” said Tormund.

“Well,” said Sam. “We don’t know that the Wall’s come down. Not all of it, at least.”

“You saw it yourself, Tarly.”

“Yes, but if it had all come down, we’d be dead. The tunnels aren’t strong enough to hold all the weight of the ice and snow. I reckon about half of it has fallen, no more. We’re still buried, but we can dig ourselves out, I think.” _And face whatever waits in the world above_. He imagined the army of the dead marching south in their thousands, as they had at the Fist of the First Men, the wights staring onwards blindly as they passed over the splintered wreckage of the Wall.

It was best not to dwell on that which he could not do anything about. Quietly, Sam turned his attention back to the hall.

“The letter,” called Lady Maege Mormont. “The letter from Winterfell arrived just before Lord Snow died. Is it fair to assume that his murderer and Euron Greyjoy are working together, then?”

“Aye,” said Sam. “And with the Others, too. We face enemies to the north and enemies to the south, and enemies to the west at the Shadow Tower, and soon there will be enemies to the east; Cotter Pyke has described the dead descending on Eastwatch-by-the-Sea.”

“So we’re surrounded,” said a familiar dour voice. Dolorous Edd had returned to the hall. “Oh, bloody great.”

“B-but,” said Sam, “the Wall coming down might have done us all a favour, actually.” He found
himself stammering, but strangely unable to stop. “I mean, if it’s buried us here, it may have buried the other castles along the Wall. The wights will have to dig through all the ruins to reach us.” It was a feeble hope, but it was all they had.

“How long will they take getting here, d’you reckon?” asked the Norrey, him of the prodigious beard.

“Hows,” said Dolorous Edd.

“Weeks,” said Sam.

“Weeks,” said Dolorous Edd. “I mean weeks. Maybe even months, you know. Or a year. They’re slow moving, these Others.”

There was some muffled rumbling from the hall. “The snow’s going to keep falling,” Sam went on, raising his voice now, “so if we can get out on top, we have some time to prepare fortifications. Palisades, maybe even a bit of stone, boiling oil and hoardings and pitch and fire arrows.”

“A lot of fire arrows,” added Edd helpfully.

Othell Yarwyck spoke up from further down the dais. “I’ll get my builders to it.” And Edd said that he would get the stewards to checking the larders and clearing out the above passages. “Well,” he said darkly, “we’ve no lack of snowmelt, and we’ve enough turnips down here to last until the Others kill us all. Shame Hobb’s still around, though. Couldn’t he have died instead of Lord Snow?” Three-Finger Hobb told Edd to go and fuck himself.

Sam was beginning to think they might have it all settled when little Lyanna Mormont spoke up at her mother’s side. “And what of Lord Snow?”

“My lady?” Sam said.

“You say that he was killed by someone at Castle Black, but as I see it, you have no clue who that might be. Which means there is a traitor among us, who will betray us all to the Others without a second thought. That is something we cannot allow.”

“Well,” said Sam. “We don’t know yet, but—”

“The little girl is right,” Tormund cut in. “Someone here murdered Jon Snow. One of you. And we can’t just put that aside.”

“One of the Northmen, no doubt,” said the flint-faced wildling called Alfyn Crowkiller. “The free folk understand the risks—”

“Take that back, you rogue,” said the Greatjon. “I remind you, these are Northern lands on which you and your pack of savages have settled. If it were not for our generosity—which you do not deserve—you would be rotting in the wastes beyond the Wall right now.” He gave a hoarse laugh, and turned his attention away from Alfyn to the hall entire. “It is obvious that the culprit is among these wildlings. Some revenge for an old injustice, no doubt. And now they have doomed us all.”

“You doom us all with your whining, old man,” said Alfyn Crowkiller.

“I’ll not have my honour challenged by a savage—!”

“Says the one who wanted us to abandon the Wall altogether and march to Winterfell.” Alfyn’s face contorted. “Is your loyalty to us, or to this squid king?”
“Don’t you dare question my loyalty, you oathless—”

“Quiet!” shouted Tormund. “If you squabble any longer, I’ll bang yer heads together!”

“I’ll question whatever I like,” said Alfyn.

“I said QUIET!” Tormund rose above the other’s shouts. “We’ll never get anywhere like this. So shut up, all of you. Like it or not, free folk and crows got to work together now. I’ll have none of this —”

“And who put you in charge, old man?”

For a moment there was quiet in the hall. Then, near the back, someone stood up. Sam squinted and saw that it was Morna, she of the white mask. “I do.” Alfyn turned to face her, and began to speak, but she cut him off. “Tormund had the most votes in the Lord Crow’s count. Not enough, but I had the second-most, and if you add Tormund’s votes to mind, that will carry him over half. Yes, I should lead the free folk. And when we hold this election again after the war is over, I will. But I know when something’s bigger than me. And we could do worse than Tormund Giantsbane, Alfyn. Gods forbid, we might choose you—”

“Woman,” growled Alfyn over the titters of laughter. “You do not hold any power—”

“I agree with her,” said Val, who must have snuck back into the room. “Tormund should be our leader. Aye, we might not have all wanted him. But it’s better than being dead.”

Then a third voice joined. Sam recognised Sigorn, the Magnar of Thenn. “You give me back Thenn when this is over, old man,” he addressed Tormund. “You leave us in peace, and we have a deal.”

Sam noted that the wildling seemed somewhat sullen. But then he saw that he was sitting next to his wife, Alys Karstark, and he reckoned she had been rather more willing than Sigorn had been. But if the Magnar had second thoughts, there was nothing he could do about it. All around him the other wildlings were making their pledges, and by then, Tormund was assured of their support. He would not be King-beyond-the-Wall as Mance Rayder had been, and the free folk would not kneel, but he would be followed nonetheless. Jon would be proud, Sam thought sadly.

“And what about the Watch?” asked Pyp. “Jon’s dead, we need someone of our own.”

“There’ll have to be a choosing,” said Edd.

Sam shook his head. “There’s no time for a choosing. We have to make up our mind, and fast. We need a leader quickly, before they get here.” He took a deep breath, expecting to be met with tumultuous shouting. “Does anyone want to volunteer?”

The silence in the room was even more dead than when Sam had told them of Jon’s death. It was not just that no one spoke, but no one seemed to breathe. Sam looked round the room, but no one would meet his eye, not Dolorous Edd, not Mully, not Othell Yarwyck or Iron Emmett or Pyp or anyone at all. And could you blame them? Who would want to be Lord Commander when the Wall was falling down, when the last man to hold the post had just been murdered, when they would almost certainly be the final holder of that post when the Others overran Castle Black?

We have to choose someone. Even if they do not want it. With nothing else to do, Sam turned towards Iron Emmett. He had been First Ranger after Alliser Thorne, and the Watch needed a fighter in the days ahead. “Emmett,” he began. “Would you—?”

“No. I’m busy training the lads, besides. First Ranger’s duties will only grow and grow.”
Resignedly, Sam moved on to Othell Yarwyck. He was not well-liked after his attempted betrayal of Jon, but the First Builder had been on the Wall for near twenty years. “First Builder, mayhaps you —?”

“Not for me, Tarly. Lord Commander’s gotta know how to speak and rouse the men. But the First Builder don’t have to.” He sagged back in his chair.

Sam turned his attention to the third of the Watch’s high officers: Dolorous Edd. “Look, Edd,” he said, “you’re damn depressing, but at least you know what you’re doing. You were on the Hardhome ranging, and you saw the Fist and Craster’s, and you understand the running of the castle better than anybody.” When Dolorous Edd did not speak, he continued. “Now, there’s no time for a proper vote, so I reckon we should just shout the names, and whoever’s name is shouted the loudest —”

“—so long as that name isn’t Edd,” said Edd. “Lord Steward is bad enough, thank you very much. No, the name I’ll be shouting is Sam. He was Jon’s best friend, he was the first to kill a white walker, he can read – which puts him above half of us – oh, and his name’s easy to shout.”

Sam stared back at him. _Me? Really?_ “Well,” he said, in a moment of giddiness. “I’ll do it if I have to.”

_Why did I say that?_ he instantly thought. But by then it was too late. Edd was chanting his name, and so was Iron Emmett, and then Pyp, and Mully, and even Yarwyck. Not because they wanted him as Lord Commander, but because they didn’t want to be forced into it himself. As the shouts of “Sam, Sam, Sam!” grew louder and louder, the only thing he could think was, _can a maester even be Lord Commander?_

In the end, it did not matter. He thought of the flood of arrowheads that had signalled Jon’s elections, the flood of stones spilling out of Aemon’s kettle and all over the hard black benches, and the Old Bear’s raven flying out and around the hall, screaming “Snow! Snow! Snow!” from the rafters. And then he looked around, in this same hall, this place that was so much fuller than it had been on that cold autumn night, and yet so much more empty. “Sam, Sam, Sam!” he shouted, and when the moments of madness had passed, there it was: the fact laid down bare. He was Samwell Tarly, and following some impossible twist in the story, he was the 999th Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch.

The meeting broke up after that. Most of them in the hall retired into the wormways, trying to find their own sleeping-holes and empty rooms in the castle to make their beds in, or joined Othell Yarwyck in trying to clear the snow that blocked the wormways. Sam, still half-dreaming, made his way out through the back entrance, accompanied by Tormund. As they made their way down towards Jon’s chambers where they had laid his body, he heard a voice from his left. “Lord Commander, Lord Commander!”

Sam turned. “Lord Ramsay,” he said.

“My lord. I hope I am not interrupting you unnecessarily, but I feel it is my duty to inform you that you have my fullest support in these trying times.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

“There will be those who seek to undermine you, but… well, Lord Snow and I had our differences, but we always had a common understanding that this threat was bigger than either of us.”

“Thank you,” Sam said again, unsure of what else to say. _What would Jon do now?_
Ramsay nodded. “I wish you good fortune, my lord.”

Sam returned the courtesy and walked past him. What Ramsay had said was true, he supposed. He did not hate the man as the Northmen did, but he did not like him either. But whatever his personal feelings, he would have put them aside for now.

Outside Jon’s door they stopped. “I had best get back to the Shieldhall,” said Tormund. “If you are in here, someone needs to be in there, making sure…”

“Yes.” Sam nodded. “I… Tormund, do you think… do you think…”

“Do I think that you’ll make a Lord Commander?” said the wildling. The friendly tone in his voice diminished. “I don’t know. He would have been better. But he’s gone.”

“Yes,” said Sam. “He would be. He was. But like you said, he’s gone…”

“He is.” There was nothing more to it. Tormund turned to go.

“Tormund,” Sam said, a little choked. “When they get above, tell them… they need to build a pyre…”

The wildling nodded. Then he turned and headed off down the corridor. Alone, Sam pushed open the door and entered Jon’s chambers.

The body was laid out on the table. *The body.* It was such a cold, uncaring term. After all the years they’d shared, from that first day in the training yard, to this dark lonely night here, Jon was just a body. And… “The last time I spoke to him, we argued.” That stung, even now. “We never argued. Or was he alive, when I came into the kennels…”

“He was lost by then, Samwell,” said a brittle voice. Sam might have been shocked by Melisandre’s sudden appearance, but he’d grown accustomed to things like this. But what did surprise him was the sight of her: the usually rich and fiery red of her hair and lips had darkened to wine, and her rings and silks no longer shimmered. More than that, she had a heavy red mantle around her shoulders, as if she were truly cold.

“How can you know?” asked Sam.

“The Lord knows—”

“So the Lord knew when Jon was dead.” Sam swallowed; there was some bitter taste in his throat. “But he didn’t know that he was going to die?”

Melisandre said nothing.

“Or he did. And so did you.” He could not say where the accusation sprung from, but the moment he spoke it, he knew it was true. *Of course she knew.*

The red woman’s lips moved very slowly. “*Daggers in the dark,*” she said at last.

“You knew that this would happen?”

It was a question with only one answer. And Melisandre’s lack of an answer was all the answer Sam needed.

“And now Jon is dead,” he said. “Because of you, your Lord, and your blindness.”
“I didn’t know,” Melisandre said. “I only suspected—”

“You only suspected. That’s a damn lot more than the rest of us knew.” His voice broke suddenly. “Why didn’t you tell him? Why?”

“I warned him.” She did not seem able to say more than three or four words at once. “I warned him. He did not listen. And I never thought—”

“No,” said Sam. “You didn’t think. Not once. And neither did I.” *If only I had stopped him that night. If I had told him more about the glass candle, I could have made him listen.* “What did you do with the glass candle?” he asked.

“It is in my chambers.”

“Have you tried—?”

“No yet. I thought... I thought the Lord Commander.”

“I am the Lord Commander now,” Sam said. “Give it to me.” He wanted to banish Melisandre to some distant corner of Castle Black.

“You do not know how to use it—”

“No. But I will not have you playing games behind my back. If I need you, I will call for you.” *Until then, be thankful that I am still mourning my friend. And do not give me a reason to tell the others what you have done. Or not done.* He did not say the last part, because he was not sure how to reply if she reacted angrily. But he did not have to, because Melisandre lowered her head, and then left the room.

He stared down at Jon’s body a while longer. They would have it washed and dressed, and until the builders managed to clear the heavy film of snow from above, they would keep the body in the underground larders; the cold would keep it from rotting. It was a strange thing to think of, trussing his friend up like a joint of meat. But they were all just that: meat. And the Others were descending to feast, and Euron from the south. There were enemies all around them, and no one had ever taught him how to cope with it all?

*Kill the boy,* he thought. It was the only lesson he had, though Aemon had never meant it for him. *Kill the boy, Samwell Tarly, and let the man be born.*

After a few moments, Sam became aware that he was no longer alone at his vigil. He *looked up expecting Val or Tormund, but instead it was Ghost.* The sight of the white wolf took Sam back to earlier that night, out in the snow. He would never have found Jon if the wolf was not howling. Ordinarily that would have been no strange thing; most wolves howled, after all. But not Ghost. In the years Sam had known him, Ghost never howled. Until tonight. For a while he stared into those bright red eyes, redder than any coals, yet stranger, somehow, not fire but... something else. He almost recognised the colour, but in the end it evaded him. Sam leant across, and ran his fingers through the pale fur on the wolf’s ears, and down his snout. “It’s alright,” he whispered, wondering how much of that Ghost understood. But it wasn’t.
First of all, I would like to apologise for the long wait you've all had to endure while waiting for this chapter.

Basically, I spent the entirety of November preparing for an interview at Oxford, and about one week after that recovering from that harrowing experience. Then I managed to lose my laptop charger, and Google Drive and Dropbox both exhibited mighty fuck-ups, and the dodgy Chinese company that was meant to be delivering the replacement messed that up too (though really I should have done my research and realised the price was too good to be true, and just Amazon-ned it anyway). Anyhow, even though I finished this chapter in late November, I've only just managed to get it up now.

It's alright, I suppose, though there's nothing particularly special about it. Sam managed to become LC and... you know what, I don't really want to go in depth on this. I just want to get the chapter uploaded.
There was a log fire burning in the hearth, yet Arya Stark was cold to her bones. And though the table before her was laid with more pastries and sweetmeats than she could ever eat in a lifetime, she felt absurdly guilty taking even one under the gazes of the siblings from whom she had been parted for so long.

For a long time the three Starks sat in silence. Sansa stared at Arya as if she might disappear again at any moment. Rickon fidgeted all the while, watching her with a toothy grin. Arya wanted to smile back, but she was not sure if she could. So she kept staring straight forwards, tight-lipped, feeling colder and colder by the moment.

It was Rickon who finally broke the silence. “The Hound told us you went to Braavos,” he said to Arya. “Did you really?”

“Yes.” She didn’t want to talk about her journey, but it was better than the silence. “All the way across the Narrow Sea, and back.”

“What was it like?”

“Very wet,” said Arya with a shrug. “There’s nowhere else in the world quite like it.”

“If you ever go back, can I come with you?”

“I don’t think I’m going back.” She thought of the kindly man, the waif, and of Jaqen H’ghar – and the Nightingale, too, if she counted as a Faceless Man at all. Though their expedition to King’s Landing to tame a dragon had failed, Arya doubted the cult of assassins would let her leave them so easily.

They could be anywhere. They could be here already. They could be sitting across from me at this table, wearing the faces of my brother and sister.

“Why did you go to Braavos?” Rickon asked.
Arya took a deep breath. She could not tell them about the Faceless Men, or about her brief encounter with Tyrion Lannister, or about Ferrego Antaryon or the months she had spent disguised as Daenerys Targaryen’s scribe. “I was training,” she said, finally.

“How training?”

“It’s a long story.”

Sansa seemed to understand that. “So is mine.” She was not lying – Arya could see it in the lines of her face, in her eyes, in her mouth. While I was off in Braavos, she had to find a way to survive alone. And Rickon did, too.

“And mine,” said Rickon. “But it’s our story, now.”

Arya met her siblings’ stares. “Yes,” she said, “it is.” She wasn’t sure if she meant it, but she tried to sound genuine.

In the long silence that followed, all that could be heard was the pitter-patter of the sleet that was starting to bounce off Raventree’s tiled roofs. There was snow falling, too. “Do you still remember the last proper snowfall at Winterfell?” Sansa asked, suddenly.

“Yes.” Or at least, she thought she did. It could have been any snowfall. Snow. That reminded her.

“Have you had any ravens from Jon? Or from Bran?”

Sansa shook her head. “Not for a while. Should we have?”

“No. I just thought….” Maybe Jon forgot as well. Maybe he forgot about Sansa, and Rickon, and even about me. But she knew that could not be true. He would not forget me. He would never forget me. Jon had loved her most of his siblings, except for maybe Robb, and Robb was dead. Unless he thinks I am dead, too. “I want to write to him. And to Bran.”

“Our ravens can’t get north,” said Sansa. “We haven’t had any proper news from above the Neck in a week. Not even from White Harbor. Lord Manderly has blockaded the port, and forbidden anyone from getting in or out.”

Arya nodded, but this was not what she cared about. “Do you have any letters from Jon?”

“A few. You can have a look, if you’d like.”

She nodded again. And said nothing more. She didn’t really know Sansa or Rickon, and she definitely didn’t know herself. So what else was there to say? Someone had once told her that words were wind.

“It’s been so long,” said Sansa. A long pause preceded her next words. “If they could see us now, do you think they’d be happy?”

“Who?”

“Mother. Father. Robb.”

They’re dead. They’re not happy. They’re not anything. Arya shrugged. “I don’t know. But I hope so.” That was the answer Sansa wanted, wasn’t it?

“I dreamed of Mother,” said Rickon suddenly. That took Arya aback. He knows. She stared at her little brother, trying to play the game of faces with him as the waif had once played it with her. How
“Now, Rickon,” Sansa was saying. “We both know that’s not—”

“He wasn’t dreaming,” Arya heard herself say. “I… I dreamed of her too.” And there was the first lie. She was certain it would not be the last.

“You did?” asked Sansa.

“Yes,” said Rickon. “I saw her. She was at the river. At the Trident.”

“But… but they’re just dreams.”

“You wouldn’t know. You wouldn’t understand.”

Sansa had never been a Stark as the rest of them had, Arya knew that much. *She was never truly part of the pack. She never loved Jon. She never listened to Father. She never wanted anything other than to be a princess and to live in the south.* Arya was not such a fool as to think that her sister had not changed since then – the years had not stood still for her, it was plain to see from her face – but Sansa was still not quite a Stark.

*Jon was never a Stark, not by name. And I cannot remember what being a Stark means. That leaves only Bran and Rickon…*

“What do you mean I wouldn’t understand?”

“It’s the wolves,” said Rickon. “I can see through Shaggy’s eyes, but you can’t because Lady is dead.”

“I spoke to Bran too,” Arya said, remembering faintly. “In Braavos. He talked to me, said he was some sort of magician. He made me remember things.”

Rickon nodded. “He’s the three-eyed raven.”

“What things?” asked Sansa.

“What?”

“You said he made you remember things. What things?”

“I…” How could she tell her this. “He made me remember you. I remembered what you looked like, what you sounded like… and myself. I remembered who we were, before…”

“Before we went to King’s Landing.” Sansa seemed to accept that rather easily. It was almost disarming to Arya. She wanted her sister to say, *how did you forget me?* That way she could tell the whole story. But instead the matter of the Faceless Men would remain a barrier among them, a part of her life that could not be explained, even now.

“I remembered other things,” she said, a bit shakily. “Like my list.”

Rickon asked, “What list?”

“The list of people I’m going to kill,” said Arya flatly. With Dunsen’s death at the inn, only four names remained. *Queen Cersei, Ser Meryn, Ser Ilyn, Raff the Sweetling.* And for all she knew, they might be dead already. Sansa would not know about the knights or the men-at-arms, but she would know about the queen. “Is Cersei still alive?”
Sansa hesitated a moment. “I think so. Yes, she must be. Jeyne Westerling got a letter from her sister. And she’s queen, now. In Casterly Rock, I mean. But the proper queen, not the Queen Regent. So they say.”

“Oh,” said Arya. She did not know how far away Casterly Rock was, but she supposed it must be on the other side of Westeros, because otherwise the sailors in Gulltown or Septon Meribald or someone in the Brotherhood would have mentioned it. “Well,” she said. “That puts an end to that.”

Sansa kept staring as though she’d seen a ghost. Which was true, Arya supposed, because here they were, ghosts to each other.

And then Rickon burst out laughing. “A list?” he said incredulously. “Really? A list, Arya?”

Arya smiled along with him. Yes, she wanted to say to Sansa, it was a joke, it was all just a joke, a silly trick I was playing on you to prove that I am your sister.

“You’ve got a sword,” Rickon observed.

“Yes. It’s called Needle. Jon gave it to me a long time ago, when I left Winterfell. I had lessons with my dancing master, Syrio Forel, First Sword to the Sealord of Braavos.” Slain by Meryn Trant. Queen Cersei, Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, Raff the Sweetling…

“I’ve got one too,” said Rickon. “A sword, I mean, not a list. Do you know how to use yours?”

“Yes.”

“Have you killed people with it?”

“Yes,” said Arya, with her eyes on Sansa. This time her sister did not flinch. She opened her mouth. “Arya, I—”

“Can we practise?” Rickon interrupted. “Together? Please?” He pressed his hands together and made a childish face at her.

Arya decided it might be best to get away from Sansa. “If you want,” she said. No sooner had she said the words than Rickon had jumped up from the bench and sprinted halfway down the hall. “Come on!” he was calling. “I’ll show you Shaggydog, too. You won’t believe how big he is now! And then we can visit Jeyne and Roban—”

“One moment,” Arya called back. “I’ll be out soon.” When he was gone, she turned to face Sansa again.

There was a long moment of silence at first. Then her sister said, “You said you’ve killed people.”

“Yes.”

Sansa took a deep breath. “And how did that make you feel?”

“I don’t know.”

“Was it…? was it…?” She did not seem capable of finding the words. “Why?” she blurted at last.

“Because I had to.”

“Because of Father?”
“When I escaped King’s Landing, I killed a stable boy. He tried to stop me and take me to the queen. So I stabbed him. That was all.”

“Only a stable boy?” A pause. “And how did you know he was going to take you to the queen?”

“Because he said he was going to take me to the queen.”

There was another long silence. Arya watched her sister closely. There was a very brief flicker of worry in Sansa’s eyes. If she had not spent so long playing the game of faces Arya would never have noticed it. But it was there, and she had seen it.

“What is it?” asked Sansa in the silence.

“Nothing. I’m going out to Rickon.”

“We should meet later.”

“Meet?”

“For supper, maybe.” Sansa chewed her lip. “You, me and Rickon. I just thought… since you’re home now, and everything.”

“This isn’t home.” Had she forgotten that?

“No. But it is a start.”

Arya nodded and left the hall. She knew her sister’s eyes were on her all the way.

It was snowing lightly when she got out to the yard. The sky was black, fading to grey where the sunlight was trying – and failing – to get through. It was an unnatural morning. Even Arya could see that. The red priest of Thors of Myr had said that the sky would clear later, but here and now she felt a little unnerved. It was, she thought, a little like being back in the House of Black and White again, with all the gods staring down from their inscrutible faces.

“Arya!” Her brother’s shout rang clear across the yard, turning heads. If the inhabitants of Raventree Hall did not know that she had returned, they did now.

Rickon had taken out a practice sword, and was clumsily outfitting himself with leather padding and a heavy iron helmet. Arya watched him as the swordsman helped him into his armour, trussed him up like a chicken. “Aren’t you going to get yours on?” he called to her.

Arya shook her head. With a whip-like movement of her wrist Needle was out of its sheath. “I don’t need it.” What was it Syrio Forel had said? *Swift as a deer. Quiet as a shadow. Quick as a snake.* And, *fear cuts deeper than swords.* He was right. It did.

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She waited for Rickon to get his armour on. “Right,” he said, as the last strap was done up. “I’m ready. Is that your sword? It’s very skinny—”

Arya went at him. The first thrust nearly overbalanced him, but he managed to twist away, and to be kind, she gave him a moment to straighten up. But then she was on him again, swiftly from the left, then the right, switching the sword from one hand to another. That made him step back a full three feet, putting as much distance between them as he could. Arya did not give him time to make a measured blow. She ducked beneath his hurried slash, twisted round, and brought Needle’s point up in the gap under his arm. If she pressed forward now, his whole arm would go dead. And if she went further than that, the blade would slide sweetly into his chest. “Done,” she said, quietly.
Rickon stared blankly down the sword. “How the hell did you do that?”

Arya did not answer. Instead she turned a somersault away from him, landed on the balls of her feet, and brandished her sword again. “If you watch more carefully,” she said, “maybe you’ll find out.”

For a moment the world held its breath. Then Rickon advanced, with a heavy two-handed stroke that came nearer than she had been expecting. Nonetheless she twisted away, leaping back across the square. She poked Needle out, catching Rickon unawares. *He is afraid of my sword,* she thought, *while I have no fear of his. And fear cuts deeper.*

Sometimes you knew what your opponent was about to do ages before they did it. So when Rickon stepped in close and turned her blade away, ready to shoulder her to the ground, Arya locked her feet together and jumped, away and out to the side. She landed smoothly and swept her trailing leg back; Rickon tripped, and fell flat on his back in the wet dirt of the training square, disarmed. Arya kicked his sword away.

From across the square she heard a whoop of laughter, and then clapping, and then a voice shouting, “Yeah! Go Arry!” Hot Pie lumbered towards them. “You did good there, Arry!”

“Thank you, Hot Pie,” said Arya stiffly. She offered a hand to pull Rickon to his feet. Her brother stood up, brushing off the splattered mud. And so Arya introduced the baker’s boy to the youngest son of Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell.

“Oh,” said Hot Pie. “More o’ you from Winterhell.”

“Winterfell,” Arya stressed.

“Oh. Sorry, m’lady.” After a pause, he added hopefully, “I saw you fighting. You were really good.”

“Thank you, Hot Pie.” There was something odd about this; he was just hopping from one foot to the other, looking lost. “What is it?” she asked.

“It’s Gendry.”

“What about him?”

“Who’s Gendry?” asked Rickon.

“A friend,” said Arya quickly, before Hot Pie could answer for her. “Me, Gendry and Hot Pie travelled together once. From King’s Landing.”

“After Father died?”

“Yes.” She turned back to Hot Pie. It was less risky than admitting all she had forgotten to Rickon. “What does Gendry want?”

“He was wondering if you wanted to talk. In the forge. Well… he wasn’t, but I said he should talk to you…”

“You said I should talk to him?” Arya frowned. “Wait… what?”

Hot Pie sighed. “I’ll tell you on the way.”

He did not tell her on the way. Instead he turned and said, “I didn’t like the way he was looking at you, m’lady.”
“Who?” said Arya.

“That squire. Watching you. You might have seen him. He was all blushing red, and everything.”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

Hot Pie shrugged. “Doesn’t matter, then. Sorry. It’s just, I didn’t like the way he was looking at you, and all.”

“You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Sorry. ’S just what friends do, though, isn’t it?”

Arya shrugged. It was the thought that counted, she supposed.

Gendry was standing over the bellows, heating up a piece of hot red steel, his face all screwed up from concentrating too hard. Either he did not hear Arya and Hot Pie come in –that seemed unlikely, given all the noise Hot Pie made – or he did not want to talk to them.

Hot Pie cleared his throat. “I told you,” he said. “I told you I could convince her.”

“Arya asked. Gendry didn’t answer. He just kept scowling.

“Remember when we used to do this at Harrenhal?” Hot Pie said brightly. “Meet, I mean. I would bring stuff down from the kitchens – well, I say that, but Arry would nick it, mostly, an’—”

“She doesn’t remember,” Gendry said flatly. “She doesn’t remember any of it. Or us. You don’t remember anything nowadays, m’lady.” He paused a moment, expecting her to speak. When she did not, he pressed on: “Back at the inn, you wouldn’t even have recognised Hot Pie if I hadn’t pointed him out to you.”

“I would have,” Arya lied. “I could never forget Hot Pie.”

“But you did.”

“I had a long journey.”

Gendry shook his head. “Oh, you might have. But even if you went halfway round the world for tens of years, you wouldn’t have forgotten us. You wouldn’t have forgotten Harrenhal.”

“I haven’t forgotten Harrenhal,” Arya shot back. “I didn’t forget you, or Jaqen, or—”

“Oh, you remember your foreign friend well enough. But what about us? Do you remember what you did at Harrenhal. What about the torturer? The one what broke his neck. What was his name?”

“He… his name was…”

“The Tickler.”

“The Tickler,” said Arya. That name had been on her list once. She could not remember the face that went with it. But she remembered the list.

“You said your foreign friend killed him with a whisper,” Gendry said. “But you gave him the name. You killed him, Arry. And you don’t even remember his name.” He shook his head reproachfully.
“What happened to you in Braavos?”

“I don’t know.”

“And I don’t believe you,” Gendry said. “I think you do know, but you just don’t want to tell me. And if you’re going to keep all these secrets from me, I don’t think we can be friends anymore, Arry. Or Lady Arya, I should say.” He put down his hammer and stormed out of the forge. Arya thought about going after him, but Gendry was stubborn and stupid: she remembered that much.

“Well,” said Hot Pie through the silence. “You’ve still got me, Arry.”

“Yes,” said Arya meaninglessly.

“He’ll come round soon enough. He’s been bitter ever since… well, for quite a while now, come to think of it. Ever since he found out that he was a king’s son. Strange, innit? To think he could’ve been sitting on the iron chair.”

“You mean the Iron Throne,” she said. “And no, he couldn’t have. He’s just a bastard. A stupid bastard.” She was angry at Hot Pie too, for bringing her here, but it was not worth losing him as well when he was pretty much all she had. So instead she turned and walked out before he had a chance to respond. Then she ducked behind a cart outside the stables, and waited until he had walked off in the wrong direction – searching for her – before creeping out.

Where to, now? Rickon would still be waiting for her in the yard, but if she went back there, she might never leave. I should explore, she decided. That would not do any harm. Raventree Hall was not particularly interesting, though. She climbed roof tiles and ducked behind chimneys, but there was little here to look at; a few malformed alcove gargoyles here, a screen of ivy that hid a pointless there. The only thing of any great interest was the godswood, with its massive dead heart tree that splayed across the yard like some drunk about to keel over for good. That would be better than nothing, though, she decided. It took her a while to find the right staircase, but eventually she found a likely looking set of servant’s stairs that rose towards an abandoned tower. She was halfway up, creeping on her tiptoes, where she heard the low thrum of voices:

 “…don’t trust her. She’s looking round like she’s never seen us before. Like she’s forgotten us.” Sansa, she realised with a start. That was wrong. Sansa did not hide out in a castle’s nooks and crannies.

“Was she always a fighter?” An older voice, and more gravelly.

“I’m… I’m not sure. She mentioned her dancing lessons in King’s Landing… dancing with swords. But in Winterfell, I don’t think so. Mother never would have let her.”

“I imagine Cat was offended by the very prospect.” Hearing her mother spoken of thusly, Arya supposed that the other voice must belong to her uncle Brynden Tully, the Blackfish. She tried to remember what she knew about him, but her mind was blank. “Well,” said the Blackfish. “I imagine Rickon will benefit from being knocked on his arse every now and again.”

“She was always wild,” Sansa said, slowly. “But never like this. She’s killed people, uncle.”

“You don’t know her story yet. If you were in her position, you might have been forced to do the same.”

“Yes. Only… when she told me, she didn’t seem bothered. Not one bit. I thought, if you’d killed someone, you’d be more… remorseful.”
“I don’t know.”

“Well, when we leave for Winterfell, I don’t want to be sharing my carriage with a remorseless murderer. And I don’t want a murderer around Rickon, either.”

“Well,” said the Blackfish, after a heavy sigh. “All I know is your mother wouldn’t approve. Not of this murdering business, but not of your disagreements either. Family, duty, honor.”

There was silence for a moment. Then Arya heard footsteps close above her, descending. She leapt from her perch on the stairs, and ran, three at a time, nearly twisting her ankle as she landed on the lowest step and darted round the back of the tower. A few moments later Sansa came out, followed by the Blackfish. Together they headed towards the castle without once looking back.

It was a moment before Arya realised she was in the godswood proper now, down among the bramble bushes and the naked trees. The snow on the ground was perhaps half an inch thick, and it was melting into sludge around her feet. More would fall tomorrow, she knew, but for she knelt on the damp blanket of leaves, beneath the goggle-eyed gargoyles that lined Raventree’s walls. The leaves were red, so the sludge looked a bit like entrails.

How were you supposed to pray? Had she forgotten, or had she merely never known? “Oh, gods,” she murmured, looking up into the tearful face, “oh, you gods…”

Just then the wind changed to blow against her, and as it did so, a solitary leaf detached itself from the tree and skated over her head, brushing through her hair, and as it moved it seemed to whisper her name: Arya…

Had it heard her, or was she just imagining?

Arya looked round. There was no one else there. Very quietly, she crept a step closer to the stump, and whispered, “Hello? I… I’m listening. If you’ve got something to tell me.”

Again, her name: Aryaaaaa…, followed by sibilant hissing, as if the voice were trying to say the word Stark but could not quite manage it. “Yes,” she said back. “I’m Arya. And you… you’re a tree. But… you might not just be a tree.” What were you supposed to say to gods? “I’m… I’m sorry. It’s been a long time since I was last in front of a tree. I was in Braavos, in the House of Black and White. That’s why I haven’t prayed to you.” She licked her lips, wondering at how silly this was, and how silly her next impulse was. “If… if you know where Fath—”

“Girl.”

Arya spun quickly, so quickly that even he seemed taken aback. “What do you want?” she said, her hand moving instantly to Needle.

Sandor Clegane looked down at her fingers curled around the blade’s hilt. “So you kept that, did you, eh? You kill anyone else with it while I’ve been away?”


“I wouldn’t be surprised if you had,” the Hound growled. “Though if you’d killed hundreds, girl, I imagine you’d be showing a little more respect.”

“Why’s that? You’ve killed hundreds, and you don’t—”

“I didn’t say me. I said you. Like it or not, you’re still just a little girl. You don’t know what violence is.”
“Violence is—”

“Violence is a disease,” the Hound said, very deliberately. “Thought I’d got most of the Elder Brother’s nonsense out of my head, but seems like some of it got stuck.”

“What do you want?”

“What do I want? Never mind that. I came here to see what you want, girl. With that tree, I mean.”

“Nothing.”

She kept her face still, playing the game of faces, but the Hound was not convinced. “You were talking to it a moment ago.”

“You weren’t supposed to be listening.”

“Now there’s a bit of hypocrisy,” said the Hound. “Specially considering you were eavesdropping on your sister earlier.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you do. And I know what you were talking to the tree about. Your father.” He snorted. “You think he can hear you?”

“No,” said Arya firmly.

Sandor shook his head at her. “See, that’s the problem with you, wolf girl. You think you’ll get something out of acting tough like that. You think I can’t see how you really are, deep down? You can act like a wolf all you like, but you’re not, not really.”

“And how do you know that?”

“Believe me, I just do.” Sandor stepped away from her. “You want some advice, girl?”

“No.”

“Don’t you go doubting your sister, now. The little bird might be all porcelain and ivory on the outside, but underneath she’s steel, and a steel far less brittle than you. You don’t know what she’s done to get to where she is now. You might have the wolf on the outside, and she on the inside, but you’re both part of the same pack. Aye, and both as bad as each other.”

Chapter End Notes

My least favourite part of Season 7 was the confusing Winterfell plotline, and to some extent KotN is an attempt to correct that aspect. Obviously, it’s unreasonable to assume that Sansa and Arya will simply reunite and everything will be happy, but there are limits, too. Unlike the shambles of S7E6, I intend to make their relationship understandable, at the very least.

Anyway, I quite liked this chapter, and I hope you feel the same.

Thank you for reading, and Merry Christmas to everyone, etc, etc.
Day and night the rain pissed down.

Archmaester Marwyn said it must end, eventually, but there was no end in sight. The stone dragons along the balconies of the castle were damp to the touch, and getting damper with every passing moment. Tendrils of moss and ivy forked through the gaps in the flagstones, growing through the rain. Messan of the Unsullied reported that the beach had become a quagmire. Dragonstone was now ringed by quicksand. Only yesterday two of the queen’s soldiers had been pulled under by their own armour.

The island was at war with her, same as everyone else. In the Chamber of the Painted Table, her forces – a pile of malformed dragon pieces – seemed small and lonely marooned in the middle of Blackwater Bay. And where the dragon seemed weak, dozens of lesser beasts were crowding in, ready to snatch at its treasure, waiting to feast on its corpse. Dany frowned down at them: crab and seahorse, rusted battleaxe, wolf in a sheep’s clothing. And in the west, the thorns in her side: Tyrells and Martells, numbers unknown, but expected to be somewhere around forty thousand, or more.

She had left Lord Rosby and Lord Celtigar in King’s Landing, come what may. Along with Aurane Waters, they had materialised the day before her departure, begging her forgiveness and asking to be named her loyal servants again. Dany had given them what they wanted – after taking hostages from both their families, of course. As for the city, let them have it. King’s Landing was nothing to her now. The only things it offered were ashes and disease. The flux was spreading like wildfire up and down the Blackwater. Here on Dragonstone, she could at least assemble her fleet in peace without fear of pestilence, to sail north to the Wall to help this Jon Snow, or east back to whatever allies she still had in Essos.

“Your Grace,” Marwyn the Mage’s voice called from outside her chamber door.

“Come in,” the queen answered.

The archmaester entered, his cloak sodden with rain. “Your councillors are assembled in the Chamber of the Painted Table, Your Grace,” he said. “Should I go ahead and tell them you are on your way?”
“There is no need,” Dany said. “I am ready now.” She pulled up the hood of her cloak and stepped across the threshold.

The rain did not stop, not even for queens. Though she was dry under her hood, Dany could feel the drops splashing down her cloak and the puddles growing under her boots. A bright flash to her right, followed shortly by the percussive hiss of thunder, caught her a little by surprise, but she stood straight and kept going. She was Daenerys Stormborn, and Dragonstone was her place.

Above the door that led into the throne room three stone dragons coiled, entombing one another in lust, or perhaps in violence. And as the rain fell bright against their cracked stone bodies and ran down from the stone recesses of their eyes, Dany swore she could hear screaming, of one dragon for a lost brother, fallen over the Blackwater or disappeared into the northern mists. Then the throne room doors swung open, and the dragon’s screech drowned beneath the groan of hinges, and the Unsullied drew them shut behind her, and the rain and the wind was gone.

The throne room was nearly as big as the one in King’s Landing. There was no Iron Throne here, but Dany did not care; the Iron Throne, for all the nonsense that had been fought over it, was just a chair. *Let palsied children play on its bars,* she thought, *let drunken beggars dance on its steps.* It would make no difference. Indeed, in some ways, she preferred this hall, here in Dragonstone. The Lannisters and the Baratheons had both hung their banners in these halls, but they had never profaned them the way they had the Red Keep. They could take the dragon skulls out of the throne room, but they could never take the stone dragons out of Dragonstone. The stone dragons, of whom they said, *spill the dragon’s blood here, and they will return to life.*

She beneath the stone throne of Aegon the Conqueror, and down the rain-slick steps into the Chamber of the Painted Table. When she had arrived on Dragonstone, the chamber had been decrepit, the magnificent table splintered and dusty with mistreatment, its ornately carved chesspieces spilling all over the flagonstones. Beyond the open window, the night wind boomed. The waves spat flecks of salt and foam, trying to climb the walls of the fortress, and failing.

“Where is Ser Jorah?” Dany asked. Everyone was here, save for her bear knight: the red priest Benerro, Messan of the Unsullied, Grand Maester Gormon, and of course, Marwyn the Mage, at her right shoulder, smelling strongly of raw meat.

“Ser Jorah went down to the beach,” said Benerro. “He spied a ship coming in. I imagine he will be back soon with the news.”

“What sails did they fly?”

“Dark ones, Your Grace. Beyond that, I could not see.”

The Westerosi said *dark wings, dark words,* Dany knew, but she could not recall whether they said the same about sails? “Very well,” she said darkly. “I imagine I will learn of these new arrivals soon enough. For now, updates on our present situation will suffice.” She walked down the length of the table to where Dragonstone sat, a raised rock out at sea. The island was stacked with half a dozen wooden dragons, each promising five thousand men. *Thirty thousand in all.* And off the coast floated enough counters for her fleet of five hundred ships. Barely one-third of those were warships; the rest were cogs, traders, and barges that had been in service to Aegon and the Braavosi at the battle on the Blackwater. It was the biggest fleet in Westeros, there was no doubt of that.

“We had a letter earlier from Lord Rosby, in King’s Landing,” said Grand Maester Gormon. “He says he will be sending Lord Willas to join the Night’s Watch on the morrow—”

“There is no Lord Willas,” said Dany. “He has been stripped of his lands and titles. I trust you
remember that, my lord.” Grand Maester Gormon was a Tyrell by birth. He had to be reminded of his loyalties every now and then.

“Yes, Your Grace,” the maester replied. “The… the former lord of Highgarden will be starting north on the morrow, at dawn. Meanwhile, the epidemic of dysentery in the city is still strong… truly, Your Grace, an outbreak of the flux on this scale has not been seen since the Great Spring Sickness of King Daeron the Second’s day…”

*Daeron died of the Great Spring Sickness,* Dany thought. *Does he want me to die, too?* “I know this,” she said. “What about—”

“Truly, things are *dire*,” the Grand Maester went on. “What with the crop burned to ashes along the Blackwater, we have not even half of the provisions we need to last through this year.”

“We will make do somehow, I am sure.” She had sent Aurane Waters to the Free Cities to make arrangements for the trade route to be re-opened between Lys, Myr, Tyrosh and the Disputed Lands. “It may not matter, anyhow. Since we are heading north, we will not be a burden on Dragonstone’s larders much longer—”

“Your Grace, King’s Landing is still home to some five hundred thousand citizens.”

*Yes, for now.* “The Tyrells were supplying King’s Landing. And now they are not. If the people want someone to vilify, let it be Olenna Tyrell and her grandsons.”

“Your Grace,” said Marwyn the Mage. “The people have *chosen* someone to vilify, and it is you. There has been a… resurgence of the sparrow movement in the capital city. The High Sparrow has risen again – though it may be a different man to last time – and his followers are making a pilgrimage through Your Grace’s lands, spreading treason—”

“Words are wind,” said Dany.

“Yet winds may overturn even the tallest towers, if they blow strong enough. The Faith has been subdued this last year, but it still has power among the people.”

“The people know the Faith of the Seven to be false,” said Benerro, in his deep, spiced voice. “Did the seven gods protect them from the false king Aegon? I think not. Did the seven gods keep the towers of Baelor’s sept from falling? No. But, Your Grace, if we offer them an alternative…”

Benerro had been pushing this for weeks. He was starting to sound like Hizdahr zo Loraq with his fighting pits, and that made Dany wary. *I gave Hizdahr what he wanted, but he turned against me nonetheless.* She did not agree with the red priest, either. She could not change the culture of the Seven Kingdoms just like that. People would not follow her example simply because she told them to. That was the one lesson Hizdahr had taught her.

“Of course, this will matter little once we head north, Your Grace,” said Marwyn the Mage.

“Yes.” Dany nodded. “Of course. And when… how are the preparations going?”

“Very well, Your Grace. We estimate two weeks’ sailing to Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, if the wind holds up. And from there, it will be another two weeks to Castle Black, though of course you could fly on Drogon.”

“Has there been anything more from this Lord Snow?”

“Nothing yet, Your Grace. That may be a bad sign. If the threat is what Lord Snow says it is, the
Night’s Watch may well have already been overrun."

Dany sensed he was holding something back. “Speak plainly, Marwyn.”

“Well, Your Grace… we have been here on Dragonstone for two weeks, and we still have not left for the North. Leaving it so long could not be perilous—”

“I will not flee north and leave my enemies to feast on the lands that are rightfully mine,” the queen said. “Until our situation is stable, we remain here.”

“With respect, Your Grace—”

“What do you think, Benerro?”

The red priest cleared his throat. “I saw a great battle in the snow, Your Grace. But I never saw when this battle would come.”

Dany was about to speak when the doors of the Chamber opened and Ser Jorah Mormont came down the stairs, in a thick fur cloak which nearly hid the silver pin that marked him out as Hand of the Queen. Behind him were two men. She did not recognise the first man: him of the white-blond hair and bristling yellow moustache. He was hugely broad, with the shoulders of an ox; the badge his doublet was quartered blue and pink, adorned with a moon and a sun. Yet he wore them with unease, and were it not for those noble colours, the queen might have mistaken him for a fisherman.

“Your Grace,” said Jorah, bowing. “May I present Lord Selwyn, the Evenstar of Tarth.” The blond man came forward and inclined his head barely a few inches. “And his companion, Ser—”

“You need not introduce him,” said Dany, stepping forwards. “I never forget an old friend.”

“Neither do I,” said Ser Harry Strickland, Captain-General of the Golden Company.

“I thought you were dead.”

“Would you prefer it if I was?”

“I think you already know my answer.”

“I should have known better than to ask.” The sellsword bowed his head. “Your Grace.”

“Is there a reason you are here, or have you merely come to beg for mercy, ser?”

Ser Harry inclined his head further. “The latter, I fear. The storms are too strong and our ships too few to carry us back across the Narrow Sea.”

“How many men do you have left?”

“One thousand, four hundred and seventy-four. Not enough to launch any great offensive in the name of the late King Aegon, as I’m sure you understand.”

“But if you had the men, you would?”

“Our word is as good as gold.” He smiled.

Dany scowled back at him. “Give me one reason why I shouldn’t have you executed.”

“You are not stupid, Your Grace. Give me one reason why you’re bothering to talk to me, and not
Because having one ally, however treacherous they might have proved in the past, is better than having nothing. “You are not what you once were, are you? Fifteen hundred men. Though I suppose you are not the only sellsword company still hiding out in the reaches of the kingswood or over on Massey’s Hook. Have you seen Brown Ben or the Tattered Prince anywhere, perchance?”

“If you want that answer, you will have to take me into your service, Your Grace.”

Perhaps you are right. Dany did not want him on her side, but if she granted Strickland clemency, some of the other sellswords might come forwards. And she could always rid herself of the Golden Company later, she supposed.

“Perhaps,” she said. “But not tonight. For now, I will have Messan take you down to a cell. I think you would benefit from a few hours of contemplative silence.”

“Your Grace is merciful and wise,” said Ser Harry, even as the Unsullied led him from the room.

The queen turned her attention to Lord Selwyn. “I am wary of making hasty observations, my lord, but your choice of companion is hardly encouraging.”

“Strickland is no friend of mine,” said the Evenstar of Tarth. “I have even less faith in him than I do in you. Your Grace.”

His straightforwardness took Dany aback. “If you have no faith in me,” she said, after a pause, “then why are you here at all? I did not ask you here.”

“I am here because I am afraid of you, Your Grace,” said Lord Selwyn. “I was at the Blackwater. I was on Aegon’s side of the battlefield, though my men did not fight his cause, because I had no faith in him either. I saw your dragons descend upon the Braavosi fleet. I saw what they did to those ships, and to the men aboard them. I remember the smell: cooked meat, ashes, fire and blood. When I smelled that smell, I fled with all my men, with not a care for what the other lords might think of me. They are – were – young fools who only ever saw the glory in war. But I still remember the days of your father, the Mad King. I remember the way he would line men up in the throne room to burn.”

“I am not my father.”

It was Lord Selwyn’s turn to raise his eyebrows. “Aren’t you?”

“Have you any children, Lord Selwyn?”

“A daughter. Only the one.”

“And would you say your daughter is like you?”

“More than you might think.” Lord Selwyn curled his lip distastefully. “Brienne would see right through you.”

“Is your daughter here?”

“No. Unlike you, Brienne learned to stick to what she is good at.”

Dany glanced over Lord Selwyn’s shoulder at Jorah, who was making a concerned face. Not now, ser, she tried to signal back. I do not need you yet. “Tell me, Lord Selwyn,” she said. “Do you think I should have surrendered to my nephew because I am a woman?”
“No,” said the Evenstar. “I think you should have surrendered because you were born to conquer, Daenerys Targaryen, not to rule. Stormborn. A storm destroys that which lies in its path; it does not nourish it. A storm will not feed your children or make your harvest fertile. But it will keep you safe from your enemies, and it will force your enemies to scatter themselves to the winds.”

“I am a conqueror and a ruler,” Dany said. “But your words are not without some merit, my lord. Truth be told, I shared your concerns when I was in Slaver’s Bay—”

“Slaver’s Bay,” said Lord Tarth bitterly. “The unfortunate few who sail into Tarth from there now tell me it is a lawless place, rife with corruption and civil war… and yes, slavery. Do not count Slaver’s Bay among your successes, Your Grace.”

Had he been waiting for her to fall into that trap? Dany had heard nothing from Slaver’s Bay since Reznak mo Reznak’s last envoy, and that had been a year ago, or more. Lord Tarth might well be right. Her victory over the slavers could well be in tatters by now.

But that was a matter for another time.

“Ser Jorah,” she called. “Take my lord of Tarth to some rooms befitting of his rank. It is getting late. I think it would be better if we all got some sleep and continued our discussions on the morrow.” She did not wait for Lord Selwyn to object, or for Marwyn the Mage to make a last-ditch plea to get her to listen to his Northern plans. Instead she walked out of the room before any of them could say a thing, half a dozen Unsullied fast on her heels.

Out on the wallwalk the storm was blowing even harder. Dany could make out the black-clad figures of her Unsullied ranged along the stone wall, their shields braced against the wind. As she stepped out there was a loud and sudden crack, and angry vibrations bit into the stone beneath her feet, tickling her soles. The smell of sulphur filled the air, and a flash turned her pale skin bright and white. The braziers ranged along the wallwalk shivered in their brackets, and threw their black sparks out to be swallowed by the rain. The flames flickered, on the brink of death, as salt washed over the high stone ramparts and drenched the walkway. Behind Dany, one of the Unsullied guards slipped, and had to be helped up.

“Your Grace,” said one of his companions, in broken Common Tongue. “You should hurry inside.”

“No,” said Dany. “You can. But I intend to stay here a little while longer.”

Here she was. Stormborn. A name she had given little thought to, or not nearly as much as she should have.

Twenty years ago, or thereabouts, Rhaella Targaryen had been up in one of these towers, with a young Viserys clutching her hand, screaming out unheard in the black, black night, as the Usurper’s men struggled to overcome the waves that turned them away from this island and onto the rocks.

They said that, in a storm like this, when the only brightness came from the sparse braziers along the wallwalk, and from the lightning that flashed sporadically over the island, you could see the stone dragons moving, creeping along the wallwalk, their talons and claws outstretched, slowly but surely carrying the island through the unending depths of Blackwater Bay. As for where they were heading, no man could say.

Presently Ser Jorah came out to join her on the walkway. His beard was sodden, his cloak a wet black rag, and Dany noticed that he had to brace himself against the battlement with one hand to keep from slipping. “Your Grace, you should not be—”, he said, and then broke off, because he knew better.
“How is Lord Selwyn?”

“How is Lord Selwyn?”

“He seemed… manageable. Not happy, but manageable.”

“What do you think we should do with him? Did he bring many ships?”

“What do you think we should do with him? Did he bring many ships?”

“Only three, Your Grace. The better part of his armies and navies are still moored back on Tarth. But… I thought we might send him out again, rather than keeping him here.”

“Why?”

“Because here Lord Selwyn will do nothing but cause you trouble and doubt. But if we send him out to treat with the others who are yet to fall in line with your cause: the Sunglasses, the Peaseburys, the Bar Emmons, the Velaryons—”

“Lord Selwyn has no love for me. It seems unwise to send him to promote the virtues of my cause.”

“On the contrary, Your Grace, who better? Lord Selwyn carries the same doubts as many of the Stormlords whose loyalty you seek. He can sympathize with them, and with what they want, and even if he cannot and will not convince them to love you, he will convince them to follow you, same as he will follow you. And maybe, if you were prepared, we could send the boy Edric Storm—”

“No. The boy cannot be controlled. He will stay here. But nonetheless, your idea may have some merit, Ser Jorah. I must have had good reason for making you Hand of the Queen.”

Mormont frowned. “Your Grace?”

“It was a joke, ser.”

“Ah. Of course, Your Grace.”

“Has Marwyn lectured you about his northern expedition yet?” Dany asked.

“No. But I am prepared to hear it.”

“Prepared for the expedition, or for Marwyn’s lecture?”

Ser Jorah’s face showed a brief flicker of sourness. “Your Grace,” he said, “forgive me, but… it seems you are hesitant. About heading north. We could have sailed days, even weeks ago.”

Dany sighed. This again. “I will tell you what I told Marwyn. I will not sail north until I am comfortable with the situation in the south.”

“Your Grace, the situation in the south is… it is…”

“Say it.”

The knight sighed. “The situation in the south is one we cannot salvage. Short of burning Highgarden and Sunspear and forcing the Reachmen and the Dornish to bind their cause to ours, we have no chance of recovering ground here. And even if you did force them… they would not be your true allies.”

“Then they had best hope they do not do anything to displease me,” said Dany, looking away. She sensed Jorah was about to reply, so she cut in with, “Thank you, ser. That will be all for now.” She closed her eyes, and listened to his footsteps as they faded away.
Dany turned her gaze back to the sea. A great wave hurtled up the beach below her, washing away a day’s worth of sediment and leaving a different day’s in its place. The queen breathed in and out, in and out, her breaths tied to the sound of the sea. As the sea entered its next deep swell, Dany felt something swell inside her, too. The child, faintly kicking against her stomach, alive in the rain.

(Would she give birth to it here on Dragonstone, or in some distant kingdom, far to the North? Would it have her eyes and hair, or Daario’s—)

You are a conqueror, not a ruler, Daenerys Stormborn. Daario had said that, long before Selwyn Tarth had. Daario Naharis, her lover and her betrayer. Why was she still carrying his child? Did she really want that reminder of prophecy nestling inside her? Did Ser Jorah and the others know?

It was too many questions for one night, she decided. Instead she leaned against the rampart again, letting the sea continue to play its distant lullaby. Briefly she closed her eyes.

Then, from the east, she heard the screeching again, the same screeching from earlier. Through the grey-black of the clouds flapped something blacker. His wings were two hundred feet from wingtip to wingtip, and his scales gleamed as black as her skin gleamed white. Drogon. The lightning flashed again behind him as he came over the ramparts, flapping so hard that the wind nearly knocked Dany from her perch, sending the rain flying in every direction, scattering droplets into the mouths of the stone dragons that adorned the castle walls.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so I gave away the main point of the chapter in the title - a last minute change, I originally went for "Stormborn", but I've decided to save that. But I don't think it really matters too much, and besides, Evenstar has thematic connotations of resignation and finality that I think describe the emotional state of Dany's councillors (specifically Jorah and Marwyn ) pretty well.

I think this chapter acts pretty nicely as a reset, putting Dany back to where she was at the start of TSK - though there's a lot of differences. It's a setup chapter, but it's necessary setup for an arc that is one of my favourites in this fic.

Next chapter: more setup - this time in a previously unseen location.
These Weeping Halls

Chapter Summary

There's nothing for you here, not anymore.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

MYRCELLA

Casterly Rock was full of silence. The halls had never been loud with bells and trumpets as King’s Landing had been, but Princess Myrcella Lannister did not recall ever seeing a place so corpseslike. It was bitingly chilly as she crossed the covered bridge that led to her mother’s chambers. Rain sheeted down across the western sky, tapdancing on the tiles overhead. Weeping o’er the halls. Now and always.

Ser Robert Strong waited at one end of the causeway. He turned his gold-helmeted head in her direction as she passed him and proceeded down the corridor: a hundred yards of dimly lit stone lit by only the barest candelight.

She knocked on her mother’s door, one, two, three. It was not her mother but Joy Hill who greeted her. “The queen will see you now,” her cousin said, in a soft, slightly fearful voice. Myrcella did not deign to reply.

Queen Cersei’s chambers were by no means austere, but every piece of gold and silver and glass lacked lustre. Even the flames in the fireplace seemed joyless and dead.

The queen rose from her dining table, trailing black lace and red velvet, her arms open in the coldest embrace that had ever been or ever would be. “Myrcella,” she said softly. “You came.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“I thought you might…” She pursed her lips. “Never mind that. Come. Sit.”

Thiers was a simple supper: venison sauced with cranberries, buttered pease, greens with pine nuts, fresh bread with apricots, mellow white cheese. They ate without much in the way of conversation. Everything worth discussing had already been talked about to death.

“Qyburn says the storm will continue through the night,” her mother offered.

Let it. It would suit her mood. “Good.”

“Good?”
“King Robert always said storms meant good fortune to his house. Though maybe he was only talking about trueborn Baratheons.”

“Ah, yes. Robert was full of these wisdoms. On the rare occasion that he was lucid.” She put down her fork. “Tell me, Myrcella. Which is the bigger number, five or one?”

“I suppose you’re about to defy basic mathematics and tell me that it is one.”

“Indeed. But why, hmm?” She held up a hand, fingers outstretched. “Five—” Now the fingers clenched. “—Or one? Five armies, all with different intentions, or one, united behind a single leader?”

“The five have a tendency to tear themselves apart,” said Myrcella acidly. “Whereas we are so united behind our queen.”

Mother frowned. “What point are you making?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“No, you’re right, it doesn’t. Storms are storms. They serve no man.”

“They may serve armies fighting against impossible odds. House Lannister is likely to find itself in that position rather soon. Soon someone will come to take the Rock from us, Mother, you know that. Though, of course, you have done us a great service by eliminating all the enemies within our own ranks.”

Mother sat a little higher in her chair. “House Lannister will withstand its foes. We always have.”

Myrcella shrugged. “Well. Maybe you’re right.”

“What is your point?”

“How many times must I tell you the same thing? “I’m saying you can’t win like this.”

“You mean, we can’t win like this.”

“There is no we, Mother. You broke apart we when you sent uncle Kevan to Castamere, and banished uncle Jaime as well—” Her uncle – her father, rather – had been sent off on some mission to Kayce, to find what had become of Ser Lyle Crakehall and to investigate further into the ironborn invasion. Myrcella had arrived after he left, and there had been no letters back since.

For all she know, he might be dead. But she did not really care. He failed me as well.

“Sending Jaime away was necessary.”

“Jaime did nothing wrong.”

“He defied his queen.”
“You defied your…” Myrcella broke off. She could feel tears already, hot behind her eyes. No. I will not. I am a lioness of the Rock. She shook her head.

“Why are we having this conversation?” Mother asked.

“I don’t know.” It was the truth. What was done was done. Why waste your breath on the dead? “I’m sorry.”

Mother reached across the table, and laid her hand on Myrcella’s. “I know.”

After supper the rain started falling harder still. Myrcella crossed through the Stone Gardens, abandoned now, the leaves of the trees caked in frost, as they would be until distant spring.

Spring. What a strange and impossible thought.

It would be a long winter, all agreed, and Myrcella doubted they would all see it through. And certainly not in this cold and chilly coffin of a castle, with its foundations built on stone torture cells and the crypts of the hundreds and thousands of Lannisters that had come before them.

Burn them.

The voice leapt suddenly into her mind. It was not her own.

The dead, Myrcella, it said. Burn them all.

Why?

Because winter is coming. You know it is. You have to listen.

She knew that voice. From somewhere, sometime. But whose voice? Whose?

If I listen to it, I am going mad, she decided. And there was enough to suggest that as it was. No point giving Mother another reason to lock her away in a tower. She closed her mind to outside thoughts, and left the gardens and their gnarled trees behind and entered the Keep.

With the ringfort burned to ashes, the household – excepting Queen Cersei and her entourage – had moved to chambers lower down in the Rock, in the New Keep, the most recent of the castle’s extensions. They were a bit more cramped than they would have liked to be, but that was not wholly a bad thing. At least here you were never alone. The New Keep was warmer too, with miles of Myrish rugs and hot water running through the walls, which worked on a system similar to the one they had at Winterfell. The final construction work had been completed shortly before Myrcella’s return to Casterly Rock, based on Lord Tywin’s designs. At the end of one hall was a tapestry which depicted Lord Tywin with his three children as they had been thirty years ago. Lord Tywin, younger and with more hair (yet no less stern) sat in a grand chair, fingers closed around a golden longsword. Tyrion stood across from him, bright eyes under his heavy brow, holding a toy crossbow. Cersei sat with her arms folded demurely in her lap, yet there was a slight hawkishness in her gaze. And Jaime… well, Jaime was so impossibly something that Myrcella found she could not look at him, lest she be sick.

She passed the tapestry and turned into another hallway. Close by she heard the raised voice of Tywin Frey. “I’ve checked the watches. We’ve got men on the third watch: the hour of ghosts.”

“We’ll have to be as quiet as ghosts,” replied Eleyna Westerling.

Smallboar Crakehall broke in. “I worry. Subtlety was never what we were best at.”
“It can’t be that hard,” said Rollam Westerling. And as always, Rollam and Smallboar set to quarreling at once.

“Sneaking out of Casterly Rock in the middle of the night with hundreds of soldiers?” Crakehall snorted. “No, that can’t be hard at all.”

“All I was saying was—”

“All you were doing was not thinking.”

“There’s no time for this,” said Eleyna.

Rollam cut over her. “I think about things more than you ever do. If we’d followed you, we’d all have died at the battle.”

“And what would you have us do?” Smallboar fired back. “Kneel down meekly and surrender without a fight?”

“I’m not going to let you put my sister in danger.”

“With respect to Lady Eleyna, this is bigger than her—”

“You’re right,” Myrcella broke in from the doorway. “It is—”

Smallboar nodded. “Thank you, my lady.”

“—but it’s bigger than you, too, Robert. It’s certainly bigger than your ego, impossible though that may seem. It’s bigger than all of us. I advise you to all remember what we’re fighting for. We have to do this properly.”

“It would be easier to besiege the queen’s chambers. That’s what we were planning to do, back when—”

“But he isn’t. So it doesn’t matter. You answer to me now. You can keep on calling yourself the King’s Companions in his honour, but he isn’t your personal martyr. If you want to avenge him, you can wait in line.”

“Your brother—”

“—believed in helping other people.” Foolish as he was. “We shouldn’t doom them to violence just because we want vengeance.” Foolish as I am. “Vengeance will be ours in time, I promise you.” She turned to Eleyna. “My lady, with me, if you please. We have matters to discuss away from here.”

Eleyna seemed only too grateful for the interruption. She came quickly and without complaining, and they were out in the hall again, passing beneath Jaime’s green eyes. “How are you keeping?” asked Myrcella as they walked.

“Fine.” She said it with such breeziness that Myrcella almost believed it.

“Both of you?”

“Yes, Rollam and I are – oh, you mean—”

“How is Rollam, now that you mention it?”
“I… I think he’s taken it worse than I have. It’s the feeling of being powerless, you know. I’ve talked to him about it, but… well, he was there that night, and I was hiding out in the armoury.” She lowered her voice. “Small mercies.”

“Small mercies,” murmured Myrcella. *The Seven-Pointed Star* claimed it was a great comfort to be with your loved ones when they passed on, but *The Seven-Pointed Star* was naïve, and no septon or septa had ever loved or lost anyone, not truly.

Eleyna had a habit of chewing her lip when considering whether or not she should speak. She did so now. “Do you think,” she said, “that he would have wanted me to... to marry again? To find someone else?”

*Sons of someone else, he said.* “He’d want you to be happy,” said Myrcella. “Whatever it takes for that, you should do it. When you get to the Reach, I’m sure you’ll find someone.”

They came to another door, guarded by two Lannister soldiers. Her men, not Mother’s. “I’ll be a few minutes, Kem, Taren.” She’d made a habit of learning their names. It was what he would have done.

Margaery Tyrell was sitting by the fire. She always seemed to be by the fire nowadays, looking dull and wan. In the weeks since her return, Myrcella had not seen a single jewel on the other woman’s body, nor any silk or velvet or anything more than the most spare of green woollen dresses. Her hair had gotten tangled a few weeks ago, and she had never bothered to brush it out. She had seemingly aged years in the last few weeks.

“Lady Margaery,” said Myrcella. “I’ve been told you’re not eating.”

“Don’t you think I’ve tried?” the Tyrell girl replied. “Everything I eat tastes of ash.”

“I’ll have the kitchens send you some soup. It tastes of ash anyway, so you might not notice the difference.”

Margaery managed a smile. Then she saw Eleyna standing behind Myrcella – her smile, and the slightest swell of her belly – and her face fell. “We might have been twins,” she said flatly. “Most people think I’m older, but they’re wrong. Loras has a year on me. Had. My parents… they kept trying for a girl. So were we, I think. I don’t know. Quentyn was. Or I was.” She looked at Myrcella, lost in the web of her own words.

“I’m not sure what they wanted,” said Myrcella. “Or whether they’d intended for us at all. Or whether it was just a way of stopping Robert from getting suspicious.”

“All my brothers mean different things to me,” Margaery said, unfeelingly. Willas has always been wisest and cleverest. And I know Garlan will protect me no matter what. But as a friend, Loras was unmatched. We shared every smile and every laugh. We were two, but at the same time, we were one. Renly’s death hurt him greatly, but he was coming round again…”

Myrcella caught Eleyna’s worried look. *So she has heard this more than once, too.* “I know. He was all three,” she said, quietly.

“Grandmother was right all along,” said Margaery. “We never should have come to the Rock. We never should have gone to King’s Landing. We should have sat back and waited for Daenerys, and watched you all burn to ashes when she came.

“And Quentyn,” she said, changing her tone suddenly. “I never really knew Quentyn. But I loved him. More than you can know. More than he knew. That’s the saddest thing. And I know he loved me, that we were all each other wanted or needed.” She counted on her fingers. “One, two, three,
four. And five. Our son, or daughter. They would have grown up happy, but now I can’t have him. I can’t have children every again.” Her eyes had drifted away, but now they snapped back to Myrcella. “Do you still hate me?”

“No.” How could she hate something as pitiful as this? “I don’t hate you. I said I’d help you, and I will, once I get the Companions properly organised. I’ll get you out of here. I’ll send you home.”

Margaery nodded, then suddenly broke out with, “Have you heard anything about Ser Jaime?”

“No. I don’t even know where she’s sent him. Why?”

“He’ll side with you when the time comes, I think.”

“The time for what?”

Margaery’s eyes darkened. “Someone has to end this, Myrcella. Someone has to kill her. You know that.”

“Not Jaime,” she said. _He’d never be able to do it. He couldn’t go against her when it mattered, so why would he do so now?_

In her confusion of thoughts, she barely heard Margaery speak up. “You’d better get me out of here, Myrcella,” she said. “Before I decide to do it myself. I’ll die trying, but I’ll do it nonetheless. I’ve got nothing to lose.” Then she looked back into the fire, as if trying to discern the future from the flames, the way the red priests could. She was gone again, into another world.

They went back out into the hallway. As they passed the statue of Lady Joanna Lannister, Eleyna grabbed her arm. “Myrcella,” she said, firmly. “I’m not going back to the Reach. I don’t want to. I’m staying here. I’m staying to fight, and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.”

“There are plenty of things I can do, Eleyna, you know that. And I have plenty of reasons to send you away. The child—”

“—will not be heir to anything. It will be fifteen years before he or she can take their father’s seat. You will be lady of Casterly Rock by then, if things go well. And queen, perhaps.”

“All the same,” Myrcella said. “Your child is my niece or nephew—”

“And _my_ son or daughter. I will not have them grow up knowing their mother to be a coward.”

“You’re not a coward. And even if you are, there’s nothing wrong with that. What are you planning to do, pick up a sword and lead our men into battle?”

“If I have to.”

“Don’t lie to yourself. You don’t want this—”

“I do.”

“No, you don’t. And do you know how I know that? Because if you were like that, he would never have married you.”

A moment passed, and then Eleyna’s shoulders fell. “Why are you always so right?”

_Because I knew him better than you, you idiot._ “He married you because you cared for him. And you care for him too much to let your child be endangered by war.”
She nodded. “Well, you’re right. It’s… just… strange. The thing I can’t bear is, is…”

“Feeling so useless.”

“Yes.”

There was a long and contemplative silence. Then Myrcella noted Eleyna chewing her lip again.

“You have an idea?”

“Jeyne,” said Eleyna. “We’ve been sending letters to one another. She’s at Raventree Hall. And… well, there’s someone else at Raventree. Sansa Stark.”

Oh, bloody shit. “You want to go there?”

“If I can convince them that you want to reconcile…”

“Sansa does not love me. And her bannermen love me even less. She knows I was innocent of poisoning Robert, but they would still love to see me thrown from the Moon Door or drowned in the Trident.”

“Which is exactly why you need me to help convince them otherwise. Jeyne is Robb Stark’s widow. The things she says still carry weight. And she owes me a favour. I thought… well, if I had the baby there… they would grow up cousins. Besides, I need to see her again. Now that Mother is gone.”

The last was a lie. Neither Jeyne nor Eleyna gave a fig about their mother, dead after an ironborn assault on the Crag. Nonetheless… “It’s a good idea,” said Myrcella. “You can take Rollam with you, if you’d like.”

“Rollam will want to stay here,” she said assuredly. “I know that much. He might not seem like much, but he wants to see justice done more than anyone else.”

Not more than me. “Very well,” said Myrcella. “I’ll have them make plans.”

Eleyna inclined her head. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

“It is no inconvenience, Your Grace.”

That got her a strange look. “I was never qu—”

“You were. Same as Margaery was.”

“Well. I suppose so.” Eleyna pursed her lips. “Is there anything else?”

“No. You should get some rest. And so should I.”

That she needed sleep was undeniable. There were long dark days ahead of her. When they came, when the ironborn came, when the time to deal with Mother came, she needed to be ready.

She found Tywin Frey in the antechamber outside her room, warming his hands over the fire. “I thought you were at the meeting?” said Myrcella. “Of the Companions?”

“I was. You saw me. But meetings go on and on, and can be dull.” He smiled. “…I thought you might want briefing on these deadly dull proceedings, since you walked out halfway through.”

Myrcella was not in the mood for his flirtations. “Go on,” she said brusquely. “Tell me what I missed.”
“We’ve brought together twelve hundred men,” he began.

She was a little taken aback. “That many? Here? In the Rock?”

Ty smiled a little. “You are not alone, Your Grace.”

“Don’t call me that. I am not the queen.”

“Not yet.”

“I do not intend—”

“It doesn’t matter what you intend,” he said, very firmly. “If you intend to do this, you must do it all. No half measures.”

And Myrcella thought, no. No half measures at all. “Very well, Ser Tywin,” she said. “If I am to be a queen, then who are you to disobey me?”

“Only your humble servant, Your Grace.”

“My humble servant.” She nodded. “I want you to think about what that means. Pray continue.”

“We have twelve hundred men whose allegiance we can be certain of. Then there are those others: lesser lordlings with no allegiance to the Companions or your mother, the few Tyrells and Martells that remain…” He chewed his lip a moment. “We might even have enough to fight—”

“No,” said Myrcella. “We will fight our way out, not in. We both know what happened… if our men start to die, they will break, and… well, there are no second chances with a plan like this.”

“I understand.”

How can you? “Thank you, Ser Tywin,” she said. “That will be all.”

“But you still don’t know—”

“For now, all I know is that I need to sleep. And to pray, I think. Yes, I need to pray. You may go.”

She turned away, but then he said, “Myrcella.” The flat, coarse way he said her name surprised her.

“What?”

“If… if you ever want…” She could see him going red. “If you ever wanted me to come back, you know I would. For you. I mean, to keep you company. Like on the road.”

“Thank you, Ty, but no.” She had been weak, back then. She wasn’t weak anymore, not now. Was she? “Go.”

He let her pass, but Myrcella waited until he had gone out before she continued to her bedchamber. She still kept servants, but she did not care to learn their names anymore. Not after Rosie. She thought of the girl occasionally: Rosamund had been of an age with her, and of a similar appearance. She had followed the princess to Harrenhal, yet only one of the two girls had never returned. Rosamund had no one who cared enough to ransom her back, no powerful relatives to demand her safe return. All she had was a pretty face. And her body.

Myrcella turned to the table by the window. Seven pale candlesticks stood upright, veiled in misty incense. Only one of the candles was lit. But she only needed one. She only had one person to pray
They had been about to put him away when they finally reached Casterly Rock. After her night of weeping at the Golden Tooth, she and Ty had ridden double-time to reach the castle. On the day of her arrival he was still laid out in the sept. Part of her had been expecting him to smell awful, had been expecting to see the flesh flaking off his bones, his eyelids peeling back, and the table covered in barely enough roses and fresh rushes to hide the fact that he’d shit himself a very long time ago. But he didn’t smell of anything, really. He looked like he was sleeping, sort of – like one of the maidens from the stories – only she knew he wouldn’t wake up, ever.

The first thing Mother said to her was, “She told me it would happen. Maggy, she did. ‘Golden is the brother, a golden giant’s gleam. He shall slay the valonqar, making you a queen.’ But he never said whose brother.”

She found out from Maester Creylen, afterwards, that valonqar meant ‘little brother’.

The candle flame swayed and swung. In the dark watery fog of the window, she could see it reflected, like a lighthouse far out to sea.

A bright scythe of lightning blasted through the sky. Briefly the sea was aflame in white light. Very far away in the distance, she thought she saw a ship. Could it be Jaime? Did Mother send him out by sea to fight the ironborn, or ahorse?

She did not know. She knew nothing.

“It’s not right,” she murmured. “None of this is right. I don’t know… whether I should take it, or not. Half measures, or…” She chewed her lip. “I’m not you. I could never be you. You were always better, you never wanted anything more than what you had. And I… when I was in Harrenhal, in King’s Landing… sometimes even when I was standing there talking to your face, there were times, sometimes, when I wished you were dead. And then you died. There you were, lying on your stone plinth, First of Your Name, a line of messy stitches down the middle of your face. They spoke of you like you were some great martyr, but all I saw was a little boy in a golden shroud. I never should have left you.”

“I never should have sent you away.”

Myrcella turned.

Sometimes she was naïve enough to think he would be standing there when she turned round. He never was, but tonight there was something. The bloody cat. Ser Pounce. Myrcella assumed he had always known that they were brother and sister; the cat had come to her in King’s Landing, after all. Brother and sister. Litter mates. Did he understand what that meant?

They stared at each other for a long time. Had Ser Pounce always had green eyes? She had never properly looked long enough to find out. But tonight, in the dark of the room, with the only other light being the fire and the occasional lightning flashes behind her, they seemed almost as green as tall grass that was good for running in, as fig trees good for climbing in King’s Landing gardens, as sunlight in golden hair and infinitely green eyes.

That was when she broke.

“Get out!” she screamed at Ser Pounce, advancing so violently she nearly tripped over her own gown, “get out! Get out! Get out! There’s nothing for you here, not anymore! He’s gone, he’s gone, he’s dead, Tommen is dead, don’t you understand, get out, I have nothing for you!” And then her
knees went from under her, and the cat was suddenly in her lap, its fur warm against her cold hands, and she realised she was crying. There was nothing here for her either.

Chapter End Notes

Again, this is all fairly simplistic setup, but I think the important thing with this chapter is to think about what isn't there instead of what is. Myrcella seems to have lost her pride to a great extent. Her hostility towards Cersei is fairly passive - initially I had her going into a rant, but I chose to cut that out - and we get the sense that she is more tired than anything. I wanted to give this chapter a cold apathy, so when there are moments that should inspire great emotional responses, that is left to the imagination. If you'll allow me to praise myself a bit, I think my favourite comment on The Changing of Seasons is one on the last chapter of A Coat of Gold, which calls it "proof of why understatement is so hard-hitting." That's something I desperately tried to capture in this chapter. I hope it worked out.

This wasn't an easy one to write, for obvious reasons. I chose not to dwell on "Mother's Mercy" from TSK, and divorced this chapter from that one so much that it is jarring. Evidently, a couple of months have gone by since the attempted coup, and things have reset themselves in some ways, but not in others.

Jaime isn't in this chapter, as Cersei tells us, but we'll catch up with him soon, I promise you.

Of course, though, the big thing missing from this chapter is ye glorious Kingo Tommo. Do a Ctrl+F search. See how many times he comes up.

Myrcella's arc in KOTN is very interesting. But I would say that, wouldn't I?

General Notes:

I have the story all planned out, far more than I ever did for ACOG or TSK. The chapter count does keep getting bigger; we're now at 87 (up from 83), though at the same time, chapters in KOTN seem to be a lot shorter than they were in TSK.

The story splits very nicely into two halves around chapter 48, which are quite different in tone, but have some themes throughout.

Random thought: I watched The Last Jedi over Christmas, and the more I think about it, the more I think a comparison between KOTN and TLJ is apt. And I hope you liked that movie, because, what goes for that goes for this, too: "This is not going to go the
way you think."
First came the silence. Then the screaming. And after that the silence again.

Ser Davos Seaworth watched, silent in a silent crowd, as the Baratheon guardsmen pulled gently on the rope, drawing it in. The knotted wool, brittle with frost, snaked its way backwards through the snow, retreating to its hiding-hole. A few more moments passed; the rope kept snaking – and then, quick as that, it was done. The rope was back in the hands of the guardsmen. The end, where the man had been attached, was now as naked as the convict’s compatriots, who stood shivering in a tight circle about ten feet from the crowd.

That made two. There were still three more to go.

The executions occurred with alarming regularity now. Though Davos would never have voiced his suspicions, he had the sneaking feeling that King Stannis was starting to see their usefulness as more important than their necessity. If the day ever came when a man made it all the way through the snowfield somehow, Davos knew the army would march at once. He wondered if the enemy knew that, too.

“Next!” shouted Ser Godry Farring, who commanded the men holding the rope. Then the third prisoner was brought forth. He was a younger man, with a scraggly beard and some reddish-gold down on his cheeks. *Eighteen,* reckoned Davos. *Three years older than Devan was.* Looks could be deceiving, but Davos doubted this one had been the ringleader. That honour probably belonged to the meaner-looking, Flea-Bottom-scum-type man who, just now, had shoved his younger compatriot from the circle. As if somehow, he could be saved now.

*But they are convicts nonetheless,* Davos reminded himself. And the girl – a servant of Ser Kevan’s household – had been no older than Princess Shireen, who stood at his side now. And, if the girl spoke the truth, they had all taken their turns.

The downy-cheeked boy felt the cold worst of the three that remained. From here Davos could see the raised goosepimples on his skin. His manhood was shrunken and small, and his lips were blueish. They seemed to be trying to form a word, “M-m-m…” Davos had seen enough men executed to
know what that word was. Mercy. I only held her down. I only watched. I only did as I was ast to, m’lord. And in the last, he was no different to Davos Seaworth.

They bound the boy’s wrists with the rope, and pulled it in a tight double knot. Then the circle parted in the cave mouth, and the raw light of the outside world rushed in, and the Stranger revealed her blue breast to them.

The moment that followed seemed to last forever. And Davos, despite his best efforts, thought of the boy prisoner. Maybe he had some widowed mother, still living in Flea Bottom. Or some girl he had loved. And yet…

…if half an onion is black with rot, it is a rotten onion. A man is good, or he is evil.

As he thought on the red woman’s words, Davos’s eyes drifted to King Stannis. Caught between the bright light of fading day and the darkness and ruddy torchlight in the cave, Stannis seemed to epitomise that dilemma of light and dark.

Ser Godry turned to the king. There was half a second’s pause. Then Stannis nodded. Ser Godry turned back to his men, and to the boy with the rope now bound around his wrists.

The boy’s feet would not move, at first. They were purplish with frostbite from having been exposed out here for so long, but it was the fear that kept him rooted. It spasmed across his face, twisting it, and then sheer terror overtook him. And then, as the men pushed him away from the cave, that terror turned to giddiness. He pushed away from his captors, twisting on his rope, and languidly drifted out into open sky. He might even have been laughing, but Davos thought he had imagined that, and even if he had been, the sound of the wind would have drowned it out.

First came the silence. Then the screaming. And after that the silence again.

The rope came back. The man was gone.

Then it was the fourth man’s turn. Then the fifth. The fourth man, having seen three of his accomplices perish before him, fell to his knees, begging. The fifth – the one Davos thought to be the ringleader – spat in the snow at King Stannis’s feet. In the end, neither of their choices mattered. They went the same way.

Davos watched King Stannis throughout the execution of the last two, hoping for some brief flicker of humanity, but there was nothing. Long months out here had hardened his once-stony countenance even further, to one of ice. Ice in his mouth, ice in his cheekbones, and blueish chips of ice in his eyes.

He felt a tugging on his arm: Shireen. “Ser Davos,” she said. “Ser Davos, we’re going inside.”

Inside. If you could call it that. The mines of Castamere did not have doors that separated out from in. It was hell above the ground just as it was below. “All right,” Davos said to the princess. He nearly reached for her hand, but Shireen did not do that anymore. Instead they walked shoulder to shoulder, she always half a step ahead of him, as they descended into the too-closeness of the cave. From there Shireen forged the path ahead on her own through the fog of men. It made Davos strangely sad to see the little girl he had helped raise grown so much like her father.

He was hastening to catch Shireen when someone tapped him on the shoulder. “Ser,” they said, and he saw that it was Ser Godry. “The king’s council is meeting. You are needed.”

“Why?” So we can discuss the impossibility of our situation yet again?
“I was not told, ser. I was just told to fetch you.”

“Now?”

“Yes, sir. In the great hall.”

The great hall. That was a joke in itself. The castle of Castamere might have a great hall, somewhere up above, but in these drowned tunnels there was only the empty shell of that greatness. And who are you, a proud lord had once said, that I must bow so low. Only a cat of a different coat, that’s all the truth I know. But now Lord Roger Reyne and all his sons were dead. In the caverns there had been a stockpile of treasure: rich crimson tapestries, statues of marble lions, a trove of golden ornaments. But then Lord Tywin diverted the river down here and everything drowned. The marble statues were chipped and soft, the gold worn and greasy cold to the touch. The banners were still wet and sodden, and sanguine dye ran down the manes of the red lions; near fifty years had passed, yet still they bled.

Castamere’s great hall, where the council met, was a vast, empty cavern. There was not nearly enough light to illuminate it all, so the oil lanterns serviced only the huge, damp table at the centre of the room. Beyond that King Stannis’s and Ser Kevan Lannister’s guardsmen stood with torches, and beyond them were stone pillars and mysterious darkness.

The lord of Dragonstone and all Seven Kingdoms sat at the head of the table, illumined by pale red firelight and shadowed in darkness. His eyes were fire and storm. The rest of the council was already assembled. Davos was the last to arrive. The king said nothing as the onion knight took his seat, at his right hand. Across from Davos was Ser Kevan Lannister, looking tired as ever. They exchanged a wordless understanding.

“I have called you here because the time has come,” the king said ominously.

“To march, Your Grace?” Ser Justin Massey asked uncertainly. Massey, Davos noted, had grown a beard, though plainly he did not know how to wear it.

“Aye, Ser Justin,” said King Stannis. “We must march. Back south, towards Casterly Rock.”

Addam Marbrand shook his big orange head. “We cannot. You saw what happened when we executed those men. The enemy is still out there—”

“And I do not think the enemy has any intention of leaving, Ser Addam. They are waiting for us to make our move. Ser Kevan and I are agreed on that.” Here he motioned to the Lannister commander.

“Lord Stannis is right,” said Ser Kevan. “In an ordinary siege, we might hole up behind our walls and wait for the enemy to give up and go home, or for relief from the Rock and Lannisport, but we know this enemy is no natural foe. You all saw what happened at Ashemark.”

Ashemark was where Stannis and the Lannister forces had come together. The king’s army had been greatly decimated by then after the battle outside the walls of Lannisport and during the hasty flight north, but they had a good position in the mountains which would have been difficult for Addam Marbrand and Lyle Crakehall’s pursuing force to assault. The day had been ripe for battle nonetheless… but then the wights had come down in their hundreds, and the battle between Lannister and Baratheon became a battle for survival between man and Other. With both armies torn pieces by the first assault, they fled back to Castamere, where Ser Kevan had his garrison, and here they were. Things had not been as simple as all that, of course, but it was rare that any of them had time to dwell on the past. There was no time for then when everything was happening now.
“All the same,” said Ser Addam. “If we go out there—”

“We may all die, yes,” the king replied. “But if we stay here, and they mount an attack on the caves, we have no way of stopping them. The mines of Castamere are not defensible, as Lord Reyne learned to his peril, even with a well-trained and well-provisioned army.”

“And we are not that,” Ser Kevan added. “Our supplies are running low already. What we have here will last us another two weeks, even with lowered rations. And our morale…”

“Our morale is sufficient,” insisted Ser Lyle Crakehall, the Strongboar.

“Oh?” said the king. “Ser Davos, tell Ser Lyle how many men have died today.”

“Nineteen,” said Davos. “At the last count.”

“You are mistaken,” Ser Lyle insisted. “We sent out the five rapists, yes—”

“Yes,” said Davos. “And then there are the fourteen men who died of their own volition. Their fellows tried to stop them, but they walked out into the snow and that was that.”

“So,” said the king. “The situation is more dire than you think, sers. Our men are killing themselves from fear. And maybe they have a point. If we leave the caves behind, yes, we will die. In our hundreds, and maybe in our thousands. But you are all fighting men. I am sure you have all been told many times that the best way to die, if there is such a thing, is with a sword in your hand.”

“And the taste of enemy blood on our lips,” Marbrand finished sarcastically. “Indeed. But these foes of ours do not bleed, my lord.”

“No,” said Stannis flatly. “They do not. But what would you have us do, Ser Addam? Stay here and die?”

“Stay here and live, I hope.”

“You hope.” The king’s face was wan and steely. “Will you pray too? Will you put your hands together and say a prayer to the Seven? Or to the Lord of Light? He has given me a flaming sword. Perhaps he will give us all salvation, if you pray to him. Perhaps he will make the snows fade.” Stannis’s mouth twitched, but it was impossible to tell whether it was in anger or amusement. “Go on. Pray.”

Marbrand was quiet. Ser Kevan spoke for him: “If the gods were ever planning to answer our prayers, Ser Addam, they would have done so long ago. The sentiment is plain. We are on our own. We have two choices. Stay here, or go. As I see it… that choice is live or die.”

“Ser Addam may be right,” said King Stannis. “Perhaps the day after we leave, a Lannister army will arrive from the south and relieve us. If we leave the caves, we may doom ourselves. But… I see this not so much as a matter of life or death as a matter of choosing what to believe in. In them, or in ourselves. Surely we are the masters of our own fates?”

Something about that moved them. They did not acknowledge it outright, and Davos did not break rank in that, but it was true for him. Stannis had spoken of dying well. Davos was not sure there was such a thing; indeed, his own father had spoken fiercely to the contrary – *nothing at all is worth more than your life*, and so forth – and he understood that; he would much rather his son Devan had lived a coward than died. But at the same time, if he had to die…

And he very well might have to.
He did not realise until Stannis said “Ser Davos” that all the others had gone. “Is something troubling you, ser?”

“No, Your Grace.” Davos rose. “I’ll be away—”

The king grimaced. “Remain seated, ser. We need to talk. To discuss matters I would rather not have the entirety of my council – especially not the Lannisters – be privy to.”

He meant close counsel, or even friendship, but those words would never cross Stannis Baratheon’s lips (and frankly Davos would be concerned if they did). “Which matters, Your Grace?”

A long pause. Then: “Shireen.”

“What about her?”

“Where do you think this notion of fleeing back to Casterly Rock came from. The girl has told me that the boy Tommen will be most accommodating to our cause.”

“And… you believe her? Wholly?”

“No. But I think she is right when she says it may be our best chance.” There was a pause. “You never really told me how you came to be here in the Westerlands.”

“That was Shireen’s choice too. No doubt you have heard about Melisandre and Selyse…”

“I have. And I am angry at myself for not predicting it earlier. The red woman always made her allusions, but I never thought she was entirely serious. So I have you to thank for that as well, Davos.”

He had played no part in the princess’s rescue; that had been Melisandre herself, after some incomprehensible change of heart. But he did not need to tell Stannis that.

“But,” said the king, “even with that danger gone, I thought you would have stayed in the Riverlands—”

“It was my counsel to stay in the Riverlands, Your Grace. But I am afraid the Princess Shireen insisted—”

“A fifteen-year-old girl insisted, you mean.”

“She is your daughter. And even more stubborn than you, I think. Once she had her heart set on coming to you, I could not change her mind. I think, after Riverrun and Melisandre, she felt she was a mere bystander, watching the war tear her life apart.”

Stannis nodded. “I know the feeling. When the Windproud broke up on Shipbreaker Bay I felt a distinct helplessness. But at the same time, that was what drove me.”

So you see, Your Grace, thought Davos, she is your daughter after all. And the fact that she had managed to convince Stannis Baratheon of anything proved that. “And do you believe what she says about Casterly Rock?”

“That is why I asked you here, Ser Davos. Does it seem… reasonable that the bastard boy would be amenable to our cause?”

“I do not know, Your Grace. I did not trust him. But Princess Shireen did. Maybe that is folly on her part—”
The king’s frown grew. “I think there is something you are not telling me, Ser Davos. You seem unsure of your own judgement. That is most strange.”

What was stranger was that he did trust the boy. And it was not because of what Shireen had said. It was because the boy had told him the truth. He killed Devan, yes, and so I must hate him for that, always. But he told me that killed Devan. He knew that I would have been well within my rights as a father to strike him down there and then, but he told me anyway.

But he could not explain any of that to Stannis.

“It is your decision, Your Grace,” he said instead. “I am uncertain, but I think you and Ser Kevan are right about one thing: if we stay here, we will all surely die. If we leave… we may still die, but our deaths will be ours, not theirs.”

There was a moment of silence. Then the king ground his teeth together and said, “Tell me, Davos, how did we come to the point where dying well is the only thing we have left? There was a time when I meant to take the Iron Throne. I had the might of the Stormlands behind me, and I stood in R’hllor’s shadow, wielding the Red Sword of Heroes.” He snorted. “And yet here I am.”

“You still wield that sword, Your Grace. When Shireen and I found you that night…”

“Oh, it catches fire when it wants to, yes. And my knights tell me that it is R’hllor’s light, and I nod along with them. Because if you give a man a flaming sword and a prophecy, he thinks he has become the last hero, or the prince that was promised. But I needed the Lord of Light on the Blackwater, and he deserted me then. I needed him at Lannisport, and he deserted me again, and left me for dead. I trusted in him, and in Melisandre, and they repaid my trust with lies and treachery.

“And then there is you, Davos. You are no god. No son of a king. Only a crabber’s son. And yet you have been truer to me than all these gods put together. I do not believe in gods any more. There is only one thing left for me to believe in, and that is the men. The hearts, minds, and swords of men will prevail. R’hllor offered me fire. Power. But what is power, without a way to wield it? What are gods without the men who follow them?”

“I can’t speak for the gods, Your Grace,” said Davos. “Nor for men either, I don’t think. But my wife is a pious woman. She knows the Seven, far better than I do, and they taught her virtues. I don’t believe in the gods much, but I believe in some of the things they teach us. Maybe when we die there are no seven heavens and no seven hells; maybe there is just nothing. But I do not think trying to live virtuously can hurt us, even if there is no hell on the other side.”

“Aye,” said Stannis. Then his eyes drifted away, and Davos knew that it was time for him to leave the king to his quiet reflection. He had other duties to attend to, besides. The first of those was Shireen.

He found the princess in her chambers, across the hall from his own. They were as damp and cavernous as any in Castamere, but Shireen had tried to make them homely by hanging up cloaks and blankets as tapestries and by placing a few candles here and there. A dozen books, the contents of her saddlebags, were spilled across the floor. Davos found her hunched over one of them, reading by the light of a thin candle. For a few moments he stood and watched her. She knew he was here, no doubt. But her reading came first, and he came second, as was increasingly the case.

Eventually Davos cleared his throat. “What are you reading, princess?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Shireen closed the book and looked up. “What is it, ser? Does my father want me for anything?”
“No. It’s not that. I was just wondering if you wanted help with anything.”

She saw through his ruse, of course. “I am fine, Ser Davos,” she said, “but I sense that you are not. And it is a very particular problem that troubles you. Something that only I can solve. Else you would not have come to me for counsel. Which means…”

“—Devan,” said Davos, because he was sure she already knew. “I was talking to your father, princess. He says—”

“—that I told him we should try and make for Casterly Rock. Yes. I did.”

“Why?”

“What other choice do we have, Ser Davos? Other than staying here to die?” She said it with hard-edged, unfamiliar confidence. She has changed so much.

“None, my princess.”

“Then we had best head for the Rock, don’t you think?”

“I suppose so, my princess.” Davos turned to go. “I apologise for interrupting you.”

When he was at the door Shireen called him back. “I know it is hard for you,” she said. “With what happened to Devan. I miss him too. But sometimes we have to make peace with our enemies. And… whatever he did, Lord Tommen will help us. I know he will. And you know so too, I think. You just don’t want to admit it.”

Davos nodded, and without another word, he went out into the hallway. He could smell a cookfire somewhere down the winding hall, but he had no appetite for food. Instead he retreated to the narrow space of his chambers, closed the curtains behind him, and lay down amid his blankets in the complete darkness.

It was always raining in Castamere. Water dripped endlessly down the walls. Among decrepit watchtowers and crumbling ramparts, the rains wept o’er these halls. And here I am to hear.

How many women died here? Davos wondered, staring up at the stone ceiling. How many children? How many were convinced that they would be safe, because their lord said they would be? Then he thought, if Lord Tywin had gone to Dragonstone while we were still there, or to Cape Wrath and our keep, what would have become of Marya and Stanny and Steff? He could not help but picture his elder sons too, floating facedown in Blackwater Bay, with tendrils of serpent-green fire swirling around them. He thought of Devan – his Devan, his young, sweet son, and the battlefield at Sarsfield, and mud on gauntlets and bright blue eyes staring into green ones that stared back bright as the wildfire from the Blackwater.

He fought bravely to the end, the boy-king said. His eyes were pleading.

Davos was quite sure he was dreaming now. He grabbed the boy by the neck and drove his fingers into his neck, squeezing and squeezing till the face went blue and the eyes went blue and he realised he had been strangling Devan all along, and he realised that Melisandre had been right. If anyone killed Devan, it was me.

The next morning, he woke early, washed, and donned his suit of padded leather, and his thick wool gloves. He broke his fast on wheat bread and cold blood sausage with the men – though he did not share words with them – then made his way up through the damp halls to the cave-mouth where the prisoners had been executed the day before. Baratheon and Lannister soldiers were lining up,
beneath their banners of stag and lion. The Lannister men were better armed; their steel was newer and brighter, though the patches of rust were still there. Stannis’s men made do with arms more meagre – they were hardier, and stronger, and if it came to it, they would fight with teeth and claws. But that did not really matter anymore. He must needs put any and all doubt aside. *It is Us against Them.*

So Davos walked past Lannister men who might have fought him on battlefields long ago, and was thankful for each and every one of them. At the cave-mouth, he came across the man who had once been his enemy’s Hand. Ser Kevan wore a cloak of heavy red wool. His fingers were closed around the hilt of a ruby-set longsword.

After a time, Stannis came to his side too, dressed in his dark steel armour. Then Ser Lyle Crakehall and Ser Addam Marbrand, Ser Richard Horpe and Ser Justin Massey as well. Stannis reached into his scabbard, and drew forth Lightbringer. The blade did not burn, but fingers of pale white light ran down the steel, so it seemed to glow.

The snow was blowing into their faces, through the opening. It was very cold. Everything seemed to go still around him. Davos was barely even aware that Ser Kevan was there at all.

“So,” said King Stannis. “We march.”

**Chapter End Notes**

Guess who's going on the world's worst roadtrip...

So Stannis and the gang are on the move. I skipped over a lot of the "contention between Lannister and Baratheon forces" stuff since it seems fairly obvious that things have to resolve themselves like these, and I tried not to dwell too much on the past, even though Davos's personal line in this chapter is very much about reconciling himself with their situation.

It's unusual, I think, to see Davos in this situation. I enjoy showDavos, but I think in Season 7 he had very little depth. His jovial "The last time I was here, you killed my son" to Tyrion is possibly the worst line of dialogue ever created, since it seems to directly conflict with Davos's rage from 6.10 over the loss of Shireen. But I digress. It's weird to see Davos being the one who is lagging behind while Stannis is the epitome of progress.

A few thoughts:

You may notice that there are a fair few references to Stannis that rely on the dichotomy of light and dark, and the idea of illumination. This will be expanded on in the future.

The final scene is heavily inspired by both Daenerys's "Shall we begin?" from 7.01 and the last shot from 7.05, "Eastwatch", and the beginning of the wight hunt, both of which were individual moments that really hit me:
Here’s a very important line of dialogue that I'll just highlight:

“I do not believe in gods any more. There is only one thing left for me to believe in, and that is the men. The hearts, minds, and swords of men will prevail. R’hllor offered me fire. Power. But what is power, without a way to wield it? **What are gods without the men who follow them?**”

**And finally, thank you to everyone who has read, commented, left kudos, etc.**
Chapter Summary

Vivere libere aut mori.

Chapter Notes

**Continuity:** This chapter takes place at around the same time or possibly before the first Daenerys POV chapter, "Evenstar".

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**WILLAS**

He awoke to the click of a lock. Normally he never would have heard it, but after what he judged to be more than a month in this cell, the new sound was sudden and strange to Willas Tyrell’s ears. *What is happening?*

*Thunk.* That was the bolt sliding across on the inner door. And then there was the slow screeching sound as the rusty hinges folded and the door swung inwards, slowly, slowly, picking up speed – and coming to a dead stop as it thumped against the frame.

The first thing he saw was that it was still night. There was little light down here in the black cells, but Willas had grown accustomed to even the slightest changes in the darkness. And this darkness was blacker than usual.

The second thing he saw was the torch. His pale, flickering salvation. And the third was the man who held it, some dusty, godforsaken sellsword. “Let’s get you up, now, y’lordship. No time to waste.” He held out a grubby hand and hauled Willas to his feet. “Careful on them legs. You haven’t used them for a while, I wager.”

“Who are you?” Willas asked, stepping forwards gingerly. “Who are you working with?”

“You’re the smart one, y’lordship,” said the man. “You tell me.”

Willas had his suspicions, of course. And unless his wits had deserted him completely in that cell, he was sure his suspicions were right. *But if it is Varys, why didn’t he come down earlier? And why didn’t he come down here himself?*
He squinted at the man. The eunuch was known to use a whole variety of disguises, but this one seemed a little too real. Willas thought back to a group of travelling musicians he’d seen at Highgarden when he was a child. The costumes were greatly exaggerated, their facepaints heavy with yellow and rouge, their accents greatly overblown to the point of ridicule, every man of them some caricature or other. *Even Varys is surely guilty of that. So this is not him.*

“You going to stare at my face all night?” the man asked.

“Sorry. You looked… familiar, that’s all.”

“You don’t know me, y’lordship.”

“Do you know Varys?” blurted Willas, knowing the question might well mark him out as a fool, or worse than that, for death. If the eunuch was still in King’s Landing, plainly he didn’t want his presence known.

“Do I know Varys?” said the man. “Good question. I don’t think anyone knows that rat. Not me, not you, not his little friends.”

“His little friends?”

“Little birds. Though there aren’t so many of them any more. Not since the dragon queen sent her men through the tunnels—”

“Daenerys,” said Willas, musingly. How had he forgotten about Daenerys, and the executioner’s axe lying above his head? “Is she still here?”

“Sailed off to Dragonstone a few days back,” said the man. “I imagine she was leaving you to the mercy of her Unsullied. Only problem is, there aren’t no Unsullied guarding you no more.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean.”

He did, but that didn’t make him any more comfortable. *What will the Unsullied do when they come down here and find their comrades with their throats cut? What will they do to me if they catch me, and to Arianne—?*

“Where’s Arianne?” he asked. “Princess Arianne, I mean.”

“She’s been taken care of. She’s safe.”

“Are we going to meet her?”

“How the fuck would I know, m’lord? I’m just the messenger.” The man laughed hollowly. “There’s no way in seven hells that they’d tell me anything. I’m not trustworthy, you see.” He turned to Willas and grinned through yellow teeth.

Willas smiled back. He had something too. *Just the messenger.* So this man, whoever he was, was working for someone with a bit of sense. *And I am not entirely alone.* A sudden thought came to him: what if this was not Varys’s rescue at all, but Garlan’s? “Highgarden,” he said suddenly. “Are we going back to Highgarden?”

The man shrugged. “How would I know? I’m here to get you out, that’s all. And then you can bugger off wherever you please.”
As they rounded the next corner, Willas glimpsed two Unsullied in the light of the man’s torch. His heart leapt for a moment, but then he saw the smears of blood on the wall behind them, and the crimson smiles drawn across their throats. Their life’s blood puddled around their feet. Willas nearly retched, though this was far from the grisliest thing he had seen. No, the problem was seeing one grisly thing brought back all the others, the memories he had forgotten in the cell. That night on the Blackwater was first and foremost: the smells of burning meat, like the world’s biggest and most evil campfire. Around the flames, men danced and sang songs – only they were not dancing, they were writhing in their death throes; and they were not singing, they were screaming. A dark shadow passed through his mind, beating great demon’s wings.

“If you’re gonna retch, m’lord, save it for when we’re outside.” The man pulled him forwards. “And if you’re still feeling squeamish, best close your eyes for this part. We’re going down. The fourth level of the dungeons.”

“There are only three levels in the dungeons,” said Willas.

“Best you keep thinking that, and close your eyes, unless you want nightmares for the rest of your life.”

“What about you?”

The man turned to him, half his face shrouded in shadow. “I’ve seen enough shit to cope with most of it.” Then, more quietly, “aye, most of it.” To Willas he said, “Close your eyes, and hold on to my shoulders.”

Willas did as he was told. Briefly he wondered if this was just the man’s way of hiding their escape route – not that he would remember it anyway – but then he heard moaning, somewhere off to his right, and the scuffling of feet. He did not think the feet were his own, but there was no real way of knowing. I have been reduced to a rat, he thought, scurrying and scuttling through darkness.

He had been in blackness for about half a minute when it occurred to him that this might not be an escape at all. What if he is the queen’s assassin, and no friend to me or to Varys? If he was going to murder me, where better to do it than down here, where no sane man would dare to look? That made him pick up the pace, just a little. “Hurry,” he whispered, where he thought the man’s ear was.

The man picked up the pace. Willas’s legs, sore with misuse, started to burn, and he had to dig his fingers into the man’s chainmailed shoulders to keep up. The strangest thing was that his lie had not been entirely false. It felt as though there was someone behind him the whole time, breathing in his ear. If he strained and listened a little closer, he might have been able to make it whole sentences, and the entirety of what they were saying, but as it was he heard only one word: please.

Willas screwed his eyes up even closer and prayed. Please, he thought, please take me out of this place. The walls were pressing in on him, the tunnel was getting narrower. Please, Mother have mercy, Mother have mercy, oh—

“You can open your eyes now.”

Willas let out a shuddering breath and looked up. They had come to a gate, and beyond it he could hear the faintest hiss, the sussurus of the Blackwater river, he reckoned. The gate was old steel, worn and crusty with frost, which sparkled, sapphire bright, in the light of the man’s torch. Beards of seaweed and black ivy clung from stalactites fixed in the cave roof. There was a drumbeat coming somewhere above them. Willas’s heartbeat rose to match it: dumdumdumdumdum.
The man had no key, but the gate was old that all he had to do was smash the hilt of his longsword against it, and it crashed open.

Now they ascended through a cave, up through a forest of stalagmites, the path slippery with ice. Willas, in his worn and peeling boots, slipped at every opportunity. By the time they reached the cave mouth, his shins and knees were bruised and cut, and he felt like shit, but the pain had awakened something in him. And as he stood outside the cave mouth, stinking of sweat and musk and rat, with the thunder crashing down over the river, he felt alive for the first time in weeks. A louse crawled down over his cheek, clinging to the knots of his beard. He prised it off with his hand, and smashed it to a bloody stain against the cave wall. That bruised his hand, too, but he was glad of the pain. *I am alive.* Even if the sellsword turned on him now, and put a knife to his throat, he would feel the blood sluicing down over his chest, like some hot waterfall. He would feel the pain and the anger and the frustration. Surely that was better than dying alone like a dog in Daenerys’s dungeon. Or living as her prisoner.

The sellsword did not kill him, though. Instead, he stepped out into the rain, waved his torch a few times, then extinguished it. A few moments passed, and then a shape emerged from the rain, as silent as a corpse. A single lantern was briefly unshuttered, marking the ship’s position, a blinking eye, on and off, on and off.

“*Oh, bloody shit,*” said Willas’s rescuer. “*They want us to swim.*”

“They don’t want to waste time coming ashore,” Willas knew. “*Fair enough.*” He thought the swim would do him some good. He stumbled down the rocks from the cave mouth, and, neither knowing nor caring whether the man was behind him, he pushed out into the Blackwater.

The river felt curiously warm, though in truth it was freezing. But as he pushed his head under, and the other lice fled from his hair and beard, and the cold water forced the old dirt from his skin and sluiced him in river mud instead, he began to laugh.

Unfortunately he was underwater as he started laughing, so he broke the surface choking and spluttering, legs kicking weakly, barely able to stay afloat. Then the current had him, and dragged him backwards, and he was beating at the water with his hands, and someone was swearing; it might have been him or it might not have been, and the water went over his head, and then a man was shouting at him, and the water was fighting back, a strong flanking manoeuvre, and he knew this was a losing battle, and he could just lie here, lie back and die and try not to drown—

“You fucking idiot!” A hand passed by his face, and Willas grabbed it, despairing for air, almost crying. “*You bloody fucking idiot!*” said the voice of his rescuer. “I get you out of your cell, and the first thing you do is try to drown yourself!” Willas felt a sharp pull, all the way up his arm, and they dragged him up onto the deck, where he collapsed among a pile of ropes and sandbags, spitting out seaweed and snails.

The man dragged him along the deck. “*You dumb cunt. If you’d found me on a bad day, I’d be gutting you right now.*”

“*Piss on that.*” Willas was surprised to hear the words coming from his own lips. “*Don’t pretend you give a shit about my life. If you did, you’d have gotten me out of my cell a lot earlier. No. You’re a sellsword. For you it’s all about the money.*” He turned onto his side and vomited.

After that he fell asleep. He dreamed of the river, of the sound of drums, pounding through his ears. Only it was a different river, the Mander, and he was on a pleasure barge, and he was sailing through the little stone gate that marked the secret way into Highgarden castle, the way that only the Tyrells knew. Garlan was waiting for him up there, he could see him, up high on a stone balcony, and
Loras, and Margaery, and even Sansa, for some reason, the wife who had run away.

They were laughing at him, pointing and laughing. Why are you laughing? he wanted to shout at them. But he had no mouth. So he would have to see for himself. He turned around, and nearly shit himself in doing so. The river was on fire, burning up red and green, and the black-winged dragon was flying overhead, coming straight towards him, screaming, its mouth a furnace, and he was no longer in Highgarden, he was in the seventh hell—

He woke, gasping and retching. Only this time nothing came out. He was lying, naked, in a narrow bunk. His chest was on fire, and his head burned with the nightmare, but his legs and arms didn’t seem to be there. He was just lying there, and there was a noise in his head, a scream, rising and rising, shriller and shriller by the second.

Willas sat up. The noise faded, and everything was silent. All he could hear was the faint patter of the rain, and below that, the barest hiss of the river. He walked to the porthole window and looked out, but everything was foggy. Then he went over to the table. They had laid some fresh clothes out for him, so he forced them on, still dazed. He went to try the door of the cabin, but it was locked. I am as much a prisoner here as I was there, he thought. Only here they pretend otherwise.

There was nothing to do but sit by the porthole, and pretend that there was something to see out there. Then, after a long time, the motion of the boat began to steady, and when he heard footsteps coming down into the belly of the ship, Willas realised they were now moored in place.

There was some noise of a key scrabbling in a lock, and then the door swung inwards, and his sellsword rescuer stood in the doorway. “Come on, then,” the man said. “There’s people waiting to see you. Up in the castle.”

“Castle?” said Willas, as the man shoved him roughly out of the cabin. “What castle?”

“Stop talking, and start walking, and you might find out.” In the morning light, Willas could see his rescuer more clearly – greasy black hair, a windburned face – and in that light, he had the certain feeling he had seen this man before. He did not find that particularly reassuring.

They climbed the stairs to the deck. It was no clearer up here than it had been looking through his porthole window; the fog was everywhere, a swirling grey cloud of it. The river had calmed considerably, Willas noted; the strong currents from Blackwater Bay had petered out, and the steep rocky banks had become softly sloping ones, all mud and weeds.

Standing at the stern, he could see a narrow wooden jetty poking like an inquisitive finger out of the gloom. Very slowly they drew up alongside; the crewmen lowered the mainsail and cast their ropes out to the men on the platform. Led by his rescuer, and now wrapped up in a green wool cloak, Willas disembarked.

The men on the dock greeted him with mutterings of “Lord Tyrell.” That sounded so strange to his ears that it almost made him sick. The last time he had been called Lord Tyrell… was it before Garlan had departed, or after? Had Arianne ever called him that, either meaningfully or in jest?

There was no time to question, because the path leading up from the jetty suddenly widened out and there the arches of a castle loomed up above. They passed through a narrow gateway – watched by soldiers whose blue-and-green livery he did not recognise – and then along a dark passage, stalked by the smells of livestock and soiled hay, and then up a flight of moss-slick steps. “Back entrance,” Willas’s rescuer explained, as they approached a pair of ominous-looking wooden doors.

“Where are we?”
“Maltwood Hall. Little castle on the edge of the kingswood.”

“Maltwood?” He did not recognise the name.

“Aye. Owned by some thirdborn son of Lord… Lord Whatshisface.”

“Who?”

The man shrugged. “Leave the explanations to the people who are good at them.” He did not say who he meant, but then the doors to the hall opened, and Willas understood.

There was a moment of brief silence. Then: “You.”

“Me.” The eunuch, Varys, stood by an iron brazier, warming his soft pale hands. “But you knew that already, I think.”

Willas felt very stiff. “I did.”

“You may be wondering how it was that I got you out of your cell, Lord Willas. And you may also be wondering what took me so long.”

“The thought had occurred to me.”

“I had to speak to some friends, you see. In the capital. Lord Rosby and Lord Velaryon had both turned their cloaks to Daenerys, and as reward for their treason she had named them as castellans of the Red Keep in her absence. Do you see where I am going with this?”

“You needed to bribe them,” said Willas heavily. “You needed time to bribe them.”

“Yes. Quite so. But now that they are our men… they will tell Daenerys that you are on your way to the Wall. To the Night’s Watch. As you are supposed to be. And in the meantime…” The eunuch shrugged. “Well, we will leave those matters for a few moments, I think. There are meetings to be had, first.” He picked up a bell from the side table and rang it. Then the door at the back of the hall opened, and Arianne Martell entered.

There was a moment of breathless silence. Had she, Willas wondered, been expecting his arrival as he expected hers? But that was only a moment. Then they rushed together and they embraced, neither caring that the other was bruised or that they smelled like graveworms. She was here, she was real, and she was warm; the first warm thing he had felt in a long time.

When they drew apart Arianne turned to Varys. “Thank you,” she said.

“Do not thank me just yet,” said the eunuch. “There is still a way to go.”

“To Highgarden?” asked Willas. “Did Garlan—?”

“Your brother made it back to Highgarden, yes. Once he was back within the castle walls, Daenerys dared not pursue.”

“Why not?” Willas was admittedly surprised by that. “She could have subjugated him then and there. With Aegon dead—” He cast a cursory glance to Arianne, “—she would have found it easy to demand her fealty.”

“Daenerys has seen fit to practise mercy, it would seem. My little birds inform that she intends to flee north, to the Wall. Something to do with aiding the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, I believe.”
Willas frowned. “Do you believe her?”

“My dear boy,” said Varys, patronisingly. “I don’t know what to believe anymore. What does ‘the truth’ even mean now, I ask you?” He tutted.

“Something to believe in,” Willas muttered.

“I’m glad you said that,” said Arianne suddenly. “There are… other things now. Other things to believe in, I mean.”

Willas looked at her, with a distinct sinking feeling. “Such as…” And then he noticed the way she was standing, with the hand resting – protectively, he realised – over her belly. She was not yet starting to swell, but there were other things: twitches in her hands, flickers of her eyelids, the way she moved, so slowly, so, so… “You’re pregnant.”

“I am.”

“I… the king…” Or…

“Yes. Before he died.”

You can’t know that. You can’t know it wasn’t me. Willas nearly said it aloud, but if Varys had done all this hoping that the child would someday take back his father’s seat, and solely for that purpose, and if the child was not Aegon’s, then Varys had no use for them. For either of them.

Varys turned his attention back to Willas. “I trust you have made Ser Bronn’s acquaintance,” he said, gesturing to Willas’s rescuer. “He’s no fabled knight, I fear, but my friends are so rarely men of honour.”

“I’m no friend of yours,” said the man called Ser Bronn. “Just another person you’ve bribed into submission. Another person you’ve lied to.”

Varys made a tiny scandalised noise. “Lied to? Why, Ser Bronn, I would never presume—”

“The boy. The money.”

“Oh, very well.” The eunuch waved a hand. “You can have the boy back now. You are free. Although… you may soon find out that you are under suspicion in King’s Landing. And all across the Crownlands. Believed to have aided in the escape of both the lord of Highgarden and Aegon’s queen. With a bounty on your head, and no shortage of men hunting it. Hunting you, hunting the boy, hunting everything you’ve gained, Stokeworth—”

Ser Bronn hawked and spat at Varys’s feet. “You truly are a shit, aren’t you?”

“You could say that. But we are rogues both, Ser Bronn. I doubt you expected any less.”

If they are rogues both, what does that make me and Arianne? Willas wondered. And all our families, and all our allies. We are traitors all. Then the horrifying thought came to him. If Daenerys comes for us again, there will be no mercy this time. Instead it will be heads, spikes, walls, for all of us.

“And what say you, Lord Tyrell?” Varys said to him. “Of course, you are perfectly within your rights to stay here, too. You and the princess both.” It was as if the eunuch read his thoughts – though that could not have been particularly hard, since the worry showed so plainly on his face.
“Highgarden.” He choked out the word. “We go to Highgarden. Back to my brother. To live… or to die.”

“To live free or die,” said Varys, with a wink at both Willas and Ser Bronn. “But first, we have other places to go. To Bitterbridge first, I think.”

“What is at Bitterbridge?” asked Arianne.

“You forget, Your Grace, that your late husband had far more friends than his aunt ever did. Not only the remaining Reachmen and Dornishmen, but others, and some new allies, even. Even without Magister Illyrio’s funding from Braavos. Oh, the lesser companies broke on the Blackwater, but they will all come running back when they catch the sweet smell of gold. The Long Lances. The Windblown. And most numerous of all, the Second Sons. So, then: to Bitterbridge. Brown Ben Plumm is waiting for us.”

Chapter End Notes

The title of this one, "Live Free or Die", is the motto of the state of New Hampshire. Which is... completely irrelevant, actually.

I wrote this one ages ago, which is usually a bad thing as that often means it doesn't make sense... but surprisingly this one was, for the most part, readable. So there wasn't much editing to do, which is always a relief.

The KL plot starts getting exciting pretty soon, so hold on because it's going to be like the world's greatest rollercoaster. Probably.

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**BIG NEWS/2018 PLANS:**

As I've vaguely alluded to before, I've had a hell of a lot of real life stuff going on which has meant that Knights of the Nightingale has proceeded at a snail's pace compared to the previous two instalments in this series. Unfortunately, it's probably not going to get a lot better, as my priorities have changed around a lot.

On the other hand, I am currently (albeit probably only briefly) operating on a ridiculous high as I found out today that I've been offered a place at Oxford, starting this October. Which has been a sort of lifelong dream, I suppose. But I still have to meet my offer grades, and as a result this story is taking a backseat. Not just because of my increasingly hectic schedule, but because I've got about three more projects crawling along at the same time as KOTN (film script, fantasy novel, and I'm starting a sci-fi concept thingy this week). Whereas previously I was working this every time I sat down to write, I now only write KOTN about one day in four.

None of this is to say that there will not be any new KOTN coming, but things will be uploaded A LOT slower than usual. For my ease, I've split the story up into 10 informal
"parts", the first of which ends with the next chapter (Tyrion I). However, I've only written about 2 chapters of Part 2, with another 8 chapters incomplete. Already things with KOTN are going a lot slower than I had intended.

When all my exams are done in June, I should have time to get this story rolling again for about 4 months. But, assuming I meet my uni offer and start out in October, KOTN will be on hold again, so the end date may well be months or even years down the line - though at the same time, I have no intentions of putting this on permanent hiatus. And on the plus side, we might have TWOW to tide us over by then, fingers crossed.

Regardless of what comes up, though, thank you all so very much for reading, and supporting me all this way.
Dagmar son of Hagmar licked his lips. “You are a fool, Halfman, to think this will be your salvation.”

“Perhaps so,” Tyrion admitted. He was not feeling so confident about his plan now. The mountain clansmen were not known for listening before they acted.

“Better to accept your fate than to make our chief angry.”

“I’d sooner have life than death any day.” Tyrion passed beneath his outstretched arm into the tent. Penny followed close behind him, anxious not to be abandoned.

No sooner had he stepped inside the tent than Tyrion regretted his decision. The dozen or so clan leaders were twice as tall as he was, and garlanded in so many medallions and chains, with so many weapons in their belts, that the tent interior looked like some strange meeting between King’s Landing whores and a cult of bearded priests. Only the cult of the Stone Crows was vast and angry, and armed to the teeth (— quite literally; Tyrion saw that one of the chieftains had silver teeth that had been shaped into fangs). What also struck him was the sheer volume of steel that he recognized. These were swords and shields and pikes from his father’s forges, the payment of a promise Tywin Lannister had made long ago to the man sitting in the middle of the ring: Shagga son of Dolf, who lorded over it all with such radiating presence that he could have claimed to be king of all Westeros, and Tyrion would have gone down on bended knee.

Dagmar son of Hagmar presented his prize captives: “Shagga son of Dolf, and other chiefs of the Stone Crows. I bring you Tyrion son of Tywin, the Halfman. And his little wife.”

The little wife was Penny. It was a safer story than to admit the truth. If the Stone Crows thought she was Tyrion’s property, it was less likely they’d rape her. Not that she was entirely safe anyway. Especially if Shagga decided that he’d like to lop off Tyrion’s head.

No such words came forth, though; instead, the chief of the Stone Crows let out a great, rumbling laugh. “Tyrion Halfman,” he boomed, “you stood so tall once.”
The Stone Crows burst into screeching laughter. Tyrion smiled back at them. Let them see me as they will. Dwarf, jester, monster, I can be whatever you like, Shagga dear.

“You stood so tall once,” said Shagga again. “Yet now I see that you are truly quite small.”

Again the incessant, vulture-like laughter. This time, Tyrion timed his outburst for when the laughter broke, like the susurrus of a river. “It is good to see you again, Shagga son of Dolf.” He dipped his head courteously; Penny followed his lead. “I bring glad tidings—”

“What do you want, Halfman?” Shagga’s smile was amused, but it was the sort of smile that could disappear and be replaced by malevolence without a moment’s warning. It was the smile of a cat that could turn to a lion at any second.

*What do I want, indeed?* “My freedom, for a start,” said Tyrion. “And that of my wife, Penny. Your friend Hagmar took us as prisoners. I was hoping we might remember old friendships, and stand before you as guests.”

Shagga advanced, as a hunter stalks his prey. But when he reached Tyrion, he turned away and leered over Penny instead. “Your wife?” he growled at Tyrion.

“Aye,” said Tyrion, hoping neither his voice nor Penny’s shaking would betray them. “She is.”

“Heh,” said Shagga. “Pretty. Young. But small. Just right for you, eh, Halfman?” That sent up another chorus of laughter; when it died down, he went on: “Shagga son of Dolf like this girl. But he needs much more than a Halfwoman. And he needs much more than lies from you, Halfman, if you are to keep your manhood.”

“Of course,” said Tyrion. “But you understand, I will settle for half in this deal.”

It was, he supposed, in vain to expect that the lummockes would get his little joke. Shagga just scowled even wider.

“Nevertheless,” Tyrion went on, attempting and failing to meet the eyes of the gathered chiefs. “I would ask that of you, as a first boon. Our freedom.” He held up his wrists, bound with the rope.

A long moment passed. Then Shagga motioned for one of his men to cut Tyrion and Penny’s bindings. “Your freedom,” he said, coming close, his breath smelling of raw meat. “Not your lives.”

Tyrion understood that only too well. He also understood that if he was to speak, the time was now. “I have come here to you, noble Stone Crows,” he called, “to make a deal.”

“You made us a deal before,” said Dagmar son of Hagmar. “And you lied. You said we would have the Vale of Arryn. But here we are, and the Vale is still the land of the milk men.”

“You do not have the Vale yet,” Tyrion corrected. “But a Lannister always pays his debts. On my word, you shall have these lands sooner than you can believe if you help me.”

“But why should we believe you, Halfman?” Shagga boomed. “Why should we believe you after your last lie?”

It was not too difficult to outsmart the Stone Crows, especially after he’d had the better part of four days on the road to think this plan through. “I promised you more than the Vale,” Tyrion said. “I promised you weapons and armour, too. And looking around, I see that you have them. Is that not testament to the fact that I pay my debts?”
A rumble went through the Stone Crows. Shagga nodded. “Continue, Halfman.”

“I promised you weapons and armour,” Tyrion said. “But I did not give you them. You had to take their weapons and armour, by demanding them from my father. Else he would never have given you them. He, like many of the milk men, regarded you as savages. But he was wrong, was he not? The Stone Crows took what they were owed!”

When the nods of agreement went through the tent, Tyrion could scarcely believe it. This is almost too easy, he thought. “You took what was yours then, and you must do the same with the Vale of Arryn. I am not the lord of the Vale; I cannot give it to you on a silver platter. But that is no matter to you – for you are not milk men, and you take what is yours!” He turned his attention to Shagga alone. “Every great leader - including you - knows that they must fight their own battles. When you took those weapons from my father, you took the tools of conquest... and now, finally, it is time for you to use them.”

The Stone Crows might have bought that there and then, but unfortunately, Shagga son of Dolf knew Tyrion Lannister better than his fellows did. And Shagga son of Dolf was only too familiar with the lies and empty promises of the milk men. His people built their civilization on a dung heap. Of course he knows one when he smells one. “Those are words, Halfman. Nothing more. We have steel, aye. But they have better steel, and bows, and spears, and hundreds of men on horseback in steel suits, and tall stone houses which we cannot attack.”

“No. You cannot attack castles. But if you ride with me, I will show you how—”

Shagga laughed, a loud, throaty sound. “And how will you do that, Halfman? Will you talk these castles into dust?”

Stepped right into the trap there, Shagga. “Would that I could,” said Tyrion, “if it were possible, I would be the right man for it. No man can speak like me. But, no, I have a different suggestion. One that will test even the bravery of the feared Stone Crows.”

“Oh?” Shagga’s smile was more dangerous than Tyrion ever remembered it being. He was all too aware that what he had to say next was likely to make them burst our laughing. Or else he might lose his head.

“Perchance,” he began slowly, “perchance you have heard tell of a creature that lives up in the hills. A fanged beast of some fearsome reputation. A scaled neck, wings larger than any birds, the eyes of death itself, a mouth like the maw of hell, with fire scarce contained within—”

“We know what a dragon is, Halfman,” Shagga growled. “And we know that it is not the hell-beast you have just described. The creature is wounded.”

So Viserion had not recovered from the woundings he’d received from Aegon’s ballistae on the Blackwater. Not yet. “You have seen it?”

“Aye, we have.”

“I’ll wager that you thought dragons were myths until a few weeks ago.” Tyrion decided to play up that angle. Appeal to their bravery. Appeal to their stupidity.

“There were dragons in the old times,” Shagga said, with an almost-thoughtfulness. “They lived like kings. Not this one, though. It just burns pasture grass and steals sheep from the high hills. It is more an annoyance than the hell-spawned demon you describe, Halfman.”

“But dangerous nonetheless, I’m sure you’ll agree.”
Shagga nodded. “They are dangerous,” he said, gravely. Tyrion was a little surprised. He’d expected the clansman to shake his head and beat his chest, and claim that the Stone Crows feared nothing. They did not, of course; that was the beauty of their stupidity. *Give a man something to fight, and he’ll fight for a day. Give a man something to fight for, and he’ll die a stupid death in battle for you, and be proud of it. Unless that man is called Bronn.*

Never mind that, though. He could still work with this. “And what if I told you,” he said, “that three hundred years, a great dragon named Balerion melted the walls and towers of Westeros’s greatest castle, Harrenhal, to dust, even though the stones were four hundred feet thick, and burned a thousand thousand men on the Field of Fire?” A little embellishment would do no harm.

“This is known, Halfman.”

“And what if I told you,” Tyrion said, “that these beasts could be tamed, and convinced to fight for you?”

Shagga laughed, as Tyrion had hoped he would, and the rest of the tribe laughed with him. He let the laughter gather. “You are mad, Halfman,” said Shagga.

“Perhaps,” said Tyrion. “Or perhaps I have tamed one myself. Perhaps I tamed this dragon in the hills.”

“That is impossible, Halfman,” said Shagga. “You are funny, though. You have always been funny.”

“On the contrary, noble Shagga son of Dolf. I am entirely serious. I *will* tame this dragon, and I will help the mountain clans conquer the Vale with it, if you help me. I will pay my debts, more than twice over. All I ask is your support, and your friendship, as you lent it to me in the fight for the kingdom of my people.”

Shagga’s gaze darkened. “You want us to help you tame this dragon?”

“I do. Or you stand outside with Penny and cower, if you’d prefer, while I venture into the beast’s lair alone, if you are too weak-hearted to follow me into the depths.” *And pray that my luck holds out.*

When the angry roar of indignation went up, Tyrion Lannister knew he had them. Shagga made himself heard above the rest. “So be it, then, Halfman! You want to face a dragon, we will take you to his cave! And we will laugh and dance over your bones when you burn. Yes, there will be a dragon hunt!”

“A dragon hunt?” Tyrion frowned. *A hundred Storm Crows armed with spears and one angry dragon. This will end well.* He forced himself to smile.

“If you fail, Halfman,” explained Shagga. “We will have to go after the beast then and there.” Then he smiled, showing stained yellow teeth, and turned that smile on Penny. “And if you fail, your little wife will be poor and powerless… and alone.”

Now Shagga seemed satisfied that his threats had been made with sufficient clarity. That done, he abruptly banished Tyrion and Penny from the hall while he made plans for the ‘dragon hunt’ with the rest of his kinsmen. Tyrion did not overly mind; he had not great desire to waste his hours sitting on the councils of savages. Dagmar son of Hagmar led them from the room. Tyrion began to whistle.

“Why are you so happy, Halfman?” asked Dagmar. “Unless you are even madder than you look, you have nothing to be pleased about.”
“Oh, quite. I am mad. The dragon will burn me down to bones and melted flesh if I am wrong. But he will do the same for you and all your clansfolk, so it is every bit in your interest to see that I survive.”

“We made no guarantees of your survival.”

“No. But your chieftain implied my death, as I recall. So forgive me if I do not take your words to heart.”

Dagmar was seething, he could tell. Some men might have called it unwise to let such resentment fester among savages such as these, fearing, perhaps, that they would end up being dragged out and murdered in the night, but Tyrion was used to that sort of situation. *It is somewhat like being back in King’s Landing,* he thought, *only the Stone Crows do their backstabbing and murdering in plain sight.*

In his unending kindness, Shagga had decided to take them as guests rather than prisoners. Tyrion and Penny were conducted to a snug hut on the edge of town, with a firepit and two misshapen mattresses strewn with goathide blankets. It was a little small, but as Penny predictably japed, they didn’t need much room.

After about half an hour, a matronly woman came round with some skewers of goat meat, some goat’s cheese and two bowls of goat milk. Tyrion felt a little sick after finishing it all, but they did not give him time to feel too uncomfortable; the matron promptly returned with a large wooden bucket, which she filled with pails of tepid water. “Out,” she grunted, slapping Tyrion on the head.

Very well. She wanted him to take off his clothes, so he did, and stood opposite her in his rude naked skin, his cock slapping down against his thighs. He raised his eyebrows at her. “Well? Is this what you want?” She did not know how to take that. He was about to waddle towards her when he remembered that Penny was watching too, so he turned away, and climbed up obediently into the tub. The girl did not deserve to be a subject of his anger.

The matron made her wrath known, scrubbing him down so forcefully Tyrion was certain some of his skin sloughed off with the dirt and the mud. Then, as soon as he’d stepped out of the bath, she forced him into a shirt and trousers that were too tight around the waist and too loose everywhere else. They had been made for a child, he surmised. Then it was Penny’s turn; Tyrion averted his eyes, so that she might have some decency. But as he listened to her splashing timidly in the tub, some strange impulse overcame him. He had not been with a girl since Shae. She had been the only girl who had spoken to him since Braavos. But she was just that: a girl. Not a woman. A virgin, sure as sunrise. If he turned round now, and she caught him looking back at her, what would that mean?

It took a tremendous amount of willpower, but he averted his eyes until she had climbed out of the tub and put her clothes back on. His cock stopped twitching in his breeches. Penny stood there in front of her, fresh faced and newly scrubbed, looking like a miniature mockery of the Maiden. “Tyrion,” she said, “maybe… maybe you shouldn’t have turned away.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean… well, you said I was your wife.”

“That was to protect you. Otherwise some of them might have sought to have their way with you.”

A long moment passed. Then Penny said, “Tyrion…”

“What?”
“I… I would be. If you wanted me to be. Your wife.”

Tyrion blanched. “What?”

“Well,” said Penny. “It’s just… I haven’t met many little people, and… well, you’ve always been good to me. Most of the time. And no big person is ever going to want me. So maybe… if I tried, I could fall in love with you—”

“Stop,” he heard himself say. “No. I mean it. Stop. Penny… don’t. Just don’t.”

After that they did not speak for three hours. Tyrion paced around the tent, mulling over his plans. Twice he went out into the encampment, though he never strayed far. He caught sight of a hunting party, comprising all men, as they rode down into the camp with a buck strewn over wooden poles between them. Other men were builders, putting up the houses for which their wives and daughters wove hoardings and curtains, and the clothes and blankets which would fill the earthen rooms. The older boys were learning how to fight and fish from their elders, and girls learned their crafts from wizened old crones. Only the very youngest children were free at their play. Tyrion thought that his father would have liked it here. Everyone does as they are told, and no one disobeys the clan chief without consequence. And if the clan chief were to sire a dwarf, why, he could carry it out into the hills and abandon it, and no one would bat an eye.

He sat waiting in the hut for Shagga or one of his subordinates to return, but they never did. Though in the end, he supposed that was not really too surprising. “Why would they wait on a dwarf, after all?” he said aloud.

“My lord?” Penny looked up brightly. Tyrion had nearly forgotten that she was here at all. There she sat, rocking back and forth on her toes a bit. Earlier, one of the women had come in with a ball of wool, to get something useful out of her, but all Penny had managed to make was an even messier ball.

“I was talking to myself,” Tyrion said. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Were you thinking about Gerion?” she asked him.

“What?”

“Gerion, I said. Numbers. I mean… seeing as he’s your son and everything.” Tyrion had revealed his suspicions to her on the way down to the camp, to get her to uncoil herself from her initial terror of their captors. Now Penny attacked the subject voraciously, as though she might die if she failed to bring it up at least once a day. Maybe that is what she wants. She wants to be a family, with me and her as the parents and Numbers as our son.

“Yes, Penny,” he lied. “I was thinking about Numbers.”

“Gerion. You should try calling him Gerion. He doesn’t like Numbers, remember.”

“I remember.”

“Is that where we’re going? Back to him?”

“I… possibly. Hopefully.” He did mean the last part truly. He wanted to see the boy again, though he did not know what he would tell him, or how to tell him. He could not go running in, and proclaim that he was the boy’s father. And after all I did to him, would he ever want me?

“Tyrion—”
“Go to sleep, Penny. You need to get some rest. The next few days will be long for us both.”

She obeyed him, as a wife would obey her husband. She turned over in the corner, her face pressed into the blankets. Tyrion sat there in silence for a long time, watching her, and in some small way, wanting her. But that could not be, because if he took her, he would have to leave her, and that might very well kill her. *It is for her own good,* he tried to convince himself.

When he was quite certain that she was asleep, Tyrion went and lay down beside her, their heads about three feet apart. His fingers found purchase in the blankets and there he clung, like some limpet to the warm breast of life. He was asleep in moments; no great surprise there, for this was the first bed he had slept on in weeks that was not made up of rocks. His green eye blinked close, and then his black, and he fell into the soft, milky whirlpool of dreams. And at its heart, Penny was there, and the boy Gerion, and the girl he truly loved, a maid as fair as springtime, with sunrise in her hair.

Hours later he woke, though he could not remember what nightmare had brought him out of his dreams. Sweat lay damp on his forehead, his hair was greasy, and the crannies of his body smelled sour and ill-kept. Tyrion sat up, his clammy shirt sticking to him, trying to breathe gently and failing. His hands were shaking, inconsolable. “Wine,” he murmured through the veil of sleep, “I need wine.” But there was no wine here. He turned over onto his side, feeling sick, but there was nothing to be sick from. He looked back at Penny, watching her small breasts rise and fall, watching her as she snored through sweet dreams of her brother Groat and Pretty Pig. His breeches felt stiff, constricting and sticky. He did not dare chance a look.

Looking at Penny, he felt vile. *I want her, and that is the worst thing. But I do not want to love her. I want to fuck her, and then toss her away, to hurt her and burn her and tear her to pieces, to teach her that the world is a terrible place for people like us.* And then, he thought, *I want her to be afraid of me.*

*I want you all to be afraid of me.*

Chapter End Notes

I think Tyrion has the potential to get very dark, especially when he's left alone in his own head for too long. And in the context of TCOS, this is a real low point for his morality, crossing from bitterly dark into downright morally reprehensible and terrifyingly unpredictable. And I think there are places in this story where, frankly, he gets even worse. But at the same time, on the occasions when the light shines through the dark, he's very very interesting indeed.

Another interesting thing about Tyrion, slightly in ASOIAF, but far moreso in TCOS, is his internal monologue. I think Tyrion, more than any other POV character, is aware of his own mortality and the transience of life. So, a question for you: who is Tyrion speaking to in his internal monologue?
Stillness

Chapter Summary

Sit still, and take the stillness into you.
Think, if you will, about the absences –
sun, moon, stars, rain, wind, fog and snow.
Think nothing then, sweep them all away.

- from “Grey” by Edwin Morgan

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

MEERA

The day did not dawn over Greywater Watch. Meera Reed had been up all night, and she noticed the darkness lessen somewhat, as the clouds thinned out and drifted off into nothingness, but the sky was still dark grey, and snow fell in damp, dusty spirals from the heavens. The forest beyond her window was the colour of dried blood.

Meera dressed in darkness. She was slender, and quite tall, but too flat and too plain-featured for any southern lord to consider her beautiful. Not that it mattered. There were no southern lords she wanted.

Now she pulled on undergarments and then the loosely shaped cassock, with fur around the neck and a thick wool lining. The fur was grey. Summer had been grey, she recalled. The last nights in Winterfell had been grey. Her whole life had been lived out in shades of grey. What would you need other colours for?

It seemed a long, long way down to the main hall. She did not see her father this morning, but she did see her mother, talking with Lady Ashara Dayne at a table surrounded by a throng of crannogmen. The Greyjoys, meanwhile, dominated the other side of the hall, drinking their weak ale in the shadow of a giant stuffed lizard-lion. She spotted Asha Greyjoy in the centre of the throng, in deep conversation with her second-in-command, sandy-haired Qarl the Maid.

It had been Qarl and Tristifer Botley who Meera came upon in the forests north of Greywater Watch. At first she had thought they were scouts of Euron’s army, but then she heard them mention their commander Asha Greyjoy, and she saw how disoriented they seemed. Euron’s men, bound to his Horn, were never without purpose. So she followed them for maybe a mile – they were, after all, the first living persons she had met since Winterfell – and as luck would have it, they came upon Asha Greyjoy’s camp.
She could have left them in the fog, endlessly blundering in search of Greywater Watch. But Asha being there made no sense, not after Bran had dispatched her and Theon (in secret) to the Iron Isles. So Meera went to them, and said just that. And after Asha told her that she, too, was fleeing Euron Greyjoy, there was no reason not to join her. Impossible as it seemed, the siege of Winterfell all those years ago was forgotten. There were two sides now: you were either the living, or the dead. In that, at least, there was no such thing as uncertain loyalties.

Breakfast at Greywater Watch was admittedly meagre: lukewarm kippers, and eggs that were nearer red than yellow. The sight of it made Meera a little sick, yet she swallowed it down all the same, eating quickly and methodically. No one talked to her. They had the foresight, at least, to know that she did not want their company.

Except one of them, that was. “My lady,” said a voice, and she did not even have to look to know that it was Edric Dayne. Or, as he liked to say, Call-Me-Ned. The young would-be-Stark who wanted to be a hero.

“What is it?” snapped Meera.

“Your father sent me. He’s in the grove. He wants to see you, after you break your fast.”

Meera stared bleakly down at her wooden plate. “Well, no time to waste, then. I’ll go now.”

That surprised him, but not enough to stop him from jumping up from the bench. “I’ll come with you,” he said.

“You shouldn’t—”

“You father said I should.”

She wanted to hit him. She wanted to knock him to the ground, and then hit him again, and again, and again, till all his blood had oozed out and his stupid face was cracked open like an egg. But instead she sighed, and said, “All right,” and they walked out of the hall together. On the way Meera picked up her spear, resting on a rack just inside the porch. As they set out across the rope bridges that tethered the castle to the other swamp islands, she could not help but notice Edric’s nervous movements, the fingers brushing the hilt of his longsword. Does he really think he can protect himself, and me, with that? Even if the boy-lord armed himself with his house’s ancestral sword, Dawn – which was kept in a locked chest in the castle proper – he was still only that: one boy lord, against the Enemy that never stopped.

“Lady Meera,” said Edric politely. “I don’t know if you have heard the rumour, but—”

“Which rumour?”

“The one about… well, about you and I.”

“Together?”

“Yes.” Edric did not seem capable of meeting her eyes. “Together,” he said queasily.

“I see.”

“Well. I only want you to know that… if it did come to that, and if that was the only way to… to consolidate our support—”

“Be quiet,” Meera snapped.
Edric did just that.

They walked for five minutes more until they reached her father. He was on his knees before a
gnarled, greyish heart tree, clad in a breadth of greens and browns, of skins and furs. “Meera,” he
said without turning. “Ah, good, child. You are here.”

It had once been endearing when he called her child. Now it felt bitter and ironic. “I am here,
Father,” she said, aloof. “Why did you send for me?”

Father stayed gazing at the tree. “Come here, child. You may go, Edric. Thank you for your help.”

When he was gone Meera approached the tree, and went down on her knees beside her father. Lord
Howland’s gaze did not move from that terrible carved face in the trunk, as though he were trying to
stare out those bloody eyes that never moved.

“You do not like it,” Lord Howland said.

“The tree?”


Meera took a long, deep breath. “Everything has changed so much.”

“That it has, child. Though there is the chance, mayhaps, that this was always how it was meant to
be.”

That couldn’t be true. It simply couldn’t. “If this was how it was meant to be,” she said, voice
waveri...
“At dusk, if all goes according to plan.”

“We can’t leave Greywater Watch.” She felt dizzy; how had she gotten the rumour of her and Edric, but not of this? “We can’t. The Reeds have been here—”

“—for thousands of years, yes. Eight thousand, to be exact. But times have changed, Meera. Until recently, there had always been a Stark in Winterfell, and men to serve him unquestioningly across the North, but the Starks are gone. The winter we were always promised is here. And in this particular winter, our responsibilities are not only to the Stark in Winterfell, but to the realms of men. *The Song Must Be Sung.*” Those were House Reed’s words. “But for that to come about, we must first go to Moat Cailin, and then to White Harbor, and attach ourselves to the other Northmen.”

“But… but Greywater Watch is impregnable. They – the Others – can’t get in. Not while the wards exist. You said it yourself.”

“The wards are breaking, child. Before long they too will be overrun. Before that time comes, House Reed must turn its attention from prophesising the Long Night to fighting it. This is the way we must go, that follows the way it was meant to be, all along.”

“The way it was meant to be? Father… even if the three-eyed crow lives in some way, *Bran* is dead. Hodor. And Jojen! Your own son!”

“Jojen knew the cost of his journey.”

“He never knew the cost of his life, though!” Meera braced herself against the tree trunk, hands shaking. “He never found a wife who loved him, or had children to succeed him, or had anything worth living for other than his death!”

Her father went very quiet. “And what is that?” he said softly, “if not a life lived in the fullest bravery?”

They had buried her brother atop a hill, a hundred miles or more north of the Wall. She and Jon Snow had brought up the snow, and laid it down again. And like that, Jojen was gone, vanished into the land. Meera would probably never be able to find him again if she tried. But she was damned if she forgot Jojen the boy, and remembered only Jojen the greenseer.

“I’m going back,” she said. She rose to her feet, and her father did not stop her.

A mist had settled over the marshland surrounding Greywater Watch. The bridge over the swamp bucked and swayed as Meera made her way back across, towards the castle on its grey island. Outside, on the water, she sighted Asha Greyjoy and some of her men, attending to half a dozen narrowboats that were floating on the scummy water. She would have liked to move past unnoticed, but Asha hailed her as she approached the door. “Lady Meera!”

“Lady Asha,” returned Meera, though it felt strange for either of them to be granted that courtesy. “I see you are preparing.”

“Aye. And forgive me, but I won’t be sorry to leave this place behind.”

Meera shrugged. “Only a Reed can love Greywater Watch.”

“As only a Greyjoy can love the Iron Islands,” said Asha. “There is, I suppose, a certain austerity in this place. Some might call it beauty. A brutal sort of beauty.”

Like the edge of a knife, Meera thought. Or an axe. “Some might say that we crannogmen are a
brutal people."

“And are you?"

“That depends on what you mean by brutality,” said Meera. For how else could she describe the life Jojen had lived, according to the gods of the trees and the wetland lords who bent to their every will?

The breakfast plates in the hall were being tidied away. Meera glimpsed her mother with Lady Ashara Dayne, conversing in a corner, but she ignored them both and headed back up the spiral stairs to her chambers.

It was dark inside, and quiet and lonely. Meera sat down on her reed mattress, her eyes slowly growing accustomed to the darkness. There was nothing to do but sit and wait.

After a long time it began to rain. The sun had come out briefly at one point, but now it had gone back behind the clouds as dusk approached. Meera glanced through the shutters and saw that the narrowboats down below had been pushed out into the deeper part of the river and were bobbing there, just about moored. She saw Asha Greyjoy on the deck of one, and her mother on another. They would be leaving very soon.

Meera wondered if that should mean something to her. She had spent the better part of her life at Greywater Watch, never leaving the Neck. Training, Father said. But all the time he had known that they were preparing for a road that led to Jojen’s death, and to the loss of Hodor and Bran and all the friends she’d made. He wondered if he knew, too, that she would come home in the end. That she would spend the rest of her days miserable and alone.

On her windowsill, a marsh flower was growing in a earthen pot: a pale, tinged-yellow bulb growing from a green stem. When she had returned to Greywater Watch, it had been on the verge of dying. But it had persisted. It was on the verge of dying still, two weeks later.

Gently, Meera picked the pot up, and moved it out of the light, into the shaded dark space under her bed. The shaded dark, where no one would ever find out. Where it would wither and die, most likely.

Just then there was a soft knock at her door. She looked up to see her mother. “Meera,” the crannogwoman said softly. “Your father is holding a council downstairs.”

“And? What of it?”

“We thought you might—”

Then she went downstairs, and out to the boats. There were only about a hundred of them in Greywater Watch: not enough to fill more than a dozen of the narrowboats. Meera made her way towards the one that was closest to the shore, walked up the gangway, and climbed aboard. One of the crannogmen, Gennis, tried to hail her, but she walked round him, and sat quietly at the narrow stern, listlessly looking into the growing fog.

A low bass call sounded in the distance: the signal; it meant depart now, go in peace. And slowly but surely, the boats ahead of them in the column began to drift away from the shore; the crannogmen at the prows threw off the ropes, and carrying tall red torches, they glided out into the fog, barely rippling the water at all.

But not her boat. Not yet. Meera felt the boat rock and twist, and then she became aware of someone standing over her. “Lady Meera,” said the voice of Edric Dayne: Call-Me-Ned. “Are you all right, my lady?” Uninvited, he settled down, uncomfortably close to her in the boat.
“I was fine until you arrived,” Meera said.

“I thought you might say that,” he replied. “My father sent me to look—”

“To look after me,” she knew, with a sour feeling. “Oh, good.”

Their boat was starting to drift now, as Gennis the crannogman cast the ropes off, and the other six or seven on board took up their paddles and began to gently brush them through the dark water. Meera ignored Edric Dayne entirely, reaching down over the side, trying to reach far enough for her own hand to skim the surface, and trying to see whether the boat to their right held her mother, or her father, or Asha Greyjoy and her men.

Suddenly from behind her she heard a deafening whoosh, and when she looked back at Greywater Watch, she could saw specks of ember red through the fog of green and brown and blue. She was far away now, but the crannogmen were all silent, all watching, and the sound of timber walls splintering and woven rope crackling carried far and well across the empty water. The castle was built of old damp wood and waxy vines, but there must have been some enchantment placed on it, for it burned quickly, and smokily, so smokily that Meera only saw the conflagration for a few seconds before the smoke veiled all from sight.

She felt curiously calm. The only tears in her eyes were the ones from the smoke.

“You don’t have to look, my lady,” came Edric’s recurrent whine from her side. “I know it must be upsetting.”

“No,” Meera snapped. “You don’t. You don’t understand any of it. You don’t understand who I am, or what I’ve been through or… or why I hate you so much.”

Call-Me-Ned looked at her. “If you tell me,” he said, “then maybe I can help you.”

Enough of this. She sat up in the boat and rounded on him, eyes full of fire. “Have you ever lost anyone?”

What happened next caught her unaware. Edric’s purple eyes seemed to grow, as though opening for the very first time. He took a deep breath and spoke very quickly: “My mother died birthing me. And my father died when I was four. My uncle Ser Arthur was dead before I was born. I spent sixteen years of my life thinking my aunt Ashara was dead. Lord Beric, who I squired for first, died six times, was brought back to life more six times, then died a seventh and final time. Once I pulled his body out of the Mummer’s Ford myself, and once I cut him down where he hung from a tree. I lost friends to the Lannisters and the Bloody Mummers in the Riverlands, both before the Red Wedding and after. Ser Barristan Selmy, who was my hero, died in my arms on the Blackwater, cutting down my own cousin Ser Gerold Dayne, who would have killed me when my back was turned. On the Blackwater, I saw thousands and thousands burning and screaming and dying, and some of them were my own men, who had come to fight for me and Starfall. And King Aegon, whom I also squired for, is now dead. And countless others, no doubt.” He uncurled his hands, which were in fists, and shrugged. “You asked.”

“I did,” said Meera.

“Then maybe you have realised that you aren’t quite as alone as you seem to think.”

She turned back to take another look at Ned. He was no Bran, and never could be.

“I am not Lord Brandon,” he said, eerily. “And I never can be. And for what it’s worth, I don’t want to marry you, either. I… I don’t much like girls. Swords are more my thing. I mean…” He reddened.

There was a long silence.

Meera put out her hand. “I am honoured to meet you, Lord Edric,” she said.

“The pleasure is mine, Lady Meera,” said Ned.

The moon was high in the sky, a pale white pupil staring down through an iris of cloudy stars. Meera and Edric crowded together in the stern of the narrowboat, with not quite enough room for either of them, and side by side they watched the moonlight fall among the mangrove trees.

Chapter End Notes

Seven hells, this one was *tedious*. The weird thing is that I have chapters 11-13 all planned in detail and mostly written, but for the sake of pacing this one has to come first, so I was stuck with this nightmarish chapter.

I’d known for a long time that the POV would be Meera. She's one of the few POV characters who will be new in KNIGHTS OF THE NIGHTINGALE, getting maybe a couple of chapters if she's lucky. So if you want more Meera, be sure to leave a comment below. To be fair, I don't think we see her at her best here, as she's very mopey.

Other than knowing the setting and the importance of defining this as a proper story thread, I had no clue what I wanted to do with this chapter. It could easily have been a huge, fiery battle in the forest. It could have been a travelogue (though, admittedly, I hate those myself), or it could have been set after a timeskip at Moat Cailin or White Harbor (both places we will see in the future). At first I tried to do everything - there could have been visions and councils and fights and everything, but it soon became apparent I had left myself with far too much to do in one coherent chapter. So I chose to simplify everything - which I think is fitting for the crannogmen. The end result is (I hope) a good character study of Meera Reed, framed by two scenes showing her relationship with Edric Dayne.

I felt it was important *not* to include supernatural elements in this chapter. There are no visions, no magic swords, no wights or Others, and (sadly) no considerable roles for either Howland Reed or Ashara Dayne. In my eyes, what makes Meera such an underrated hero of ASOIAF is her normalcy in the face of her insane situation. She has no powers, but she is stubbornly persistent nonetheless. The nature of heroism is a huge theme in KOTN, and while empowered heroism is more fun, this is an equally important facet of it.

Thank you for reading. Comments, kudos, etc. would be very much appreciated.
A Little Light

Chapter Summary

“Don’t you think we deserve a little light?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SAMWELL

Sam’s pen scratched faintly across the parchment, tracing a futile pattern. He ought to save the paper for messages, he knew, but who was there to send a message to, now? They were all alone out here. Would messages really be any less of a waste than what he was doing now?

It was folly, he knew. If Gilly was not dead, if the Others had not somehow managed to march past the Wall while they were not looking, then she was a thousand leagues away in the South, hidden behind a dozen blizzards. She might as well be on a different continent. Part of him hoped that she was; at least there, she might be safe. But he was not thinking of Gilly a thousand miles away; he wanted her here, at his side, leaning on his shoulder, her woolly hair falling down, matted through with snow – or maybe, just maybe, Talla and his mother would have dressed her up, and she would be in silk instead, yellow or maybe pale pea-green, with a foxfur collar. That would go nicely on her, he thought. And, though it shamed him and his own Night’s Watch colours, he thought of her breasts too, spilling mother’s milk onto his tongue, tasting of rum as she had on the boat to Oldtown. And her breasts were only a little larger than they normally were.

Don’t think of her like that, Sam warned himself. Gilly was not a whore. He loved Gilly. It was simple as that. Gilly was a thousand miles away. She would never read his letter. It was simple as that, too.

He had not sent a letter to Horn Hill in over a year, not since leaving Volantis for Asshai. There was no way of knowing if they had received his letter, or if they had sent back a reply, and it was lying somewhere in an archive in Asshai with Gilly’s scrawl and Talla’s neat cursive merging into the parchment. Maybe that was how they’d find his letter, here in Castle Black, in a thousand years, hidden among tall candles of ice and ledgers frozen stiff with ice: And these here are the writings of Samwell Tarly, Sam the Slayer, to his lady love. It was, of course, Samwell Tarly who was the 999th (and last) Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, he who lost Castle Black to the invading forces of Euron Greyjoy, from the south, and the advancing Long Night, from the north.

But of course, they would never say that. Because if they lost this coming battle, there would be no men around to discover his writings. He would be forgotten entirely, as would all the frozen annals
A knock sounded at the door. “Come in,” said Sam, and Tormund Giantsbane did so. Frost on his shoulder-plates, the big wildling stood in front of the fire, warming his charcoal-dusted hands. “Thank the gods you’ve got a fire in here, Tarly. Freezing up there.”

“How have you finished with the snow?” Sam asked.

“About three-quarters done. No thanks to your builders. Alone we might have done it much faster.” He turned back to Sam and smiled. “Not to say we’re not entirely grateful for you, though. We’re clearing more snow than we would have done. Just not in the right places.”

“We need to clear it all,” said Sam. “If we’re to fight Euron up there—”

“We’re damned to hell if we try to fight them up there. Nay, we’ll be hiding down here like rats. But you’re right. We need the main yard free. To get to the towers. For scouting.”

“For scouting,” Sam agreed flatly. “And for other things.”

“Other things?” Tormund paused a moment. “Ah. You mean the body.”

“The bodies,” he emphasized. “We’ll be giving them all proper funerals. Not just Jon.”

Tormund grunted. “All the ones we can find, you mean.”

“When will you have it done?”

A frown. “By tonight, I hope.” The wildling gave a big shrug. “I’d best get back up there. Though you wouldn’t happen to have any wine lying round, would you?”

There was a skin of sour Dornish on Sam’s desk. “Be my guest,” he said. Tormund took the skin, and drank most of it in one gulp. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, muttered “Swill” under his breath, then went out. Sam listened to his footsteps receding down the wormway tunnel.

Once the wildling was gone, he tried turning his attention back to the letter, but it was no use. His worries were too many, his answers too few. In a matter of weeks, or even days if the Others breached from the North, they could all be dead. What good would a letter do then?

Sam felt a queer heat on the back of his neck, as though he was being watched, but with eyes that burned his skin. He turned to look… and his eyes found the glass candle.

The candle had been his and Melisandre’s great discovery. They had found it in a secret space behind Maester Aemon’s fireplace, using the instructions uncovered from the Jade Compendium. Unfortunately, they had only found the candle moments before the Wall fell, and whatever enchantments had been created or destroyed in those fatal moments had rendered the candle useless, at least for Sam alone. Melisandre might have more luck, but since his chastisement of her she had retreated to her old chambers in the Grey Keep and had resorted to prayer in solitude.

Sam carefully picked up the glass candle. Its obsidian edges were sharp enough to pierce flesh even through the leather of his gloves, so he held it gingerly, though he took care not to crack or smash it. A thin sliver of candlelight drifted through the dark heart of the prism, promising something, but never making good on that promise.

Marwyn the Mage had possessed a glass candle, back in Oldtown, though he had left it behind when he departed for Meereen, and no one else had been able to understand its signs. It was not
unreasonable to assume that Marwyn had acquired another, but he had never deigned to reply to Sam’s letters. It was too much to hope that the glass candle might yield different results, even if he could get it to work.

Sam was busy staring into that dark void when another noise made him turn. The flapping of wings, loud beside his face. Mormont’s raven, he realised, with a start of surprise. Where had the bird come from? He had assumed the bird had flown away when the Wall came down, and was trapped behind the great wall of snow. And yet here it was. It alighted on his desk, flapped its big black wings, and cawed out a word, thrice in quick succession: “Ghost! Ghost! Ghost!”

Sam frowned. “Ghost?”

The bird squawked back, insistent. “Ghost! Ghost! Ghost!”

*Ghost*… perchance it meant the direwolf? But what did it mean by that? As far as Sam was aware, Ghost’s relationship with the bird was limited to that of a predator and its prey. Or perhaps it was referring to Sam, a ghost in Castle Black, stranded and alone when everyone else was dead and gone. Or maybe it referred to itself—

The only way to find out, Sam decided, was to ask. The bird might change its tune. “Ghost?” he said. “What are you talking about?”

“Master Tarly?”

Sam whirled round so quickly he nearly dropped the glass candle to the rushes. Val stood in the doorway, looking ill at ease. Despite his best efforts, Sam felt his cheeks go red. Val was really very pretty, and no doubt she had enough reasons to think him strange without this evidence that he spoke with birds—

“Yes.”

“Master Tarly… Lord Tarly, I suppose—”

Sam held up a hand. “My father is Lord Tarly. And I am certainly not my father.” It was easy to say what you weren’t, though. It was far harder to say what you were. “Do you want something, Val?”

“To talk.”

He did not understand. “We are talking.”

“No,” she said. “Not about that. About… about…”

“About Jon.”

Val took a long, deep breath. “When will you burn him?” she asked, very cautiously.

“As soon as we get above the surface. Which will be tonight, if Tormund has the right of it. He deserves to be properly remembered. As do all the others who died.”

Val nodded. But that was not all she was here for. “There’s something else,” she said, more nervously than Sam had ever known her. “Gilly’s boy… it will be his second nameday soon… I had thought we might… name the boy after him.”

Sam was admittedly hesitant. Jon’s decision to keep Gilly’s son at Castle Black was the only thing he had been unable to forgive his friend for. True, Gilly had grown to love Dalla’s son on the long
journey to Oldtown, but that was no substitute for your own flesh and blood. Instead Jon had
doomed Gilly’s boy to die up here with the rest of them. But… Jon had been courageous too, and
dutiful, and honourable to the point of folly… and kind, as far as he could be. “It’s a good name,” he
said in the end. “I think Gilly would agree.”

“I hope the boy grows up to be like him,” said Val quietly.

*If he grows up at all.*

“He was a good man,” Sam said.

“A good man,” Val repeated. She seemed trapped between Sam and the doorway, unable to depart
without saying her final part. “I know you’ll do what you can,” she said, “and so will Tormund, and
everyone. But it was Jon who brought us together. Him and Mance. Without them…”

*Without them, we are doomed.* “I know.” And it was the truth.

“Do you know who did it?” she asked suddenly.

“No,” Sam had to say. “Once the snow’s been cleared, I’ll have a think. But for now… for now we
should focus on other things. We have to.”

“If only we’d been there.” Val seemed frail, and more frightened than he’d ever known her. For once
the warrior princess was gone; in her place was a girl as scared as Gilly. “If only we’d been there to
stop it. If only he was still here.” She bit her lip. “If only there was a way of bringing him back…
some magic… some spell…”

There she stood. Begging him. As though this were entirely her idea. As though he hadn’t shared the
same thoughts a hundred times in the past few days. As though he hadn’t heard stories on his way to
Asshai, or read such tales of resurrections in his childhood storybooks. As though he hadn’t dreamed
of it.

“And I thought,” said Val. “That the red woman might—”

“It might be impossible,” he told her.

“Yes. But we have to try.”

“Maybe you’re right. But maybe you’re not.”

“If I’m not,” Val said softly. “What do we have to lose? He cannot be any *more* dead.”

She was inevitably right, but there was still an inescapable sour taste in Sam’s mouth, the same taste
that had held him back all these days. “We should let him rest,” he found himself saying. “It’s only
right.”

“You don’t really think that.”

She was right again; he didn’t. “I… he died. The rules of living and dying… in the Book of the
Stranger, it says that death is final. That death must be kept sacred. That any man or woman who
returns from the land of the dead is an abomination.”

“It might say all of those things,” said Val. “But Jon Snow was not named in the light of the Seven.
He belongs to the North. To the old gods. If there is nothing Melisandre can do for him, it is to those
gods that he will return. And the old gods do not judge us for who we were in our old lives, or how
we died, or whether or not anyone tried to bring us back.”

“He is gone, Val. It would be mad to try—"

“It would be mad, yes. But do you know what else is mad? The bloody Others. All this darkness the gods are forcing upon us. So, tell me, Samwell Tarly, you great philosopher: don’t you think we deserve a little light?”

“I don’t know.” But he did. The gods were never fair, but maybe, just maybe…

*I am the sword in the darkness. I am the watcher on the walls. And so was he.*

“I will talk to Melisandre,” Samwell Tarly said. Then he reconsidered. *If I wait, I will not be able to do it. “We will talk to Melisandre,”* he said. “We will talk to her now.”

He left Gilly’s letter lying on his desk like a dead butterfly. He left the glass candle, rolling gently onto its side like a tired old man. He left Mormont’s raven, too, screaming “Ghost! Ghost! Ghost!” as he and Val went out.

The tunnels were eerily quiet. Briefly he passed Lyanna Mormont, Talia Forrester and Larence Hornwood on their way up to the surface, but they shared no more than a glance. *Any one of them could have murdered Jon,* he thought, for half a second, but he immediately realised that was mad. He had no idea who had killed Jon. And part of him was afraid of what would happen if he ever found out.

When they reached Melisandre’s door, a momentary chill came over him, and his bones froze in place. *This is wrong,* he could not help thinking. But then he broke out of the trance and rapped on the door, once, twice—

It was Melisandre’s squire who opened up, the red-headed Northern boy named Beren. “Lord Commander,” the boy said, drawing himself up to his full, not-entirely-impressive height. “How may I help you?”

“Is Lady Melisandre within?” asked Sam.

“She is. Should I give her a message.”

“No. We’d like to see her in person. Will that be possible?”

“You and… oh.” On seeing Val, the boy blushed head to toe. “I’ll go and ask her, my lord.”

He need not have bothered. The door opened wider, and Melisandre revealed herself to them. Though the red priestess did not seem visibly older, her eyes were gaunter and more distant than usual, more like embers than red hot coals. She was wrapped up in a heavy red shawl, as if she felt the cold for once. “What is it, Master Tarly?” she said. Her voice was without its usual melodicness.

“It’s about Jon.”

“It has been done before,” said Melisandre.

“What?”

“The thing you ask has been done before.”

“But we haven’t asked you yet.”
“There is no need. I know what you want. And I am telling you that it is possible.” She turned and walked back into her room. Sam was wary about following, but Val pushed ahead of him, and after that he had no choice.

Melisandre went to the window and glanced out. Sam could not see anything through it because of the snow, but she must have, for she turned back to him and said, “We have two weeks at best.”

“Two weeks?” Sam inquired.

“Two weeks until the first of them arrive.”

“Did the flames tell you that?”

“The flames have told me nothing.”

“The glass candle—”

“—will tell us nothing either. Nothing worth knowing.”

Sam did not know what that meant. But they were moving on to other things now. “You said you could bring Lord Snow back,” said Val.

Melisandre shrugged. “It is possible. I never said I could do it.”

“But you know how?”

“I know a man who brought a man back from the other side, and I know how he did it. That does not mean I will have the same success. But… I will try. If it is what you want.”

“It is,” said Val, before Sam could voice any of his doubts.

Melisandre stood up, and stretched her arms. “I will need the body.”

“That can be fetched from the cellars.” They had been keeping the body in the ice under the Wall (accessed through a door from the wormways) so it did not rot.

“I warn you,” Melisandre said. “I met a man who returned from the other side. He was… changed. Very much so.” She saw their nods, and went on. “I make no promises. I will say the prayers, and carry out the sacraments, but beyond that, it is the will of R’hllor.”

“Maybe this is what R’hllor intended,” said Sam, suddenly renewed. “If he told you to let Jon die... the books speak of Azor Ahai reborn. If you were right about Jon... maybe he needs to be reborn, too.”

“Maybe you are right, Samwell,” said Melisandre. “Just maybe.” There was a long pause, broken only by Beren coughing. Then the red woman stared straight at him and said, “There is one other thing. Only death can pay for life, Master Tarly.”

Everything went quiet. The candles on Melisandre’s table seemed to stop flickering altogether. It was some time before Sam realised that the world had not stopped. Only he had. Because this was his moment, he knew. This was his destined fate. His birth at Horn Hill, his journey to the Wall, Gilly, the Other, the Citadel, Euron Greyjoy, Asshai, his return here, everything had been building to this, his sacrifice, his unselfish decision to give up his life for Jon’s—

“I’ll do it,” said Sam and Val at the same time.
Sam stared at the wildling princess. “No, you can’t—”

“No, you can’t. You’re the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, and even if Jon comes back, you’re still our maester. We need you.”

“But Jon needs you. If he comes back and hears that you sacrificed yourself for him, he’ll be a broken man. You know that. You have to stay, Val—”

“It will not be either of you,” said Melisandre. “Neither of you can die for him. You are his… his loved companions, and no doubt your sacrifices would be true, but we need more than that. We need someone with his blood. No, more than that. We need someone who was a part of him. You loved Jon Snow, both of you, but neither of you was Jon Snow.”

That didn’t make sense, and Sam was about tell her as much, but then he realised what she meant, and in that moment, everything fell into the place. Mormont’s raven, he thought. And then, just outside the door, he heard the softest of howls.

*Ghost.*

Chapter End Notes

So...

You probably knew what was coming, to be honest. Happens every time, I suppose. Anyway, next chapter will lead directly on from this one (once I get round to finishing it). Since this is really only half of the story, I don't have much more to say about this, other than thank you all for your support in Ch. 10, which was a really big boost.

Thanks,

SGH.
The Life and Death of Jon Snow

Chapter Summary

Only death can pay for life.

Chapter Notes

The Lord is My Light and my salvation—
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life—
of whom shall I be afraid?

- Psalm 27:1

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

MELISANDRE

The body was laid out on the table, stripped bare to the waist. Jon Snow’s days in the ice had taken all the colours out of him; his hair had darkened to the colour of ink, his flesh paled till it was unnaturally bright, almost shining. There was no death-smell on him. There was no smell on him at all.

“This is not right,” said the wildling, Tormund Giantsbane, standing beside the table with a frown. “He died. That should be the end of it.”

“You may be right,” Val said, “but if Lady Melisandre thinks she can bring Jon back, we must try. He—”

“He will be a wight,” Tormund said. “We cannot be led by a wight.”

Melisandre spoke now: “He will not be a wight, my lord of Giantsbane. I will not lie to you – if he returns, Lord Snow will be... changed, somewhat. But he will still be the man you knew, beneath it all. He will lead us to victory. I have seen it in the flames.”

“You really believe that?” Tormund asked.

“With all my heart.”

“Why?”
Melisandre considered a moment, then opted for the truth. “Because if I do not, then there is nothing else to believe in.”

“What will you do?” said the wildling princess Val. “I know you said you needed Ghost, but—”

“When Master Tarly returns, I will explain.” No, not Master Tarly. Lord Commander Tarly. Though that was not something I saw; the flames never told me that.

Val looked down on the body. Her eyes were wide and blank, as though she were not really seeing. “If he comes back, will he remember who did it?” she asked.

“I do not know,” said Melisandre. “Would you prefer it if he did?”

The wildling princess blinked; for a moment, she was a young girl again. “No. If you were killed, and you knew who it was… the betrayal you would feel… and the anger and the hatred… it wouldn’t be him.”

Tormund Giantsbane rested a huge meaty palm on her shoulder. “You don’t have to do this,” he said. But Val shrugged him off, fierce again. “We must, Tormund. It may be the only way.”

“The girl is right,” Melisandre said.

Val rounded on her. “I am no girl.”

Oh, but you are. A sweet summer child. The red woman walked across the room, and took the hot wax candle from the windowsill. The snowdrifts were halfway up her window, but through the top third she caught the glint of the moon. It was still snowing. Outside in the yard, men were working through the growing darkness to build a pyre. Melisandre brought the candle back to the table where Lord Snow lay, and placed it down beside him. Together there were four wax candles, and the final candle, which remained unlit, was born of bright black dragonglass. The air was choked in dim red light: the hot, smoky colour of blood.

Just then there was a knock at the door. “Lady Melisandre?” said the voice of Dolorous Edd Tollett. “We’re here.” At the red woman’s nod, her squire Beren opened the door. Edd ushered the boy away, and held it open. In the candlelight, Melisandre saw a huge shadow appear from the room beyond, a thing of hackles, teeth and claws. And then the shape resolved itself, and became a white direwolf, near the size of a small horse. Lord Commander Samwell Tarly followed close behind, looking tremulous.

The beast was unhurried in its approach. Neither fear nor rage showed on its face, and it made no sound save for the creak of its footsteps over the wooden boards. Lord Snow chose his name well. Ghost gazed on her, and she felt mistrust in that gaze. And then the direwolf turned his eyes on his dead master. Was that pity she saw there? Hope? Love?

Love, she thought. It must be. It had been love that was sacrificed when Azor Ahai plunged his forge-hot sword into the chest of his beloved Nissa Nissa, love that filled her scream and made the air rend and weep, love that had forged that steel and made it bleed hot and terrible and red.

“You brought the wolf,” she said to Samwell Tarly.

Tarly looked up, wide-eyed, lost. “He came on his own. We could not have brought him if he did not want to be brought.”

It was true. Cautiously, Melisandre approached the wolf. She looked into his eyes again, and saw keen intelligence there, now.
“What will you do?” asked Tormund Giantsbane.

“I will wash the body,” the red woman said, her gaze never leaving the wolf. “So that the Lord knows our task. Then I will pronounce the words, so that he might join us, and Lord Snow. And then…” She looked up. They all knew.

“We kill the wolf,” Val said.

“We sacrifice the wolf,” said Melisandre.

“And Lord Snow will rise?”

*We can only hope.* Without another word, she walked to the body lying prone on its table. The wolf, somehow understanding better than any of them, followed her. Melisandre looked at it again, a little surprised. *This is right,* she had to remind herself. *This is the way. The only way.*

Beren passed her the bowl of warmed water, scented with herbs. Slowly she upturned the lip of the bowl over the body and poured the liquid it over the chest, over the dark, mottling-black wound in which the blood had clotted. Then Beren gave her the cloth, and she laid it lightly upon the body. The blood came away in rivulets, in streams, in rivers. Slowly, at first, but then suddenly, as though a dam were breaking in a flood and the tepid water came a-flowing through, washed-pink turning carmine turning scarlet. Around her the onlookers waited in silence. The candles did not so much as move. There was no breeze in the room. Indeed, it seemed as though there was no air.

The wound was not a single gaping sore but many smaller ones: a gathering of weeping eyelets where the knife had been forced in over and over and over. Not all the blood cleared, but Beren kept refilling the scented water from the kettle, and Melisandre kept working it in as a lather, till the blood was running freely, and the rag as she placed it back into the bowl ran matted with old dark stuff.

“Now the words,” said Val.

Melisandre nodded, and placed her hands on the pale chest of the corpse. Despite her cleansing ritual, the flesh was cold as ice, and stiff. She imagined that if she cut open the skin to see what was inside, she would find crystals of frost forming, and the blood already frozen. If you peeled back the skin, the arteries and veins would not tear or bleed but would remain fixed in place: a skeleton of frozen muscles and their feeding-tubes, wrapped in man’s flesh and inlaid with bones and fibres of dark hair. The eyes stayed closed and blind. The heart, buried deep down in slumber, did not beat.

Thoros of Myr had told her that, after bringing Lord Beric Dondarrion back for the third or fourth time, he had no longer doubted that the Lord would absolve Dondarrion of death, irrespective of the life he had lived beforehand. Melisandre knew that she must believe the same. She had *seen* Jon Snow, surrounded by soldiers as tall and faceless as sentinel pines, watching the dead across a great field of snow and howling wind. She had seen his living breath with her own two eyes. She had felt his living flesh with her own heart. *He must return. He will return.* And so believing, no longer with doubts to stall her, to her Lord and Saviour both thus she began:

“Z ̀hys ो Ŏnoso jehikagon àeksıot epı, se g îś hen s ̀ñdrorro jemagon. Z ̀hys perzys stepagon àeksıo Ô no jorepi, se morgh lîys q Ėl îısos sikagon. Hen s ̀ñdrorro, ो Ŏnos. Hen ōuq īr, perzys. Hen morghot, glaeson.”

The room still: all alone now. Her and Him: not him, Him. *There are two sides in every war. A man is good or a man is evil. A man is right or a man is wrong. A man is living or a man is dead. A man believes in the Lord, and in Light, or he does not.* In everything a duality, one or the other, in everything a choice, the Great Choice—
“Is it working?” came the hoarse voice of Samwell Tarly, and the spell was broken. Melisandre looked to the body, felt its cold hard resistance. Nothing. And yet, that nothingness had something within it. Within their contact lay all her hopes and dreams. All her light: all she had.

And she heard the wolf howl, as he so rarely did, and it was no longer all she had but all they had, and their voices rose in jubilant exoneration, and her hands felt warm, even hot, and the bowl of water on the table was too-full now, and it was sloshing teardrops of blood, all over the flagstones, and the wax candles around the body melted rapidly into patterns of bright light, and the glass candle burst into life and gushed forth smoke and sparks, and the door rattled as though possessed in its frame and so did the shutters. And now the glass candle was in her hand, and her eyes moved up and whose should they meet but the direwolf’s. And in those red eyes, she saw herself reflected, but beyond that, in the dark irises, she saw her vision: ice and fire, and the prince at the very epicentre, surrounded by darkness, and yet he was the light.

Melisandre met Val’s eyes. The wildling princess gave the briefest nod – or maybe that was something she imagined in her rapt madness. And the white wolf came to her like a lamb to his master, and she drew the sharp edge of the burning glass candle across his throat in one swift stroke, and she and Ghost sang as one, his final howl and her first moment of true ecstasy: together, she fire, he ice; singing the song of—

Then the glass candle exploded.

Shards of blazing hot dragonglass flew in every direction. Tormund Giantsbane howled and threw himself headlong on the floor. Dolorous Edd and Beren took cover behind her bed. Val tackled Samwell Tarly sideways, knocking them both to the flags. Melisandre remained there, immobile. The flying glass did not hit her, but ricocheted from the walls and lay on the chamber floor in a thousand pieces. Smoke filled the room.

Melisandre was the first to get to her feet and approach the table. There she found Ghost slumped beside Jon Snow, hot blood pouring over them both. Long seconds passed and she stood there in the smoke, staring down. But by then she already knew.

“Is he—?” she heard Val say.

She put a hand on the body. The body. It was just that.

“No,” she said.

Val did not say a word. Her eyes moved from Melisandre to Tormund. Then, by some unspoked agreement, the pair turned away, and together they moved through the door.

Dolorous Edd turned to his lord commander. “Well, shit,” he said in a small voice, and then he, too, left the room. Beren followed shortly after; a shard from the candle had struck him and his cut needed to be seen to.

That left her with Samwell Tarly.

“We have to burn him,” said the Lord Commander eventually. “It is time to let him rest.”

“You’re right,” said Melisandre flatly.

There was a long pause.

She began: “I thought I saw—”
“You were wrong.” Tarly turned slowly towards the door. “We’ll be out in the yard in an hour. Until then…” He pointed towards the body, but the hope in his eyes was gone.

“I will,” she said curtly.

Samwell Tarly went out. He went down to the Lord Commander’s room, and did not speak to anyone. Meanwhile Val was in the library with Gilly’s babe, whom they had named Jon Nightborn, and she did not speak to anyone either, but merely nursed the boy at her teat, though by now he was too old for it. And Tormund Giantsbane went out to help the others build a pyre of good green wood in the courtyard.

An hour later Lord Commander Tarly returned to the red woman’s chambers. The room was clean; all traces of the glass candle had been cleared away, and the same for the wax and the puddles of blood. Ghost’s death wound had been cauterized somehow; there was no more blood. And Jon Snow, back in his Night’s Watch blacks buttoned up over his heart, drowning in the sea of his cloak, looked as stately as he ever had. And at peace. And gone. Gone away for ever.

Melisandre looked up at him. “I am so sorry.”

“I know.” And in his eyes, she knew that he was, too.

“I thought I could—”

“So did I, for a time.” Tarly moved back towards the door. In with him came half a dozen stretcher-bearers led by Edd Tollett, to collect the corpses of Jon Snow and Ghost. _Corpses_, Melisandre thought. That was all they were now. When they had been borne out, Tarly extended an invitation to her. “If you want to watch them—”

“I will watch from here if you do not mind, Lord Commander.”

“Of course.” Tarly nodded, awkward. He moved to leave, but stopped in the doorway and turned around. “Lord Commander,” he mused. “This was never meant to be. But it is, now. All the same… I cannot do this alone. I need help, my lady. And I need your help.”

Melisandre did not understand. “Why would you need my help? I failed you.” _As R’hllor failed me._

“Yes,” he said, “but you tried.”

“And failed,” she repeated. “The Great Choice I saw in the flames… of him standing in the war against the Others… all of it was a lie. I am no priestess of R’hllor, Samwell Tarly. Only a charlatan who plays with powders and potions. An accomplished liar, but a liar nonetheless.” Tarly looked like he might continue, but she held up a hand. “Leave me.”

And so he did.

Through her snow-encrusted window, Melisandre watched as the Night’s Watch and the wildlings conducted their ceremony below. She could not hear what any of them were saying, but she did not have to. She could see their solemn faces, and in their eyes pain, desperation, hunger, and the faintest glimpse of futile hope. She watched as they placed the bodies among the piles of wood. They put Jon Snow and his direwolf Ghost on the biggest pyre, and then the Lord Commander stood in front of his men and intoned a prayer, and though Melisandre heard none of the specifics, she read their murmured reply on their lips: _And now their watch has ended._

“And now their watch has ended,” she said.
The pyres went up. Red flames, orange flames, yellow flames. Thick, curling smoke, which rose higher and higher and blocked her view altogether. Shortly afterwards there was a sudden squall of snow from along the broken Wall to the east, and the pyres were snuffed out, and the Night’s Watch fled inside to wait for it to clear.

Melisandre walked to the door of her chambers and bolted it shut. Then she went back to the windows and closed the shutters, and the curtains too for good measure. She went to her bed, and sat down. It was very cold in the room. Castle Black had always been cold, but until now she had never noticed it. With shaking hands, she lit a fire in the hearth, and squatted by it for a long time, waiting to get warm. When that was done, she stood, walked back to her bed, and very slowly she began to disrobe. As her bright red gown fell off her, it seemed to lose both texture and shape, and became a worn, shapeless rag. Then she reached up to her necklace, inlaid with a single fat ruby. Ordinarily she would have removed her ring after that, but, of course, it was not with her tonight. Come the morrow one of the Night’s Watch men would doubtless find it out in the snowy yard, but for now Melisandre was too tired to look for it. Briefly she considered going down to the ice cells again, but she was too tired for that, too. She was too tired for anything. The weight of her years pressed down on her, and every second that passed was another brick added to a mule that was already overladen.

Her womanly curves and strength fell away; her flesh lost its firmness and fell from the bones, wrinkling like ancient paper, her lips lost their full colour and became dry and coarse as sand, hiding toothless gums. The red in her hair did not merely die out, but the strands turned brittle and the locks became tangled knots and there were bald patches here and there. Her youth, like R’hllor, had always been a lie. The Lord Is My Light, she would say to herself, in those days when she had nothing left to comfort her, when she had been a girl alone, or adrift, or forgotten. But now she had not even that. All he showed her were visions of Jon Snow, standing against the army of the dead. But that would not be, she knew. No matter how hard she tried, or had tried. He had lied to her about Lord Snow, about Azor Ahai. Just as he had lied to her about Stannis Baratheon. With Stannis she had doubted, true. But with Jon Snow, she had been foolish enough to believe it. So here she was, at the end of the world, with nothing left to do but die.

And as she climbed into bed and drew the blankets over her against the cold dark night, she was no longer Melisandre of Asshai anymore. She was Melony, Lot Seven, someone’s ghost. She was over a hundred years old. And she was afraid of the dark.

Chapter End Notes

Jon Snow is dead.

- me, 2017

Well, what did I tell you?

This is usually the bit where I get a little bit smug and smarmy, but here and now, I’ll make an exception. Despite the fact that it constitutes a big story moment, this was also a very moving chapter, in a way. I think one of the things that goes underappreciated about Season 6 was the way in which - however briefly - they showed Melisandre’s loss of faith. Mel is one of my favourite characters, and we see at the end of this chapter - and will see in subsequent chapters (she isn’t dead) how ultimately human she is, and how beautiful that achievement is.
I said in a previous Author's Note that Knights of the Nightingale had certain similarities to Star Wars: The Last Jedi, which I think (perhaps an unpopular opinion) was a brilliant film. I'm not really a SW fan (I'll happily defer to the judgement of Gracques on matters like this), but without being spoilery, I really appreciated the way the mythology was overturned, to an extent. This is, I think, what you'll see in this story: the myths and legends falling away at the roadside. If KOTN is about one thing, it is about ordinary men and women, and their blind fight against darkness which goes beyond anything prophecy can offer.

Oh, and Melisandre will be back as a POV, I suspect. But her chapters will be entitled "Melony".
Marionettes

Chapter Summary

She had taken up the strings, but she found them more like ropes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SANSA

“I want the hives,” said Lady Blackwood.

Lady Bracken scowled. “The hives are ours.”

“They are now. But they were stolen from us, as you stole everything else.”

“I have a royal writ—”

“From a Lannister king. Signed by Tywin Lannister. The hives of Honeysuckle were payment for your betrayal of King Robb.”

“King Robb was dead. We did not betray him. We acted in sense, rather than wasting our men’s lives in futility.”

“You acted solely in your own interests, and betrayed him.”

“We did not.”

“Then who gave you those hives? Look me in the eye, my lady, and tell me it was not Lord Tywin who bestowed them upon your lord husband.”

“You are a fool if you think you can demand anything of us,” said Lady Bracken haughtily. “You see, Lady Stark, they are entirely too proud. We came here to make a firm and final peace for the greater good of the Riverlands. Yet here we are, no nearer to any agreement thanks to her stubbornness. You are a mule, my lady.”

“And you are an ass—”

Brynden Blackfish had had enough. “Be quiet!” he snapped. “Or else the only order Lady Sansa will give will be to have you both dragged to some septry in the mountains. In chains. Together.” It was the last part that silenced them.
In the quiet, their eyes drifted to Sansa. She knew she had to say something, and at the same time she knew that whatever pleased one of them would anger the other. But in the end a clearer course had to prevail. So she chose: “In the interest of keeping to the principles and laws of my brother Robb, I am inclined to give the hives back to House Blackwood, and restore the boundaries of your lands to as they were before the War of the Five Kings. However, we do not have the time – I do not have the time – to manage your border dispute, and I do not trust the pair of you to resolve it peacefully, so until the war is over, your boundaries will remain as they were under Stannis’s rule.”

Lady Blackwood started. “My husband was petitioning King Stannis, and the king was inclined to agree—”

“Oh, both of your husbands were party to that cock-measuring contest, no doubt,” said the Blackfish. “A pity their efforts were for naught. Stannis is dead, and so are they. Now, if the pair of you had any sense, you would be doing your very best to please Lady Sansa, in the hope that she might turn her ear to your case.”

The two ladies settled back, glowering at one another. There was a pause. “My lady,” said Lady Blackwood, then, “if it please you—”

“It does not please me,” Sansa said. “Not tonight, at least. You should go. Both of you.”

It was not a suggestion. She might be in Lady Blackwood’s home, but she was the representative of the King in the North (nonexistent though that king was) in Raventree, and a Stark besides, and it was not in the interests of sycophants to argue against their betters.

When they were gone Sansa turned to the Blackfish. “I think this is going to prove impossible.”

“That depends on what you want. If you want their loyalty, you have that already. Their men… well, that will be more difficult, as they will not give us everything, but if Edmure and Patrek Mallister deliver—”

“Have you seen Edmure’s letter? He makes no mention of sending us soldiers—”

“That letter was written in Maester Vyman’s hand, not in Edmure’s. And even if Edmure transcribed it… well, he might not want Vyman to know everything. Maesters are untrustworthy at the best of times. But I digress: if anything, you should take it as a good sign; if Edmure is busy, it is possible that he did not have time to pen the letter himself.”

“I wish I felt so optimistic.”

“Edmure is your family. He would not withhold—”

“Uncle Edmure is unreliable at the best of times—”

“He will come, Sansa. I promise you—”

“Don’t do that.” She looked away. “Don’t make promises you cannot keep.” Promises like I will protect you, I will rescue you, I will keep you away from the monsters.

The Blackfish understood that, at least. He bowed his head.

Sansa continued, “There has been another letter. From Lord Royce. At the Gates of the Moon. Robert is… recovering quite well, he says.”

“You know,” said Ser Brynden. “The Vale does not lack for soldiers. You could do worse than to
appeal to your cousin for support—"

Sansa shook her head. “No. He needs time to rest.” That, and she did not think she could look Robert in the eye ever again. “We have had another letter from Daenerys Targaryen too,” she said, quickly changing the subject. “More of the same. Let all true men declare their loyalty, and such.”

The Blackfish looked uneasy. “Sansa,” he probed, “do you ever think it might be wiser to… to consider the affairs of the south before turning our gaze north? If what has been said of Daenerys is true, she may prove a worse foe than these Others – or she may prove our greatest ally. And the Others are still north of the Wall, Lord Commander Snow and your brother Bran both agree—”

“The dead are marching. It is as simple as that. They are marching in the North, and they are marching in the Westerlands, unless Eleyne Westerling lied to her sister. There is a reason Lord Manderly has closed off White Harbor. And Rickon… in these dreams he has, he has seen it. This coming war will be bigger than anything that has come before. We need all the allies we can find. We need to set aside our differences where we can. Even… even…”

“Even the Lannisters,” said the Blackfish. “That is what you are thinking, isn’t it?”

“Princess Myrcella still owes me her life. They say ‘A Lannister always pays her debts.’ If I offered her safe passage—”

“‘You are naïve if you think she will accept. Even if she has been absolved of Robert’s murder, Edmure will not have a Lannister army marching through his lands.’

“What Edmure wants doesn’t matter,” Sansa said, flaring with sudden temper. “It is his unwillingness to play his part that has led me to consider looking for allies among the Lannisters.”

“Edmure is your uncle, Sansa—”

“So you keep telling me. He might be my uncle, but right now he is failing me. Failing House Stark, failing the realms of men—”

“You cannot hold Edmure’s desire to protect the Riverlands against him. The recent wars—”

“—have affected us all. Yet this one will affect us even more. If Jon and Bran are right, the time has come to set aside our petty rivalries, uncle.”

“Petty?” The Blackfish shook his head. “Niece, it is not just Edmure who will object to a Lannister army marching through his lands. It is every one of your bannermen who lost friends and family at the Red Wedding. The North Remembers, Sansa. They will remember if you betray them, too. You saw what disagreements Lady Bracken and Lady Blackwood had. Invite the Lannisters here, and they will become a thousand times worse.”

“Fine,” said Sansa. “Not the Lannisters, then. There are others, though, who might be persuaded to help us.”

“Such as—?”

Sansa gave him a tired look. She knew that whatever she said, the Blackfish would refute it, so there was no point in saying anything. “Perhaps,” she said, “we should bring this to an end for tonight, ser uncle. It is getting late.”

Ser Brynden shrugged. “As you wish, Sansa. I will see you at breakfast come the morrow, then.”
“Come the morrow,” she repeated. The Blackfish knelt to give her a leathery kiss, turned towards the stairs, and was gone.

Sansa stood and walked to the window. It was the hour of the cat, not as late as she had thought. Not too late to make a visit to a certain person. She took her cloak down from its peg, brought the hood up over her face, and pulled on her thick leather boots. Six inches of snow had fallen in the yard over the last couple of weeks, so she would need them.

Jeyne’s chambers were at the top of the spiral stairs. Marya Seaworth told her she must be quiet going in; Roban was fast asleep, and once woken, it could be difficult to calm him again. Jeyne herself was sitting by the hearth fire, looking like a mouse under a mountain of blankets.

“I am sorry to interrupt,” Sansa began.

“Are you?”

The sharpness of the reply took her aback a little. “I only came—”

“—to ask if I had changed my mind about leaving Raventree. Well, I have not. Roban and I will stay here, and that is my final decision. As a mother, and as a queen, if you push me further.”

“I have no intention of forcing you to go,” said Sansa. “But Roban is Robb’s son. Some might say he is the rightful lord of Winterfell, and the King in the North.”

Jeyne chewed her lip. “If you were his mother,” she said, “knowing how frail he is, would you let him travel north? On the kingsroad, through the Neck, now that winter is here?”

“I would do whatever I had to do for my family.”

“Then we should be thankful that you are not his mother.”

The air suddenly became very cold. “Do not presume to tell me—”

“I will presume whatever I want, as Roban’s mother. And yet… I do not want to quarrel with you, Sansa. Leave me in peace, and I will do the same for you. And I will not be dissuaded.”

There was, Sansa decided, no point in this. Jeyne had made no suggestion that she ever intended to be anything other than Robb’s widow, nor that Roban would ever claim to be lord of Winterfell. When the wars were over, she might head back to the Westerlands and live out the rest of her days there.

She was no threat to Sansa Stark. It would be wrong to assume anything else.

And yet there were so many others that were.

Back in her chambers, she sent for Podrick Payne to bring her quill and ink, her wax seal, and a cup of hot wine. Pod hovered by her side, looking gangly as ever. “Is there aught else, my lady?”

“Not at all, Podrick.” She heated the wax in its pan, watching as the solid surface split and grey bubbles issued forth. But Pod did not move to leave. His lips spilled open suddenly and clumsily. “I watched her. Your sister. Lady Arya. Like you asked, my lady.”

“And?”

“She noticed me, I think.”
“You think?”

“She… she…” He coloured, going nearly the same colour as his wine, blushing to the roots of his hair. “She threatened me. She pointed her sword at me. She… said that if she saw me watching her again, she’d… it wasn’t pleasant, my lady.”

Sansa frowned. “When was this?”

“Earlier this morning, my lady.”

“I see.” Beneath the table, Sansa’s fingers twisted tightly together. “Well, then. If you mean to keep all your parts intact, I think you had best stay away from her, don’t you, Podrick?”

Pod shrugged. “Yes, my lady. Has she… has she…— nevermind.” His voice faded to a squeak.

“Has she what, Pod?”

“Has she always been wild?”

“Always,” said Sansa. But wild was not the word she would have used to describe the new Arya. Wild meant hot anger, and rage, and fury. Arya was cold as ice.

“When I saw her first, I thought she might be a bit like Lady Brienne,” Pod admitted. “But I was wrong. It’s only because they both carry swords.”

Sansa could not disagree with that.

Pod stammered out a question. “Have you heard anything from Lady Brienne?”

“Not since her letter from Pinkmaiden.” And even that had been brief, nothing more than a confirmation that the lady knight was still alive. A week had gone by since then. She might be dead by now. “But if I hear anything, I’ll be sure to tell you, Podrick.”

“I think I should have gone with her.”

Sansa was surprised by the strength of the usually timid squire’s outburst. “Why do you think that?”

Pod stepped back. “It doesn’t matter, my lady. I shouldn’t have said that. It just came out—” He stepped back further, and further still. Sansa decided she would let him go. She had few friends to begin with, and besides, she already knew his reasons. Pod felt useless here, no doubt, little more than a glorified pageboy. She had that in common with him.

All her life she had been at the mercy of others. Littlefinger, the Lannisters, even her own mother and father, if she was being realistic and not kind. That was starting to haunt her recently. I had no qualms about going south to marry Joffrey, back then. I thought he was all I could ever want. But if I had not wanted that marriage, would Mother and Father have allowed me to refuse him? She thought they would have. But she could never be sure.

That was just one of the dozens of little uncertainties that seemed to be everywhere in her life now. She was free: she had escaped her gilded cage, as Sandor Clegane would say. But beyond that cage was all the great wide world, and, frankly, there was too much of it for her. Littlefinger had been a puppetmaster for so long, playing the game of thrones while they danced and dangled like marionettes. Now Sansa had taken up those strings, but she had found them more like ropes. She was sitting in the back of a chariot pulled by four horses, none of whom wanted to obey her. And the horses had names like Arya and Rickon and Uncle Edmure.
The hours slipped by without her ever really noticing. At one point she slept. The next she knew, it was dawn. A dim and rainy dawn, at that, not warm enough for sun, but not cold enough for snow, either. Everything was grey.

She knew she would not be getting back to sleep in the hour before Arya and Rickon arrived for breakfast. There would be no point in even trying. So instead she sent for her maid to run a bath, and sat in it for a long while, staring up pointlessly at the ceiling.

She wondered if heading north was the right choice at all. Yes, it was her duty to help Bran – both as his sister, and as the last representative of House Stark in the south – but at the same time, when she had reunited with Rickon, she had sworn to herself that she would keep him safe. And in the North, that was not something she could guarantee. If her uncle Edmure was not being quite so apathetic about things, she might have sent Rickon to Riverrun as his ward. Or maybe she could dispatch him to the Gates of the Moon, to stay under the watchful eye of Bronze Yohn Royce. No, she decided, changing her mind abruptly. Not that. If they find out about Robert, who knows what they might do to Rickon. The Vale was placated, not tamed. It was important not to forget that.

Seagard, then? Lord Mallister might even be honoured to keep Rickon in his company. Yes, that would work. So long as Rickon was amenable to it. Which, given his association with the increasingly wilful Arya, was looking unlikely.

Protecting her younger siblings had never been her intended role in life. Sometimes it was still strange to think about it, to look back, and reflect on just how she had gotten here. She had been the prince’s betrothed, a rebel traitor’s daughter, the Imp’s wife, Littlefinger’s supposed daughter, the lady of Highgarden (however briefly – though, she reflected, maybe she still was). And now…

All her life Sansa had belonged to somebody else. Both her sex and her age meant that all the important decisions were made for her by another, whether they be malevolent or otherwise. It was not that she did not know what she was doing. Among his ‘lessons’, Littlefinger had given her an adroit understanding of money and economies, of lawmaking and lawbreaking. She understood the Riverlords’ desire for peace, and the necessity of buying in salt for grain storage from Gulltown, and the impacts the winter was having on trade. She even understood war – not the specifics, but the general ebb and flow of it. And yet, despite all the deference they were showing her, she felt that she was lost, floating in a sea of confusion. The planned march to Winterfell had been an obvious conclusion, but after that: then what?

Sansa resolved to consider this later. She rose from the bath and dried herself off on the towels. Then she sent for her maid to bring her wardrobe. Since winter had well and truly descended, most of her gowns were heavy embroidered velvet, and over those she wore a cloak of fur. Gone were the days of summer, when you could leave your arms bare. Not that she bared her arms anyway: Joffrey’s tokens of affection, though faint, were still visible there. Sansa chose a dark blue today, taken from her late relative Lady Whent’s massive collection at Harrenhal.

As for Harrenhal itself, she had left the castle in the command of Ser Symond Templeton. The Knight of Ninestars had wanted to be Robert’s Regent, but he seemed content with Harrenhal as a consolation prize. No one actually owned the castle now – though Sansa could have claimed it if she so wished through her mother’s line – but it did not really matter anymore. Harrenhal was behind her, now.

There was a knock on the outer door. She had not been expecting Rickon and the Blackfish for another five minutes or so, but it was no great hardship. But then she opened, and found not her brother and uncle but Sandor Clegane waiting on the other side. “Good morning to you, little bird,” he said in a throaty, sardonic voice.
“Good morning,” Sansa replied. “Except, it is plainly not.” She nodded to the sky.

“Mist,” said Clegane thoughtfully. “Always mist, nowadays.”

“I was expecting you after breakfast.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you.”

There was a long pause.

“Aren’t you forgetting something, little bird?” he asked.

“Oh. Yes. Come in.” Sansa stepped back to allow him over the threshold. “Would you like some hot wine, or—?”

“Don’t trouble yourself.”

He stood there for a while longer, and Sansa merely stared back at him. Then she remembered with an awkward start why she had asked him here. “Well…”

“What?”

“What you mean, little bird.”

“Arya. Has there been anything suspicious?”

“Depends what you mean by suspicious,” the Hound said. “She’s talked with the red priest, yes. I don’t know what they said. And to that fat baker’s boy, but he’s no threat. And near to night-time she wanders round on her own, and it might be she speaks to the trees. But no.” His voice rose to a growl. “She’s been no more suspicious than you have been.”

Sansa frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that before you accuse her of skulking around, you might consider your own actions.”

“I’m not skulking around.”

“No. You’re sending me to skulk around for you. Well, I warn you, little bird, this won’t last forever. There’s only so much I can do for you before she notices. And when that happens, maybe she’ll come after you. And your secrets.” He smiled.

Sansa felt very cold. “What do you mean?”

“It took me a while to figure out, I admit,” said Clegane. “Honestly, I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“What?” she repeated, harder now.

“Your Arryn cousin. His poisoner wasn’t the Lannister girl, was it? But neither was it Littlefinger.”

Sansa felt her heart quicken; she tried to keep her reaction hidden, but Clegane was smiling – he had seen enough. There was no way out. Yet…

“And what if I did?” she said.

His smile stretched hideously. “You’re learning. Took you long enough.”
“Well, I’m glad to see that I’ve lived up to your expectations.”

Clegane’s smile fell away. “Not quite. If you had, I’d never have known. And if I can find out… then your sister certainly can, if she cares to look. What do you think she’ll do when she does? What do you think she’ll tell the lords of the Vale, if the thought occurs to her?”

“Arya wouldn’t—”

“She would. Or she might, at the very least. Don’t you think she might?”

“I-I don’t know.”

The smile returned, though by now it was halfway to a grimace. “And that’s what scares you most, isn’t it?”

Before Sansa could answer, she was saved by a knock on the door. She stepped around Sandor Clegane and opened it to let in the Blackfish and her brother. Rickon was wearing his fur cloak, the one she had sewn to look like Father’s, and despite the early hour he somehow already had mud on his cloak. “Sansa,” he broke out instantly. “I had another one of the dreams.”

“What dreams?”

“The wolf dreams. It was Bran. He spoke to me.”

The Blackfish gave him a playful clout round the ear, and ushered Rickon over to sit at the table. “Come now. Don’t go worrying your sister with these old tales again. They made sore enough hearing the first time around.”

Sansa spied Clegane slipping out through the door, and did not say anything. She turned back to Rickon, “I’m sure they were just dreams.”

“They weren’t. He warned me—”

Then the door opened again and Arya came in. She was dressed in dark leather from head to toe, and over her shoulders and head she wore a woollen grey cowl. Her needle-thin sword hung threateningly from her belt. Sansa could not help but feel strangely vulnerable.

“Arya,” she made herself say. “Good morning. I hope you are… well.”

Her sister nodded her head in a strange, stiff fashion. “I am, thank you.” She looked towards the table.

“Oh,” Sansa said, hurried. “Please, sit.” She made her way to pull out Arya’s chair, not quite knowing why, then changed her mind and sat back down again. The Blackfish gave her a passing look out the corner of his eye.

Rickon saved her, offering up a hasty welcome. “Maybe we could go out in the yard again today,” he said, nudging Arya’s arm. “Maybe you could show me again—”

“Maybe,” agreed Arya. But her eyes kept constantly flitting back to Sansa.

She knows, thought Sansa. She knows what I have done. She reached out to the wine flagon; her shaking, spasmodic hand nearly knocked the whole thing over, but the Blackfish caught it. “Easy, now,” he said in a friendly way, and refilled her cup. Then passed it on to Arya. “You as well?”

Arya nodded.
“Your mother would not approve,” said the Blackfish.

“Nor Father,” said Arya.

“Well,” Sansa replied, instinctual and too-fast. “He isn’t here any more.” Immediately she regretted what she had said. “No, I meant—”

“Mother probably wouldn’t want me fighting with Arya either,” Rickon said. “But that was back then, when it was all right not to fight. Now, though, we need to learn. Even you, Sansa. I reckon you could pick up a sword, if you had to.”

“I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“I’d teach you. Or Arya would.”

“Or Jon, once we get to the Wall,” said Arya.

Sansa frowned. “We’re not going to the Wall. We’re going to White Harbor, and then on to Bran, in Winterfell. If we can get through the snows.”

Now it was her sister’s turn to scowl. “Thoros says the war is in the North. The real North. That means the Wall. There’s no point fighting where the war isn’t.”

“It’s a thousand leagues to the Wall. The men we have at Seagard won’t march that far—”

“Fine,” said Arya. “Let them. They don’t have to. They aren’t Starks.”

Sansa sat upright. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means we can’t stop at White Harbor, no matter how tough things get. No matter how much snow falls. Bran is our brother. And after that, we have to go to the Wall. Jon is our brother too. When the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives.” She fixed her gaze on Sansa. “Or don’t you believe that?”

“Of course I believe it.”

“Then you know we can’t settle for halfway.” Arya said it very coldly, very dispassionately. And very righteously. It made Sansa oddly angry. Family? She doesn’t even know what family is. “I—,” she began.

“I agree with Arya,” said Rickon.

Sansa turned to him. “Do you, now? So you think we should just march right past White Harbor, in the midst of a blizzard, up the Kingsroad – Seven alone knows what foes are waiting for us up there – and you suppose we’ll just keep on going north, gallivanting our way up to the Wall where we’ll have hot mulled wine and tea-cakes, dragging Bran all the way in his cart like it’s no trouble at all, and that our ten thousand men will go all the way with us, just like that? Do you?”

She had been, in truth, absurdly grateful for Rickon’s interruption. It meant she could say all she had been intending to say to Arya without having to look into those strange, unseeing eyes. And yet, seeing her little brother frozen in shock, she felt guilty too. “Look,” she said, softer now. “I know you both want to help. But you have to understand that this is my role to play. I am the eldest. Now that Robb’s gone… now that Mother and Father are gone, too, I have to—”

“Protect us?” said Arya. She placed her hands down on the table, palms up and pale. “And how are
you going to do that?” There was a long pause. “Oh. That’s right. You don’t know. You’re afraid.”

Yes, thought Sansa. But it was not the North she was afraid of right now. Very slowly she picked up the cup of wine and took a long, nervous sip. *She will not hurt me,* she thought. *Not while the Blackfish is here. And she will not hurt me, because she is my sister.* “I have to protect us,” she repeated, now knowing what she had to say. “But I can’t do that alone. I can’t do it without you. Or Rickon. We have to protect one another. Like Father said. The pack survives.”

She knew Rickon was bursting to say something, but right now he could not interrupt this intense glance of understanding which passed between the sisters.

“Well,” said Arya at last. “Maybe you are right.”

Sansa nodded. Maybe, and just maybe, she was.

Chapter End Notes

I can’t help but feel sorry for Sansa. She's juggling about three thousand different plates right now, and the people who are trying to help her are offering mostly contradictory advice and making things ten times worse. All the same, it's difficult to argue that she isn't responsible for some of the problems herself.

My favourite part of this chapter is Sansa's outburst at the end, which gave me the change to use the old "gallivanting" line in an appropriate context.

Sansa doesn't have the same huge character development in KOTN that she had in TSK, but without spoiling anything, she does get a lot more stuff done.

Note: I didn't make it particularly explicit at the end of this chapter, but the next time we see this lot, they'll be on the road (finally).
DAENERYS

She could hear the boom of the sea from below, as black waves and black salt and black sand blasted against the rocks on which the black castle stood. They were a long way from the shore up here, but sound carried easily through the dark empty halls of Dragonstone.

Lord Selwyn Tarth was back again. It had been two weeks since he’d arrived at the island the first time, and in those weeks his ships had been seen all across Blackwater Bay, from Driftmark down to Massey’s Hook, up to Crackclaw Point. Now they had returned to her. In the throne room, Dany sat on her seat of black shingled stone, looking down at the Lord of Evenfall Hall at the place where the lamps cast their light most brightly. But even then the lamps were few and far between, and most of the hall had been given to the darkness. Stone carvings of dragons reached out of the walls and snaked their way down the ceiling beams, frozen, but only in this instant. Fire and blood will wake them. Though she did not understand how.

“Your Grace,” said Lord Selwyn. “You will have heard that I have brought the banners of the Velaryons, the Bar Emmons, and the Sunglasses.”

“I already had the Velaryons,” the queen replied. “Aurane Waters—”

“—is a bastard, of a changeable mood, and one particularly disposed to treachery, if you will accept my judgement.”

“Some might call you a hypocrite. You had a changeable mood when you fought for Aegon.”

He ignored her. “The Velaryons, the Bar Emmons and the Sunglasses,” he repeated. “Two thousand men in all.”

“I thought it would be more,” said Ser Jorah Mormont from the bottom of the steps. “Your Grace, they may be withholding—”

“I find that unlikely,” Lord Selwyn said. “They were at the Blackwater too, as I recall. Lord Sunglass the Elder was burned alive by Stannis on this very island, three years ago. And his son was
“burned alive on the Blackwater, a matter of months ago.” He scowled up at her. “Some might say it has a certain poetry. I do not.”

“Not all poetry has to rhyme. The next Lord Sunglass might live a long and healthy life.”

“That depends on whether Your Grace can resist burning children.”

“That depends on whether or not they are loyal,” said Dany coldly. “Now, my lord: I cannot help but notice that you did not name the Celtigars among the lords you mentioned. Lord Ardrian is a valued ally of mine in King’s Landing, but it would please me to hear that his dependants are similarly loyal.”

“Then I must disappoint you, Your Grace. The Celtigars turned me away.”

“They refused you audience?”

“Nay, they granted me an audience. But I do not think Your Grace would like to hear what they said.”

“Tell me.”

“They said that they would not follow you, now or ever. And that even if Lord Celtigar had sworn an oath, they were not honour bound to it. Claw Isle stands alone, they said.”

_Claw Isle stands with the Tyrells, more like_. Olenna, Ser Garlan and their brood had retreated to Highgarden. Lord Willas and Arianne Martell were still locked in her cells, but that did not mean the Reachmen were entirely without influence. And the Dornish were even worse. And the Spider… upon arriving at Dragonstone, she had sent Ser Jorah and a troop of Unsullied to search all the tunnels and the caves of the island for sight of Varys, or his little birds. Yet after two months: nothing. The silence was almost more unsettling than it would have been to know she was being watched, because she did not believe he would leave her unwatched. Not Varys.

“So be it,” she said coolly to Lord Selwyn. “But I trust you made them aware of the possible consequences.”

“Oh, indeed. And I made them aware that the consequences might be more probable than possible.”

He lowered his head, and, in a voice full of mocking and contempt, he said, “I am your humble servant, Your Grace.”

He turned to go, but Dany was not done. “I’m sure you are, Lord Tarth,” she said. “Perhaps you would grace my table with your presence later tonight. I am having all my most honoured guests to supper.” Or for supper, as Lord Tarth might have put it. Call it what you like, thought the queen.

“I cannot very well refuse your invitation,” said Lord Selwyn flatly. “We will see each other later, then, Your Grace.” He went out. This time he did not bother to bow.

Dany turned to Ser Jorah. “I am beginning to think your counsel was flawed.”

“Your Grace?”

“Lord Selwyn has brought me little pleasure.”

“So long as he has brought you some, that is better than nothing.”

She had to admit that was true. “But on your head be it, Ser Jorah.” Dany turned away from him.
“Come. We are going to see Ser Harry Strickland. I mean to invite him to supper, too. It will be a gathering of all my most trusted advisors.”

“Now, Your Grace?”

“Yes. Unless you have any objections.” She said it in such a way that even if Jorah did have objections, he had the sense to keep them to himself.

She had taken Strickland from his underground cell two days into his imprisonment and put him up in one of the castle’s towers. If she got anything from the Golden Company, she was more likely to get it by keeping their company commander in relative comfort than by abandoning him in some damp dungeon.

Outside Strickland’s room two Unsullied were standing guard. Dany sent them away – she reckoned she would be more than a match for Strickland in single combat, never mind her bear knight – and had Ser Jorah open the door.

Ser Harry was sitting on an upturned pail in the centre of the room. From his prepared pose, it seemed he had been awaiting her audience. “Your Grace,” he said, rising. “I am honoured—”

“Spare me your prattle,” said Dany. “If you were paid the other way, you would slit my throat without a moment’s thought. Maybe there will be money in it for you. I imagine the Spider and Magister Illyrio would still pay you well for my death.”

“It was never Varys who paid me, Your Grace,” said Strickland. “True, Varys gave me some information, but I was in Aegon’s employ. Are you familiar with the history of the Golden Company, perchance?”

“I did not come here to be lectured to.”

“Neither did I,” said Ser Harry with surprising boldness. “The Company was founded after the First Blackfyre Rebellion, which ended at the Redgrass Field where Daemon Blackfyre and his eldest sons were slain. But Daemon’s brother, Aegor Bittersteel, escaped the battle with his supporters, and fled to Essos. Where he founded this company with a sole aim. Helping a Blackfyre take back the Iron Throne.” He paused a moment. “That aim has never changed.”

Dany did not flinch. “I trust you are telling me what I already suspected: my nephew was not my nephew at all. He was a Blackfyre.”

“More than that, Your Grace. There is a whole dynasty of Blackfyres still existing in Essos. Magister Illyrio is a part of it. He is a half-forgotten descendant of Bittersteel herself. And his first wife, Serra, was a descendant of Aerion Brightflame, the madman who drank wildfire to turn himself into a dragon. She was also, some say, cousin – or even sister – to Varys the Spider. Aegon was born to Illyrio and Serra, a descendant of two false dragons, with Targaryen blood and Targaryen features.

So, then. The mummer’s dragon unveiled. It had not come as a surprise, in the end. What was a mystery was why Ser Harry Strickland had come all this way to offer this information to her. Was it mercy he wanted, or something more? So she asked him.

“What I want, Your Grace,” he said, on his knees now, “is to go home. The Golden Company is a brotherhood of exiles. Bittersteel intended it to bring him and his descendants home to rule, but even without him, there are a great many of us wishing to return to the land of our birth. With Aegon gone, and us stranded in Westeros by storms on the Narrow Sea, it seems only natural to winter here. And if that is our intention, then we would much sooner Your Grace did not burn us as traitors.”
"But you are traitors," said Dany. "You have already betrayed me once. Why should I believe you will not betray me again?"

Strickland took a deep breath. "At the Blackwater, hundreds of my men were burned by dragonfire. Nay, they were consumed by it, immolated, destroyed. After the battle there were no bones to gather, only piles of ash. I have seen what your dragons can do."

*Dragon*, thought Dany. *I have only the one now.* She did not know if she would still be feared if the fact Viserion had still not returned to her became widely-known. "It would," she said, "save me a lot of bother if I just burned you here and now."

"Maybe so," said Strickland. "However, you will not."

"Won't I?"

"I am a terrible coward, Your Grace. You know that. If I thought there was even the slightest threat upon my life, I would never have come here. But you cannot kill me, I know that. Otherwise I would be dead already. You cannot kill me, because if you do, you will give the lords of the Seven Kingdoms another reason not to return to your side. And that is something you cannot afford."

"Some might say that with my dragons, I do not need the following of men anymore."

"There is an old proverb, Your Grace. *Dragons plant no trees.*"

"I know it." Quaithe had told her so in a dream. Only with Strickland, the meaning was more literal.

She did not think he was right. Burning Strickland would be a completely justified course; he had been at the forefront of the coalition against her. And yet… what good would more enemies ever do her?

"Very well, ser," Dany said. "I will give you one chance. Tonight you will sup with me. After that, we will decide if a deal can be made." Then she turned and walked out, leaving him supplicant on his knees.

In her chambers she dismissed Ser Jorah and called in her two Dothraki maids, Irri and Jhiqui, who had been with her since leaving Pentos all those years ago. They, who were almost all she had left. They helped her bathe, scrubbed her back and unbraided and re-braided her hair. Neither of them said anything about the swell of her belly, though it was impossible not to notice. And very soon, it would be impossible for her councillors not to notice either.

When she had finished bathing, they found her a new gown; Dany dressed, and went out to where Jorah was waiting to escort her down to supper.

The others were already seated. Lord Selwyn of Tarth and Edric Storm were down the left-hand side; across from them sat Harry Strickland. Jorah drew out Dany’s chair at the head of the table, then sat down in the empty seat beside Ser Harry.

"Will you take wine, Your Grace?" asked Strickland, smarmy from the first.

"If you please," said Dany, holding out her cup. But the table was long, and Strickland was too far from her to pour, so he had to content himself with passing the flagon across to Ser Jorah.

Dany took a sip of the wine. It was cold and sour on her tongue. "Now that we are settled and our disagreements have been resolved," she said to the unanswering hall, "I thought we might have some polite conversation at our table. In the spirit of reconciliation."
Strickland, being the sycophant he was, was quick to agree. “Of course, I will be only too willing to serve Your Grace’s pleasure. I suppose you will wanting to know when I will be able to rally the support of the others in my company.”

Dany raised an eyebrow: continue.

“I will have to sail back to the Kingswood, first, but I am sure Your Grace will permit me that. Give me a swift ship, and I will be back before week’s end.”

“I hope so,” said Dany. “That is when we intend to sail. For the North.”

“The North?” Strickland evidently did not know anything. “I saw the ships, Your Grace, but I presumed King’s Landing or Oldtown would be—”

“King’s Landing is already in my control. I see no reason to land there. As for Oldtown, the maesters were left ruined by the Greyjoy battle, and that was before my time. No, Ser Harry. We are going North. To the Wall. The Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch has asked for my support.”

Strickland gaped at her. “To what end, Your Grace?”

“He says… says that he is challenged by unearthly foes. Others, he calls them.”

“And does it not occur to you that he might just be speaking in superstition?” asked Strickland.

“Ser Jorah informs me that the Night’s Watch are men of good character and truth. Or, at least, his father was.”

“And according to his letter, this Jon Snow served my father as steward,” Jorah agreed. “If that is true, then my father trusted him. And if he did, then we have no reason to doubt in Lord Snow.”

“Snow, Your Grace,” said Strickland. “That is a bastard name. Forgive my forwardness, but in my lifetime, I have served with many men bastard-born, and found the majority of them to be men of unreliability and duplicity.”

“And I have known the company of many who have no name at all,” said Dany, “yet I have found them to be far more worthy than their noble counterparts.”

Curiously, the bastard boy Edric Storm did not move a muscle through all of it. His eyes remained fixed on Dany.

“The boy is a bastard, aye,” said Selwyn Tarth. “But he is Ned Stark’s bastard. I only met Stark once, but even from that brief encounter I knew him to be not just a man who told the truth, but a man incapable of lying. I think any son of his would be much the same.”

“Sons are not always the same as their fathers,” Dany remarked.

“You are right,” said Lord Selwyn. “Often it is the daughters, desperate for approval, that take on a particular sort of madness.”

Jorah began. “You dare—”

“Hold yourself still, ser; I do not speak of your damned queen.” He looked across at Dany. “You asked me on the day we met about my daughter, Brienne. I told you that she stuck to what she was good at. It just so happened that she was always good at fighting. Better than any of the boys who mocked her, I have no doubt.”
“A lady knight.” Dany could not hide the slight admiration from her voice.

“She probably thought she was breaking free of her bonds, too. That she was getting away from me before I could tie her down in marriage – though that would not be easy, to tell the harsh truth; Brienne is a homely mad. But...” Here he broke for breath. “She told me she was going to serve King Renly. But afterwards there was rumours that she slew him, and after that she was seen in Catelyn Stark’s company, and then in King’s Landing, and then, most recently, in Harrenhal, with Aegon Targaryen and Jaime Lannister the Kingslayer.”

“Fine friends all,” said Ser Jorah acidly.

“You may laugh, ser. But I do not know where my daughter is. I have not seen her face in more than three years. She may be dead, for all I know.”

Dany looked Lord Tarth in the eye. “My lord, if I ever come across your daughter, I will send word to you immediately.”

“That isn’t what I’m telling you,” said Lord Selwyn tersely. “Seven bloody hells no. What I’m saying is that Brienne’s path is not as singular as she might care to think. I would have wandered that path, too. I never wanted to be Lord of Evenfall Hall. But I lost an elder brother to the waves and to the gods. And here we are. Brienne had an elder brother, too, who would have inherited first. Galladon. He lived till only a young age. Then he drowned, too. Her story is the same as mine. Try as we might, and try as they might, our children are doomed to follow in our footsteps more oft than we would like to admit.”

There was a long pause.

“Whether this Jon Snow is his father’s son or not,” said Harry Strickland. “You cannot expect me to return to the Kingswood and tell my men that we are sailing to the bloody Wall.”

“I can, and I do,” said Dany. “That is the condition I am releasing you on.”

“Your Grace, I cannot—”

“You can and you will.” She felt suddenly irritable. “You’re not acting out of honour, Ser Harry, we both know that. You’re acting because you want three meals a day to eat and a warm hall to die in. So you will return to your men, and you will tell them that we are heading North, or else I will give them something warmer.”

Then the doors opened and the serving men entered, bearing the supper dishes. There was little meat on Dragonstone that was not salted, but they had managed to find a lamb in the hills somewhere, for that was present, sauced with sage and garlic. And there was fish too: a crab with its claws pulled, and a whole trout, with its scales still glimmering as the men sliced it up. But first came a thin fish soup with bits of whitefish and salmon, and hot rye bread.

“My lords,” said Dany, when the food was served. “Let us, for now, set aside enmities, and let a mood of reconciliation—”

“There won’t be any reconciliation here,” said a bold yet boyish voice. “Not between you and me.”

Dany sighed. *It was only a matter of time.* “Forgive my entreaty, squire Edric, but I fear I do not understand.”

The Storm boy stared back at her from under angry dark eyebrows raised above storm blue eyes. His face had the beginnings of a beard, and was framed by his thick black hair. He was broad in the
“You heard me,” the boy said. “I won’t. You can drag me to the Wall, but I won’t be reconciling with you. Ever.”

“Is that so?” Dany steeled herself; she could not back down. “As it happens, squire, I do not think you have much of a choice in the matter. I have ordered that—”

“I don’t have to listen to your orders. I don’t have to stay here, either.” He made to leave the table, but Selwyn Tarth caught his arm. “Edric, lad, now is not the time.”

“When is the time, then?” The boy shook free of the old lord’s grasp. “Look at her! All of you! She sits there and calls her queen, and you think there’s nothing wrong with that! She burned thousands on the Blackwater. She left King’s Landing in ruins. Have you forgotten? Or have you merely become so meek and cowardly that you will let her do the same again, up and down the Seven Kingdoms? Burning and burning and burning until only ashes are left? And then what?” He broke off. It was not an indictment but an appeal. He wanted them to act. And that was what made him dangerous.

Dany rose from her chair and took a quiet, steady tone. “Come the morrow, you will set sail for the Wall with the rest of us, squire Edric. And you will remember that today I showed you mercy, and not for the first time. When your father the Usurper took King’s Landing, he murdered Princess Elia and Princess Rhaenys, though they were innocent of any crime. If I were like him, you would have died hideously. But I am not your father, nor am I mine. Maybe it was foolish of me to show you mercy despite your birth — no, I know it was, but Barristan Selmy got into my head. You should be thankful that he did. And so am I. So: you will go to the Wall. We will win this war there, and we will return south, and maybe, just maybe, you will sit in Storm’s End someday. Aegon the Conqueror showed mercy to his foes. I am capable of the same.”

But Edric’s face did not move. “I will never serve you,” he said. “And when they realise what you are, neither will anyone else.” He picked up his carving knife, and slammed it down hard into the table, where it quivered on its end. “Never.”

She could see that he would not be deterred. “Very well,” she said, “Ser Jorah, take him to a cell—”

Just then the door banged open behind her, and Marwyn the Mage and Moqorro came in. Their faces bore dark, uneasy expressions. “Your Grace,” the archmaester said, bending to her ear. “We have had news from King’s Landing. It would appear that… that Lord Rosby and the Velaryons were not quite as faithful as they seemed.”

Dany felt that sink in like a stone. “And the prisoners?” she dared to ask.

Marwyn seemed incapable of answering that, so Moqorro answered for him. “Escaped, Your Grace. Both the pretender’s queen and Lord Tyrell. Gone from the sight of my fires, but it is not hard to work out where they are going.”

“How long have they been gone?” asked the queen.

“A week, Your Grace,” said Marwyn, and paused. “At least a week.”

Dany felt anger boiling through her, red-hot. “And are my treacherous councillors still in King’s Landing?”

“As far as we know, Your Grace.”
Ser Jorah spoke up. “Your Grace, the fleet is prepared to sail north—”

“The fleet can sail without me,” said Dany. She turned her gaze on Harry Strickland. “You were a distraction. Something to keep me occupied while all this was happening behind my back.”

The captain of the Golden Company went pale. “Your Grace, I do not know what you are talking about.”

Dany turned away, in disgust. “Seize him. And bring him down to the beach. Oh, and the Storm boy, too. I want him to watch.”

Ser Jorah dared to grab her arm. “Daenerys,” he hissed, his breath hot in her ear. “You do not know what you are doing. If you go ahead with this, you will prove the boy right—”

“I know exactly what I am doing,” said Dany. She shrugged free of his grip. “I offered them peace, and they threw it back in my face. They have played their hand. Now I will play mine.” She looked out of the window towards the beach, and beyond that the caves where Drogon made his nest. Enough with the clever plans.

Chapter End Notes

Well, no one saw that coming.

I might write some more notes in due course. But right now, I'm tired of writing this part of TCOS.
“Gold shall be their crowns” – and so they had been – “and gold their shrouds” – and so they would be.

Sorry for being late with this one. I had a busy week. Hope you enjoy it. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

CERSEI

Once more the queen dreamed she was back in the forest. This time Melara Hetherspoon was not with her at all; instead she was alone in the thick, choking fog. She caught sight of her reflection in her puddle as her feet bore her towards her inevitable destination: she was a girl again, as young as Myrcella.

When Maggy the Frog’s hut rose up out of the fog ahead of her, Cersei did not resist. She knew she could not. No matter how hard she tried to resist, she would still hear the witch’s words. “Three children you shall have,” came the thin, snaking hiss. “Gold shall be their crowns” – and so they had been – “and gold their shrouds” – and so they would be.

“And when your tears have drowned you, the valonqar will wrap his hands around your pale white throat and you shall know no more.” Then the witch begin to laugh, high and shrill, till the blood in Cersei’s ears felt like it was boiling, and all at once she woke, and sat for a few moments heaving in the darkness.

The queen realised then that her thighs were sticky. She looked down to see a flow of dark liquid running through her legs. Her face was damp with sweat, too. Slowly she sat up, though the movement was so languid it was as though she were still dreaming. She felt no horror at the sight. Blood was blood, that was all. And she was an aging woman, and even if these irregular bleedings had come earlier than she’d expected, they did not mean the end for her. All it meant was that Maggy the Frog had been right. Three children you shall have. And no more.

Cersei climbed from her bed, walked to the window, and threw open the shutters. All at once the wind came howling in; it was bitingly cold, and made goosebumps rise on her flesh. She waited
there for a long while, staring out into the night and the rain and thinking. Then she went to her door, and called for Joy Hill to draw up a bath for her.

“It’s the middle of the night, Your Grace,” came the girl’s sleepy reply.

“Will it matter to you what time it is when I have you whipped for insolence?” Cersei hurled back.

“No, Your Grace.”

“Good.” Obedience was all she needed nowadays. “And afterwards, send for Qyburn.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” The girl went.

When she was gone Cersei walked to her wardrobe and took her wool night-gown from a peg. She poured half a cup of strong Dornish red, then went out onto the terrace. There was a blood-leaf tree out here in summer, but now it was naked and even the fallen leaves had been swept away. The small pool out here had frozen over entirely. Cersei sat in its shadow and gazed out to the west, over the sea, thinking.

Her thoughts went first to Myrcella, which was not surprising. After all, the princess’s escape – if that was what you chose to call it – would happen tonight. It might even be happening at this very moment. Myrcella would be down there now in the Rock proper, with Margaery Tyrell and Eleyna Westerling and all her Companions. They would take out their shields and swords and the princess would don a cloak of red and gold, and maybe some armour to match, though that, of course, would be wholly for decoration. They would march through the Great Gate to the stables in the bailey, and climb onto horses that had been made ready for them in the days before, by loyal squires and guardsmen. And then they would ride out of the Lion’s Mouth, to Crakehall or to Cornfield or to Peckledon Castle, someplace where the princess had more allies than the queen did, and Myrcella would take up her crown, and a war would begin.

Cersei knew all this, of course, because Qyburn was not around for nothing. She wondered if Myrcella knew that she knew. Certainly her daughter had given no signs away during their supper earlier that day, but it seemed a ludicrous lack of foresight to assume the Queen Regent was entirely blind to her plans: a mistake no shrewd Lannister would make.

Yet shrewdness, Cersei also knew, was something that deserted you when the heart reigned over the head. And she thought: if Myrcella marched up here tonight instead of out of the gate, and demanded that I yield the throne to her, what would I say? What would I do?

Fight, perhaps. If I had the heart. Or lack of one. But did it really matter? There was only one way forward. It was promised. *Gold shall be their crowns, and gold their shrouds.*

That was not the only prophecy. *Golden is the brother, a golden giant’s gleam. He shall slay the valonqar, making you a queen.* And so Robert Strong had fulfilled his purpose. No one else could have slashed at her son with such power and ferocity to all but tear a steel helmet in two.

She did wonder, occasionally, if Tommen would necessarily have died if he had not been the fruit of her incest. Qyburn, conducting the examination prior to the wake, had observed that, like his brother Joffrey before him, the late king was extremely prone to excessive bleeding. She half-remembered a time when Tommen had been picking flowers in the Red Keep’s gardens and had been stung by a thorn, and had been bleeding for hours. So, that was where it had begun. It had ended on a stone table in Casterly Rock’s sept, with the son she had birthed lying there deathly pale, his eyes closed, looking entirely peaceful – save, of course, for the hideous cut that had torn open his face. There was a messy line of stitches where Qyburn had sewn the ear back on, but strangely, the matted blood in
his hair could not be washed out no matter how hard they tried. Maybe it was there for a reason, to remind her that some things were irreparable.

She had wept for Tommen, though she wasn’t sure why. She was not made of stone, but at the same time she felt weak all the way through. Why? she had thought at first. He was planning to overthrow me, and tear down the House I built. And the House Father built, and all our ancestors before us. But then, afterwards, she realised that she was weeping for the boy he had been, and not for the man he had become.

So be it. Maybe it would have been better to bury him as he had died, in his silver armour with the golden lions, red cloak streaming out behind him. Instead he went to his gods wrapped up all in black and gold velvet, made a Baratheon one last time. She kept the red cloak, though, for House Lannister – yet she was not quite sure Tommen had ever been a Lannister. To be a Lannister meant you had to be cold as old gold: deaf to the pleas of the world, deaf to those who were crying out for mercy. And he had never been deaf. Or maybe he had, and it was irony. Maybe that was what the sliced-off ear meant.

Sometimes she wished she had burned him, as they burned the Targaryens. With burning, it was all over in moments, and the flesh smoked off the bones and rose in orbital rings into the sky, to be endlessly reconciled with all days and all the nights to come. But he was in the crypt instead, buried beneath time and stone. If she wanted, she could go down to him. See how the skin had gone grey and peeled back from his cheeks, from his blackening lips. How the golden hair had turned impossibly pale, and started to shed itself, in curls and wisps. How the sixteen years had become a thousand, as if, in a way, he had always been dead.

Sixteen years. That was what the gods and Maggy the Frog had given her. Though in reality it was less than that, wasn’t it? She had stopped loving Tommen the moment he had stopped needing it. She had been doing a lot of thinking about why, in a way, she had loved her youngest son most of all. Oh, to be sure, she had loved Joffrey more, once; but he was the heir to the throne; that could be excused. As for Myrcella, she had never needed Cersei; she had always been independent, in a way, from the very first, through fault of them both. But Tommen had been hers all the way, ready to forgive and forget anything. She had thought that he would forgive her actions at the coup. Instead he had tried to kill her. That was what stayed in her mind longest, and what gave her nightmares: the green, wildfire madness in his eyes, in that long brief second where all others had been frozen in place, and only he and she seemed capable of moving. That madness had been her gift to him. She wondered what he would have done if Robert Strong had not gotten in the way.

Golden is the brother, a golden giant’s gleam. He shall slay the valonqar, making you a queen.

She had always assumed the valonqar meant Tyrion.

A droplet of blood ran down her thigh, curiously warm. Cersei watched as it traced its way down, down, dropping off her leg at last, before burrowing its way into the earth at her feet.

Some time passed, and then Joy Hill was at the door again. “Your Grace, your bath is run,” the girl said. “And Maester Qyburn is outside.”

“Give me a minute. Then send him in.” Cersei moved back out of the cold. “And bring more wine,” she added. When Joy was gone, she shed her clothes and climbed into the tub. The blood from around her thighs flowed off, staining the hot water, but she did not mind.

Qyburn came in, and took a seat on the chair nearest the door. His winter robes had fur around the collar, yet he seemed death-pale. “Your Grace,” he said. “Do you require to make any inspection of you?”
Cersei shook her head. “Blood is blood. No. I called you here for a different reason.”

“Your Grace?”

“Do you remember what I told you about the witch?”

“The maegi, Your Grace?”

“Maggy. Yes. That is what she was called.”

“It occurs to me that she may have been right. No, that she was right. And always was. I am doomed to lose my children. It will be Myrcella next. When she reaches… wherever she is going, she will crown herself. And then we will be on the last part of the road.” *Golden shrouds.*

Qyburn said quietly, “What do you want me to do, Your Grace?”

“I want you to keep watch. You have your little birds. I want to know everything she does. I want to know everywhere she goes, who her friends are, and who her enemies are. But more than that, I want her to never know that we are watching her. Can that be done?”

“I make no promises, Your Grace. But I will do what I can. If it please you, I can send my ravens now—”

“Yes, you might as well. And ravens to the Westerlords, too, of course. And to their heirs, to prevent Steffon Swyft from getting any ideas while his father is our guest.” Indeed, if Ser Harys Swyft had been her father, she might have considered his execution to her benefit. “And see to it that the Marbrands is well accommodated.” Lady Marbrand, Ser Addam’s wife, had come down from the Golden Tooth in the wake of the rumours of ironmen invading on their western coast.

“Is there aught else, Your Grace?”

Cersei considered a moment. “My ships.”

Her vessels had undergone a spate of renaming in the past few weeks, after the traitors had unveiled themselves. *Golden Rose* and *Sweet Margaery* had become *Western Thorn* and *Proudfoot* respectively. *Brave Falcon* was now *Speedbird*, after the Arryn betrayal; *Lady Dorna,* named for her uncle’s insipid wife, was now *Charity,* and the *Lord Tyrion* had become the *Devil’s Tongue.* Neither Tommen nor Jaime nor her father would have allowed that last mockery of the Imp. But what they thought no longer mattered.

Qyburn said, “Another few weeks, Your Grace, and the whole fleet will be fit for use. The crewmen are already performing manoevres with the *Lord Tywin*, the *Lady Joanna*, the *Proudfoot*, and the *King Tommen’s Honour.* And of course, the *Speedbird* is scouting near Faircastle. Her crew has not yet sent back any reports.”

“Tell the builders I retain my full confidence in their abilities. But at the same time, remind them I do not intend to be disappointed. Everything must be set in order at the right time. And as for the… the other thing.”

“The tunnels, Your Grace?”

“Yes. The tunnels. How is that going?”

“The current stockpile is sufficient, Your Grace. And I promise you, it will act more effectively than it did with the ringfort. Yes. The substance is quite improved.” He might have said more, but
suddenly he quietened, and they both heard footsteps from outside. “A visitor for Your Grace, I think,” Qyburn said.

The footsteps came louder and more frantic. Then there was a rapid knock on the door, and Qyburn opened it to reveal her cousin, Ser Damion Lannister, red and flushed from running. Ser Damion made a hasty bow. “Your Grace. Forgive my intrusion, but I have had word from the Lion’s Mouth.”

So this is about Myrcella. “And what would that be?” asked Cersei, feigning surprise.

“I – there is no easy way to say this, Your Grace. The Princess Myrcella has left the castle. And she has taken a small army with her.”

“An army?” It was important to sound surprised. “But where is she going?”

“I… I cannot say, Your Grace.” Ser Damion had gone quite pale now; he looked ready to die on the spot.

“We should assemble a council,” said Cersei coolly.

“Here, Your Grace? Now?”

“You are awake, aren’t you, Ser Damion?”

“Yes, Your Grace. But the other councillors might not be.”

“I am certain that they can be woken. Meanwhile, I shall make myself presentable. Call in Joy Hill, if you would.”

Her older cousin shuffled out and the girl shuffled back in. “You require a gown, Your Grace?”

“Yes,” the queen said. “Not the black, though. Bring the red.” And like that, quite simply, her mourning was over. Time now to be a queen.

Down in the great hall, the queen’s servants, bleary-eyed at their early rousing, took away the black-and-gold mourning banners, and draped red from the balcony and the eaves again. They replaced the window drapes and cushions likewise, rolled out crimson carpets, set the table with thin silver cups and tall flagons of dark red wine. Candles were set out too, wax burning yellow along the table’s length, and rushes laid out, and the great chandelier hoisted up to the ceiling. The heralds stood by, and the armsmen flanked the entrance, and then the great oaken doors were opened, and the queen and her Queensguard entered first. Her dress was heavy red samite, set with tiny seed pearls that hissed when she moved, slashed with black velvet and black lace around the cuffs. Upon her golden head rested a slim golden coronet set with a lone black stone.

Then came the rest of the councillors: Ser Harys Swyft, the Knight of Cornfield, his cloak made with peacock feathers and a great deal of foppery. Her sweating, fearful cousin Ser Damion. Lady Lefford and Lord Payne, the desperately sycophantic ones. Lord Farman, her master of ships, who had proved a surprising ally. Maester Creylen – a matter of respect, that. And Qyburn, her soft-spoken right hand, even if he did not wear the Hand’s badge for it would grievously insult the rest. Besides, if she withheld the Handship, it gave them all something to strive towards.

“Yes, you will have heard by now,” Cersei said, “that Princess Myrcella has left the castle, against my will. We believe that she means to head due south, to find allies among our bannermen. And then, I presume, she will return to try and take the Rock.”
“The Rock is impregnable, Your Grace,” said Lady Lefford.

Cersei nodded. “It is unless someone is helping her on the inside. And that eventuality seems very likely. But Qyburn assures me that he will find the culprits soon enough. And I assure you that they will be reprimanded appropriately.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” they chorused, “oh, yes, Your Grace.”

“Now,” said the queen, “I believe we can take Princess Myrcella’s desertion of the castle as a sign of the queenly duties her brother’s death might have bestowed on her. In that case…”

“That would make your accession lawful, Your Grace,” said Qyburn.

“That it would. All the same, I see no purpose in overtly grandiose ceremony. If Myrcella intends to rebel, then we have a war to win.”

“Either way, it might be wise to call your bannermen to the castle, Your Grace,” said Qyburn. “That way we can see who has betrayed your trust.”

“It is a good plan. Though, by the time Myrcella has assembled an army, I think it will be obvious. The Westerlings stand with her for a start. And that is a problem. Even if we capture Myrcella, we still have Eleyna Westerling to deal with.” To the council she explained: “The girl claims to be carrying my son’s child.”

She let them react to that news. “This will present problems,” mumbled Ser Harys Swyft after a time.

Cersei frowned, sour-lipped. “Obviously. We shall have to do all that we can to discredit these claims.”

“I saw that there was some familiarity between Lady Eleyna and one of her squires,” said Ser Harys.

“Oh, that is certainly possible,” said Lady Lefford. “We shall have to decide which one. There was… the Frey boy, who brought Myrcella to the Rock… the Vance boy…”

“The Vance boy is harmless to us while his father and Jonos Bracken are busy freezing to death in the north,” said Cersei. She had sent the Lords Vance and Bracken north in the company of Lyle Crakehall and Addam Marbrand. “But this Frey boy would suit.”

“Your Grace,” Qyburn intoned quietly. “If things grew fraught, a remedy might be smuggled into Lady Eleyna’s wine, that would—”

“I know what it would do,” Cersei snarled. “And I forbid it. Unconditionally.” She did not hate Eleyna Westerling as she did Margaery Tyrell. Speaking of whom… “Myrcella has taken Lady Margaery, too,” she went on, “though I do not think we can expect the retribution of the Tyrells anytime soon. Nor the Martells. Daenerys Targaryen burned them to cinders on the Blackwater.”

There was a long pause. Finally it was Lord Payne who asked the question they had all been considering. “And what if she comes for us, Your Grace?”

“Lord Qyburn?”

“A well-placed shot from a scorpion will kill a dragon, Your Grace. I have been developing weapons for such a use. Along with... other methods. Should a dragon somehow find its way inside the Rock, we have the capacity to…”
“That is enough.” Cersei did not need the others worrying incessantly. But, she thought, it might be good to keep them unnerved.

“Mayhaps,” Ser Harys Swyft suggested quaveringly, “we should turn our attention back to our northern shores. These reports… I have heard that this western invasion is not the work of the ironborn, but of—”

“Dead men,” said the queen, distastefully. “You need not fear, Ser Harys. They are but rumours, I am sure. When the crew of the Speedbird return from their scouting mission, and they may be able to tell us more.” And if they do not return, we may make our own conclusions then.

“My daughter is up there,” said Ser Harys. “Dorna.” He had gone very pale, his chicken throat bobbed up and down. “With your uncle Kevan.”

“My treacherous uncle Kevan, you mean.”

Ser Harys made a strained clucking noise.

“Has Ser Jaime sent you any word?” asked Maester Creylen.

That caught her off guard a moment. “Ser Jaime.” She swallowed. “No. Jaime has sent me nothing.”

“Do you think he has reached Faircastle yet, Your Grace?”

“We have no way of knowing.”

The meeting was all a matter of procedure after that. Eventually the others rose from the table and went out silently into the night. The queen remained with Lord Qyburn. “Do you think,” she said, “that it is time?”

“Time, Your Grace?” Then: “Oh. You mean. Well, it was only Princess Myrcella you meant to deter, was it not?”

“True, but… sometimes I wonder if this was the wisest decision after all.”

“Would you like to see for yourself, Your Grace?”

They went out of the hall, but instead of climbing to her chambers they descended yet further. At the entrance to the castle undercroft, she found Ser Robert Strong waiting. Huge, eight feet tall, all in gold, with his pure white cloak and the devil’s bloody eyes. A shiver went through her, but she suppressed it. A guard gave her a fur mantle, which she put around her shoulders.

One door led to the tombs. The other descended further, to the black cells. With every step down the long corridor, Cersei felt her heart beating faster. She remembered a story about some players who had once insulted Lord Tywin in their performance. It was said that they were still behind one of these doors, no longer able to walk or talk, but alive.

At the very furthest door they stopped, and Qyburn, by the light of a torch, took out his ring of keys, searched through them, and then placed one into the lock. There was a loud click, and then the door swung inwards.

For a long time she could not see anything. But then Qyburn moved his torch and the figure came into view, hunched over on the ground, his once-golden hair hanging long and lank and coarse. His face was blackened with dirt, and as he looked up at her, Jaime did not seem to recognise her at all.
And then, suddenly, he did. Recognition came into his eyes, and then it ignited, became fire. An animal noise rose in his throat, and he moved forwards, inch by inch. The noise rose. “Cersei…”

_There has been no change._ “Close the door,” the queen said, very coolly. And Ser Robert Strong did as she commanded.

Chapter End Notes

I swear if I had a golden dragon every time people in KOTN lamented the death of someone who died in the last ten chapters of TSK, I’d be able to buy... well, I don't know, as GRRM's understanding of currency seems to morph as fits the story. Remember that time the Hound got 40 000 golden dragons?

Digressing, digressing... ah, re: Cersei and Myrcella. You may be wondering why Cersei doesn't do anything to stop this, and the reason is that if she goes and arrests Myrcella, she becomes more of a tyrant, and... well, I imagine she's still wary about what happened last time.

I am conscious that I'm committing a cardinal sin here, but show Cersei as a multifaceted character has a few advantages over book Cersei, specifically in how she treats her children. I think Lena Headey plays her remarkably well. But that's been said a thousand times.

At the same time, though, I don't think my vision of Cersei can be reconciled with the show version much either. A lot of this, actually, is due to costuming. Show Cersei has worn black pretty much non-stop since Season 4, whereas here I like to keep her in red and gold instead of permanent mourning garb. I think it is important to recognise that the Lannister monarchy under Cersei is one of opulence and obscene wealth, instead of being a strange Gothic horror show. Or maybe, like GRRM, I just like my long descriptions of 'stuff', and rate stories based on how many different ways they express the colour 'red'.

And at the same time, I still don't actually know what samite looks like.
The Enemy of My Enemy

Chapter Summary

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend.”
- ancient proverb

Chapter Notes

PREVIOUSLY: Accompanied by a meagre army, King Stannis and Ser Kevan Lannister, now united in common cause, set out from Castamere towards Lannisport and Casterly Rock.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

DAVOS

The brief note of silence, and in it the eerie howling of the wind, was all the warning they had. Then Davos heard a shout of “Run!”, echoed up and down the line, and it was all he could do to tighten his grip on his horse’s bridle, and hold on tightly for dear life as the beast drove violently forwards. He had just enough time to say a wordless prayer to the merciful Mother before the world went mad and none of that mattered anymore.

Seven buggering hells. The bugles were calling him somewhere behind him, and men were rushing out of the lines with torches and swords, or back into line to hide behind their comrades, but none of that mattered to Davos. Some were brave men; others cowards. He had only one instinct remaining: survival. And to survive, he had to reach the town walls before the gates shut for good.

A Lannister soldier ran towards his horse, arms out, begging to be picked up somehow. Davos did not slow; if he did, the man would drag him down from his horse and kill him. Old loyalties did not matter when it was a matter of life or death. He drove relentlessly on, past the screaming Lannister soldier, towards the faint vision of the town’s gates. To his left, he saw another soldier – one of their own – torn to a thousand pieces by a fleeing, startling horse. Then that horse went mad; it veered sideways, turning into the growing mist. Davos saw the leader make a wild leap from horseback, coming down heavily on his ankle in the snow and screaming, trying to crawl his way forward to the gates. But looking back was a sure way to perish. Davos kept his head down, and his gaze fixed firmly ahead. Snow fell thick in his eyes, blotting out his vision; he had to blink furiously to keep the town walls in sight. Not far now, he told himself, though it could have been a thousand yards, or ten thousand. Behind him, he could hear the dead launching themselves into the column with that low,
keening howl they made: a band of furious percussive footsteps and inhuman screechings. Thick blue plumes of mist, smoke-like, drifted in over the road, so cold they made his throat burn. Davos heard hoofsteps coming up close behind him; on instinct, he jerked the reins right. Suddenly a burning, riderless horse came hurtling onwards where he had been just a moment before, like a beacon through the fog. The beast’s mane was alive with bright yellow flames, its eyes were possessed, and the only life remaining in it sputtered out in a low, hideous shriek.

There was a loud, dull thump ahead of him; his horse crashed into a wooden barricade and went straight through it, Davos nearly falling from the stirrups. They veered off the road for a time, through a thicket of naked trees. As his horse scattered a patch of wild gorse, Davos gripped the reins so tight that the icy leather stuck to his skin; if he tore away now, the palms would bleed, and freeze soon after. But that was the price he must needs pay; if he fell off now, he would die. In the more distant reaches of the wood to his right he glimpsed a trio of Lannister soldiers – at least, he thought they were Lannister soldiers. Their jerky, impossible movements suggested otherwise. And they were coming. He dared to give the horse a good lick across the rump, but it was not needed; his mount was running on pure fear now, frothing from the mouth already, but not caring at all. She did not even seem to notice the rider on her back. She was running for her own life, too. No doubt she had seen the horses the dead men rode, emaciated and bony, with eyes as blue as summer sky.

And then somehow they veered back onto the road, and broke through the line, stumbling into a crowd of tightly packed horses and men that had gotten stuck around the gate, pushing forward further. There was nothing Davos could do but wait in that crowd, shoving into every space he could, pressing ever forwards. Somewhere up ahead he could see a man being crushed against the palisade wall, and a thin wheeze of steam coming out of his lungs, and he thought he saw a boy as young as Devan fall under the legs of a horse and be trampled, but there was no time to think about that now. All that mattered to him was making it through the gates before someone decided to close them, and not falling off.

And then, somehow, impossibly, he was through. The crowd died away around him, spilling out from the funnel into the broad bowl of the town square. A town. That did not strike Davos for quite some time. We found a town. A town, even a deserted one, meant civilisation. And civilisation meant food, light, warmth, hope.

Suddenly he remembered Princess Shireen. Where was she? But then, as his heartbeat rose to heavy, worried throbbing, the crowd parted and he saw her there, high on her horse. He pushed his way through and broke into her circle as she was climbing down. “My lady,” he said, breathing in relief.

“Ser Davos.” Shireen’s blue eyes were cool and steady. “Have you seen my father?”

Stannis. Once again his blood went cold. Where is Stannis? He glanced round. The king was nowhere to be seen. He had been with Ser Kevan and the other Lannister commanders the last time Davos had seen him. How long had that been before the storm came on? Ten minutes? Twenty? And how long had they spent here, huddled inside the walls?

“I have not seen him,” he was forced to say. Then the implications of that dawned on him. If Stannis is not here, who is in charge? And when he realised that none of his answers seemed right, he realised that it was he himself. Maybe that was why both Shireen and Ser Godry Farring were looking at him so intensely.

Davos addressed the knight first. “Ser Godry. I want you take your men into the town and seek out some place we can shelter with the wind, or, better yet, secure the keep, if there is one.”

He looked around him, and found Addam Marbrand, by some miracle, who seemed equally in shock. He called the knight over. “Ser Addam!”
“Ser Davos.” Marbrand looked horrified; his face seemed clammy. “H-have you seen…?”

“I have not seen King Stannis. Nor Ser Kevan. Which leaves me in charge, as the King’s Hand.” He had to consolidate his authority.

Marbrand offered a small, grey nod. “As you will, ser.”

“I want you to go up to the walls – and make them our walls. I want you to keep watch over the gate.”

“There is the mist,” said Marbrand flatly. “A lot of mist.”

“All the same, I want you to keep watch. The mist will clear eventually, and when it does, we may have to venture out in search of the king and the others. And when we do, I do not want to be marching while the army of the dead are out there.”

Marbrand shook his head, very slowly. “They are always out there.”

That was undeniable, but if Davos agreed with Marbrand, he might freeze in place and never move again. “Not so.” He adopted Stannis’s tone. “Go and do your duty, ser.”

It seemed a small miracle that Marbrand did not come to his senses and defy him. It would have been well within his rights to do so, given he was lord of Ashemark, and Davos barely a landed knight. But when men are terrified, they will listen to any man who gives them something to do – even a crabber’s son. So Marbrand walked off, and rallied what men he had around his banner.

That done, he returned to Shireen. “My lady,” he said, bowing a little. “I will not lie to you. The king is, to my knowledge, still outside the town walls. Him, and many others, I do not doubt. In the meantime, we will settle here, and put up what defenses we can.”

“And should they attack?” the princess asked bravely.

“Then may every god above and below have pity on us,” said Davos. “For now, though, walls will have to do. Come, we will see if Ser Godry has made any headway at the keep.” If he turned and squinted, he could make out the walls of the castle rising on the headland. At that moment, the name of the town drifted back into his mind. Kayce. This is Kayce. House Kenning ruled here, or had. Davos knew nothing of the family itself, but he knew that reaching Kayce meant they were halfway back to Lannisport. As for what Lannisport itself meant… well, he would face that trouble when it came. For now his first impulses were to get them out of the cold. He wondered how many men the town and the castle could support. But then he remembered how many men had been behind him in the column, and realised with a dark heart that having too many souls packed inside the walls would probably not be the first of their troubles.

Now the castle rose up through the mist, and they passed into its dark shadow. It was smaller than Davos would have liked, but he saw with relief that the walls were strong and high, made of smooth stone which the wights would have a hard time climbing. But then he saw with growing trepidation that Ser Godry Farring and his men had been forced to halt at the gatehouse.

“What is the problem, ser?” Davos asked as he walked up.

“The gates are closed, ser.”

“So they are.” A black iron portcullis had been lowered over the entranceway. There did not seem to be any other way in. “Who is garrisoning the castle, then?”
“We are,” said a voice from above.

Davos thought he knew the speaker, but when your brain was addled by cold it was easy for everything to seem familiar. “And who might you be, ser?” he called back.

“We’ll ask the questions here.” The voice sounded almost amused. “Whose banners do you fly?”


“Both?” The voice sounded confused. “That makes no sense.”

“And neither does this war.” It was the truth, after all. “Will you let us enter?”

A pause. “How many of you are there?”

Too many for you to allow, Davos reckoned. “We have brought our own provisions.”

More insistently: “How many of you are there?”

Davos thought a moment. “More than there are of you,” he said. “Else you would have tried to hold us at the town walls, not at the castle. If you numbered more, you would not have deserted the town.”

There was another, longer pause. Then a different voice called back – this one was younger and more worried-sounding, yet still half-familiar – “You are fighting Them?”

The way he said Them told Davos he meant the great enemy. “Aye,” he called back. “Who else? We are fighting the ironmen, the wights, the Others. Lannister and Baratheon together. Men together.” A pause. “We will not harm you, if you let us in. We will survive from our own supplies.” Yet he did not think that enough, and from his expression, neither did Ser Godry. “But if you do not, be aware that we have enough men to break through this wall.”

The last part was a lie, and it did not sound particularly convincing to his own ears. And yet it fulfilled its purpose. “Step back from the gate, ser,” said the second voice from the wall, strangely muffled. “We are opening the portcullis.”

The sound of those crusty decrepit chains dragging the cullis upwards was a sweeter sound than any Davos Seaworth had heard in a long time. When they briefly guttered to a halt he worried that the defenders had changed their minds, but then the voice explained that they were having trouble with the frosty ropes, and that they would keep working at it. Even so, it was about half an hour in the freezing cold before they had raised the portcullis grate the requisite four-and-a-half feet for most of them to be able to duck through it. Ser Godry remained outside with the horses, while Davos and Princess Shireen advanced warily into the yard beyond the gatehouse. Or, rather, he went warily. Shireen appeared to have adopted her father’s way of walking: as if she owned all of this land, and everyone it.

They passed through the gate. There, in front of them, waited twenty or so men, all in battered and bruised armour, all shivering, all waiting with their wary hands halfway to their swordbelts. At their head were three: a tall, comely blond knight; a huge giant as bald as a baby; and in the middle, a younger man wearing an eyepatch, who Davos was certain he knew.

But it was Princess Shireen who broke out with the words, “You’re Prince Quentyn Martell.”

The man with an eyepatch – in truth little more than a boy, Davos saw – straightened up. “Well,” he said, in a thin voice, as though he himself were uncertain of the fact. “Yes. I suppose I am.”
“You were at Casterly Rock,” Shireen said.

“Yes.” Prince Quentyn shivered strangely. “I was.”

“And now you’re here. Why is that? Why aren’t you still there? And what about your wife? Lady Margaery? And King Tommen, what did he say?”

The blond knight spoke up. “Perhaps if your ladyship would stop asking questions, Quent might be able to answer one.” But he did not let his prince speak yet. “Despite all the things you have mentioned, you have forgotten one entirely. Queen Cersei. She burned down Casterly Rock. Or part of it. She burned Ser Loras Tyrell. And Lord Tarly, her Hand. And half our army. And she would have burned us too, had we not found some fortuitous escape.”

“Fortituitous,” echoed the big bald knight, in a voice that suggested anything but.

Shireen looked horrified. “But what did King Tommen do about this? He surely didn’t just let his mother—”

“Oh, believe me, he did quite the opposite,” said the blond man. “Trouble is, if our reports are right, he’s dead too. I s’pose she burned him as well.”

Just like Selyse. Davos saw Shireen go pale, though the girl did her very best to hide it. “Perhaps,” he said, through the ensuing silence, “we might head inside, and discuss these matters beside a warm fire.”

“I think, ser,” said Prince Quentyn, “that you have the right of it.” So in they went.

The defenders of Kayce castle were not nearly numerous enough to populate the whole castle, so they had confined themselves to the great hall. There was a large fire roaring in the hearth at one end, tended by frostbitten squires. The tables were arranged close to it in a horseshoe shape, up to the dais. Tapestries from all across the castle had been brought in here to plug gaps in the walls. In the main hall, below the dais, dozens of sleeping mats and blankets had been laid out; a few men were lying there when Davos and Shireen entered.

The prince and his two companions took the chairs on one side of the fire; Davos and Princess Shireen sat opposite. From somewhere, skins of warmed wine were produced. A salted ham was lugged into the hall, crusty with ice, and set down beside the fire. Davos watched as it slowly began to cook.

Shireen spoke first. “What happened at Casterly Rock?” she asked, in a voice too grave for her years.

“Fire,” said Prince Quentyn after a long time. “Wildfire, I think. Or something else. There was…” He looked around himself uncertainly.

“Tell her, Quentyn,” said the big bald knight. “Won’t do us any harm.” He looked utterly defeated.

“We were in the van. Or supposed to be. Ser Loras was leading the way, up the great stone stair to the ringfort. But when we reached the top, Lord Tarly was barring our way. Him and a hundred soldiers, or more, and they were fighting down, with the turn of the stair, so we could not get up.”

“It was murder,” agreed the blond knight. “The stairs were slippery, there was so much blood.”

Prince Quentyn continued: “We numbered many more, but we knew we would not get up that way. Ser Loras told us we should go back to the armoury, and tell Ser Jaime Lannister what was
Davos did not understand. “The Kingslayer? The Kingslayer was with you?”

“Aye, ser,” said Prince Quentyn gravely. “When Cersei poisoned Margaery and… did what she did, I suppose that was too much even for him to bear. He came with us, on the condition that we did not hurt his sister. He… he said she would not be able to fight back. But she was wrong.

“Anyhow, Ser Jaime was not in the armoury when we returned; we learned he had gone to the castle sept, to pray. The only person there was Lord Lannister. Lord Tommen, that is to say.” (Davos felt a strange lump in his throat, thinking of Devan again. Fought bravely. And died.) “He said that we should try another way. He had his map all laid out, and said there was another tunnel, a second way in. It was hard work getting through, but we made it close to the ringfort. I sent my men up first.” He swallowed. “Arch was… this close.”

The bald knight, Arch, nodded. “That close. And then the whole thing went up in fire.”

“What was it like?” Princess Shireen said after a moment, her eyes wide with horror. Davos wondered if she was remembering that night at Riverrun, with Melisandre.

“It was horrible.”

Prince Quentyn did not have anything else to say on that. The grisly details fell to his companions. “Great tongues of fire, red and orange and green.” “Smoke, choking your lungs, impossible to breathe.” “And silence, too. There was no screaming.”

“They were coming from us by then,” said Prince Quentyn. “Up the stairs behind us, we were only a few, and not enough to fight them off once they resurged. After that our own men started fleeing, trying to run. I would have died in the smoke still distraught, but Drink and Arch saved me. They brought me down the stairs, to the water gate.” Neither of his companions attested to this; their part was, in their eyes, not worthy of that honour. Davos knew the feeling, from when he had been floundering in Blackwater Bay after the Imp’s wildfire went up. At times like that, you fought only for yourselves. You saved your companions only by accident.

“There are old tunnels in the rock.” The blond knight, Drink, took up the story. “More than enough of them for a man to become lost in, and to die in. But by some miracle we made it out to the shoreline, though we nearly drowned and froze to death getting there.”

“Might have been better if we had,” said Arch.

Drink agreed. “Might have been. Well. After that, we stumbled back to Lannisport, and stole ourselves – well, I stole some, and Arch won enough at cards for us to get fresh garb to replace our damp things. And we spent the nights round the back of the Guildhall, where there were a few kind enough to give us a place at their fire. But we had our plans on our minds.

“She still has Margaery up in the Rock. I am sure of it.” Prince Quentyn’s face contorted with anger that did not seem to suit him. “But there was nothing we could do about it, not then. We numbered only half a dozen, besides Drink, Arch and me. Not enough to raid Casterly Rock.

“And then stories started to come down,” added Drink. “The queen had killed her own son, they said. Burned him with the rest, when he tried to fight back.”

“Were they angry?” asked Shireen suddenly. “The people in the streets, were they angry?”

Prince Quentyn looked at her. “They… Lord Lannister defended the city against your father, and
stopped it being sacked. They did not love him, but... he was good to them. Better than his
grandfather had ever been. I think. But I don’t know. Anyhow – we had other plans, to return to
Sunspear, or maybe just Highgarden, and gather an army there, but other news put an end to that.
First, King Aegon is dead; he fought a battle, and Daenerys killed him. And most like she has killed
our other friends as well. But more importantly, Cersei has barricaded all the roads out of the
Westerlands: the goldroad, the river road, the ocean road down into the Reach. That left only—”

“—the sea,” said Davos.

“The sea, aye. We found a trade ship, headed for Old Oak. We didn’t have any guarantee that the
Oakhearts would have us. But it didn’t matter. It was a ship, and that was good enough for us.”

“Too good to be true,” said Arch, now looking queasy. “We capsized. Or nearly capsized. The ship
blew leagues off course, and came aground about twenty miles from here. And then...”

“You discovered the wights,” said Davos knowingly.

Drink took a long swig of wine. “The wights, aye. We’ve heard some call them that. Wights.
Corpsewalkers. Doesn’t matter. All I know is that they’re dead, but they still want to kill us.”

“How did you get from where you capsized to here, then?”

“Our luck held out as we marched,” said Drink bitterly. “Or so we supposed. Occasionally, a man
would fall behind in the snowdrifts, and never be seen again. And then, suddenly, we realised it was
only the three of us left, and we had no one left to lose. Hours passed like that.”

“Felt like days,” said Arch.

“It felt like days,” his companion agreed. “But then we broke through, just like that, and the mists
parted, and the town was there. Kayce. The gates were closed, just as they were to you, and the
castle gates, too. And we were so tired that we forgot to lie about who we were. But it no longer
mattered. The men here are terrified. As soon as we said ‘Prince Quentyn’ they let us straight in.”

“And they took you as their leader?” Davos asked the prince. “As simply as that?” Given his
disposition, it seemed unlikely.

“Would you want to lead soldiers through this?” Prince Quentyn answered.

So they had chosen him because no one else wanted it, then. Davos would have to be wary that the
prince did not pass the reins on to him.

Passing the reins: that was a strange thought. A year ago, making any sort of tentative alliance
between them would have meant days upon weeks of negotiations and dancing through loopholes.
Now it was a common expectation, and with it was the expectation that neither would seek to gain
disproportionately from their alliance.

The ham had finished its thawing by the fire; two of the soldiers brought it over. And Davos looked,
and saw that they wore Lannister uniforms. A shivering squire carved for them, and refilled their
cups of wine. They ate, and were not merry. When that was done, it was full dark. Around the fire
he and Prince Quentyn shared some meagre, meaningless conversations. Davos made sure to keep
an eye on Shireen, too, and when Ser Godry and the other men came in to sup he instructed a pair to
keep a stern eye on her. Shireen, in this current excited state, had become unpredictable. He did not
know what ideas she might have, but he did not feel it was right to leave her alone.

Yet at the same time, it was not Shireen alone he was worried about. He tried to convince himself
that the king would make it through to the walls eventually, that Stannis was a hardy survivor, and it
would take more than one night in the cold to defeat him. But when he asked Ser Godry, the knight
could only shrug. “We lit torches on the walls, ser, and a great bonfire in the town. If he is there, he
will see it.”

And if he is not…

It did not make sense. The enemy would want to destroy Stannis, that was undeniable. But why
here, and why now? And why, for that matter, had they left Kayce to survive so long, despite its
floundering garrison? Was it all part of some game, to let a safe haven come within their reach, only
to tear it away?

But that made no sense either. The wights were brainless things, moved only by hunger. They did
not have plans of their own. And strategy, tactics, plans: these things were meaningless to them.
Unless, of course, they weren’t.

And then, hours into his worrying, when Princess Shireen and most of the rest had long since fallen
asleep by the fire, deliverance came. It arrived in the form of a messenger boy, freezing cold, looking
only too grateful for the opportunity to share this news. “Ser,” he said to Davos, “ser, the king!”

He jumped up at once. “Where?”

“The gate, ser.” The boy shivered all through him; he looked frozen to the bones. Davos passed him
his wineskin. “Get some of that down you,” he said. Then he met with Ser Godry Farring at the
hall’s threshold, and together they walked out into the bracing night.

Something was happening in the yard below the castle. Davos pulled up his hood as they passed
through the portcullis; together he and Ser Godry followed the icy path down to the town, through
the obstructive mist. He felt something like fear building in him when he lost sight of the walls, and
wondered if, perhaps, they had been tricked, but then the tiny lights re-emerged in the darkness, and
became torches, in their dozens and scores, and they found the remainder of King Stannis’s army
huddling inside the gate.

At once Ser Godry went off to take charge of the exodus, guiding the men who needed help soonest
back towards the castle walls. Meanwhile Davos squeezed through the throng till he found King
Stannis at its inevitable centre. “Your Grace,” he said, quite loudly – he had to be heard over his own
mercifully still-beating heart – “you are alive.”

“Did you ever doubt me, Davos?” The king’s voice was full of bitter sarcasm. There was a long
pause, and he said, “Shireen?”

“Safe and sound, Your Grace.”

“Thank the g—” Stannis broke off violently, looking confused at his own invocation of the oath.
“Thank you, Davos.”

“What happened out there, Your Grace?”

“You saw it. They surprised us. Broke us apart. I will not lie, I thought that might be the end of us,
for a while. But then the snow parted, and the wights fell back, and after that the greater part of our
troubles involved finding the way back to the town before we all froze to death.” They were both
silent for a moment. For while they had been spared, others doubtless had not.

“We have found…” Davos considered a moment; how to phrase this? “…allies, Your Grace. In the
castle. Prince Quentyn Martell, Your Grace.”
“Martell?” Stannis looked sceptical. “I suppose if he is fighting the dead too, it would be ill-advised not to accept him as our ally.”

“Not only in the fight against the dead, Your Grace. But against Queen Cersei. She has wronged him as well.” And then he told Stannis what Prince Quentyn had said, about the chaos in the ringfort and the death of the would-be-kings Tommen and Aegon.

The king considered that. “Ordinarily I would welcome the demise of pretenders to my throne, Davos.” He sounded exorbitantly tired. “And yet, I find myself wishing they were still alive.”

“They would have been easier to deal with than Cersei Lannister and Daenerys Targaryen,” Davos had to admit.

“Quite,” said Stannis disinterestedly. Then, “I suppose this Martell prince might have some use against them, too. My father taught me long ago that the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

There was another long pause. Davos began, “Your Grace, I have been thinking—”

“—about these wights. Yes. I wager we have both been thinking the same thing. And I wager we have both been cursing our own slowness. The dead, as far as we can tell, are simple animals, motivated by hunger alone. So what made them fight as they did just now, as though they were an army under some battle commander?”

“Do you think they might have a leader, Your Grace?”

“I cannot see any other possibilities. Someone controlling them. And yet, when I question who, it is Melisandre’s face I see talking to me. The Great Other. Some nameless god of darkness and death.”

He lowered his voice. “And more than that, I have heard it, sometimes, I think. In Castamere, where the caverns echoed, and now out in the open, when the wind cuts through the formations just right. I can hear Him saying my name.”

Abruptly he shook his head, clearing away the superstition. “But enough of that, Davos. Tomorrow, we will continue to Lannisport.”

“As soon as that, Your Grace? Should we not rest first?”

“I do not think it wise to encamp ourselves where our enemies so obviously wish us to be encamped, Davos. No: on the morrow we march. It may not be far, but I do not want to stay here long. If our fortunes hold, we may make it all the way to Lannisport uninterrupted.” He did not sound hopeful. But that was Stannis Baratheon for you.

“Princess Shireen may wish to see you, Your Grace,” he felt compelled to say. “Up in the castle.”

Stannis regarded him strangely, then nodded. “Well, then. It would seem we both have engagements.”

“Your Grace?”

The king pointed towards one of the brick houses around the edge of the square. “You will find Ser Kevan in there. He has asked for you, I believe.” Then he turned away abruptly and left Davos alone in the cold.

In the doorway of the house where the king had pointed a dozen Lannister guards crowded, shivering and trying to save some heat for themselves. But when they saw the King’s Hand coming they parted and let him through. The room smelled of sour sweat, and melting snow – what he
expected. But there was an undercurrent too: blood.

Davos stepped round Addam Marbrand and Lyle Crakehall, and he saw. Sitting there in a chair, with a bundle of rags wrapped round his chest, and his face turning pale, was Kevan Lannister. He raised a weak hand in greeting. “Seaworth.”

“Ser Kevan,” said Davos. “Are you—?”

“Well?” Ser Kevan laughed hoarsely. “No. But I am dying. You may wonder why I am grinning. Well, my brother Gerion alwys said that you should leave the world laughing. It seems he had a point.” Davos started to say something, but the old knight held up a hand. “No. Don’t say it. No chance for me.” He unfolded his hands from his stomach, and Davos saw that they were clammy with blood even through the bandages.

“They got me,” Ser Kevan said, resignedly.

“They did,” said Davos, hollowly.

“Stannis will have told you that I sent for you,” he said. “And you are probably wondering why.”

“I am.”

Ser Kevan beckoned him closer. “We never talked about our sons, Ser Davos. You had… seven, I believe.”

He bit his lip. “I did. No longer.”

“No. You have lost – five, is it?”

“I did.”

Ser Kevan nodded. “We are alike, you and I. Willem was murdered years ago, in Robb Stark’s dungeon. Martyn – he died of the cold, poor lad, frozen to the bones, just a few days before Stannis came to Castamere. And sometimes I think I failed Lancel most of all. I lost him first to the Faith, and then to the Stranger. And that is only my sons. As for Dorna and Janei… Lord knows what has become of them at Cornfield.”

Davos looked into the dying man’s eyes. “I understand.”

“Oh, no. You don’t. It’s not just me I’m asking you to look out for, Ser Davos. It’s all of them. Your king and your princess. And mine, my king, my niece, my nephew, all of them.”

Your king is dead, Davos might have said. But it seemed an unnecessary unkindness, here and now. And with that done, he was left with nothing to say. “Is there anything else?”

Ser Kevan relaxed in his chair. His face turned paler still. The enormity of his dying did not occur to Davos here and now; that would come later. “Remember them,” he said, with a resigned sigh. “Remember the importance of their peace. And after all that, remember me.”

Chapter End Notes

Ser Kevan Lannister has never been part of THE CHANGING OF SEASONS's
primary cast, but he has been perhaps one of its biggest supporting characters. It is easy to forget that he ran the affairs of the Lannisters for the better part of a year, until Cersei displaced him. But Kevan is, above all, a character of quiet understatement, and in that context, I think he went out the right way - with fateful resignation instead of fanfare.

Kevan’s death is one of those inevitabilities in TCOS, of which there are quite a few. There is a definite 'changing of the guard' in this series. I think, along with Barristan, this may be one of the saddest losses for me - perhaps unexpectedly so. But at the same time, I think Davos is a character who is capable of carrying Ser Kevan’s legacy, even if he will not interpret it in the same way.

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The other big thing from this chapter is Quentyn, of course. Why, you might ask, would I bother with this, when it seems so anti-cathartic and so much like a cheap trick?

The simple fact is that Quentyn's story is not done, at least not here in TCOS. In ADWD, the Quentyn story is a bitter reminder that heroism is often foolish, and rarely works out, which fits with that book's negative outlook. But here, his story ended with Margaery, before he disappeared into insignificance - becoming a mere footnote in the latter half of the story. I don't think that ending did him justice.

(I could have killed off Drink and Arch, though. But I like them too much.)
Chapter Summary

“All faith is blind.”

Chapter Notes

PREVIOUSLY: Having escaped the dungeons of King's Landing, Arianne Martell and Willas Tyrell, joined by Varys and sellswords, set out to rejoin Ser Garlan's army in Highgarden.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ARIANNE

A storm was coming. Bearing down from the west this time, from out over the Sunset Sea perhaps; maybe even now mist was drifting through the Shield Islands and Highgarden, up over the Mander river towards Bitterbridge. Arianne sat ahorse at the top of the high hill which overlooked the encampment, staring out bleakly into the west.

Their company was large, but not huge: four thousand men, or thereabouts: mostly Second Sons, Windblown, and other sellswords; scant seven hundred of their men were not bought but sworn to their cause by honour. *And if the wind should turn against us, they will not be enough to hold off the hirelings.* It worried her to think that if Brown Ben Plumm and the Tattered Prince changed their minds – or were being unfaithful to begin with – then they would find themselves trapped here amid their worst enemies.

She heard footsteps behind her, and there was Varys, coming up on his palfrey. The niceties were observed, then: “It may not be wise for you to be out here in this storm, Your Grace,” said the eunuch.

It was still strange to be called ‘Your Grace’; she almost told him to call her ‘princess’ and no more, but then his suspicions might be roused in some way. No. She must play the faithful, distraught widow to Aegon. Even if it seemed unlikely that her deception would ever convince him permanently.

“Why would that not be wise?” asked Arianne.
“You are carrying the king’s child, Your Grace. And out here you are vulnerable to the wind and the rain—”

“I will not be defeated by bad weather, Varys.”

“Many armies have been. And, likewise, by archers from distant hills.”

“You worry too much.”

“Better worry too much than be sorry for not doing so.”

“In Dorne we might argue otherwise. But… we are not in Dorne.”

Varys smiled. “No indeed, Your Grace. I understand it may displease you, though. It is well within your rights to claim some measure of freedom, but we do not know who might be skulking about in the dark, wishing to harm you or your child.”

“You are master of whisperers. I thought knowing that – and everything – was your job.”

The eunuch’s voice quivered. “If only. That might have been my prerogative in King’s Landing, yes, but that was a place where I was established, with hundreds of little birds in my employ. But when the city burned, so did the tunnels where many of my beloved friends were encamped, and—” He hiccupped, or feigned a hiccup. “—where many of them perished in the fires. And once the spider’s web is destroyed, it takes time to rebuild it anew.”

Arianne did not believe for one second that Varys’s web had been entirely destroyed. And surely he would have known about the threats that existed in the tunnels under the city. But there was no point in being unsettled by the eunuch’s secrets. She had enough worries without adding that to her plate.

Varys raised a hand, and pointed. “Look, Your Grace. It would seem we have guests to accommodate.”

“Guests?” Arianne frowned. What kind of guests would come to a war camp? And then she answered her own question. Those wanting a war. They numbered maybe two score, or a little more, and behind them streamed the green-and-gold pennants of Highgarden and the red-and-orange of Sunspear. They were too far away to see the faces, though. The figures approached the command tent, near the middle of the encampment, and their leaders shared some words with Lord Willas’s guardsmen. Then the ranks parted, the leaders dismounted, and they went into the tent.

“Allies,” Varys summarised, “from Highgarden, no doubt. Shall we ride down to them?”

Something advised her against following the eunuch exactly, but her curiosity was too great. She assented, and they turned and rode down from the hill, through the camp, snaking between cookfires and tents that buckled and blew about under the duress of the wind. At the command tent they dismounted and Arianne led the way, one hand restive over her belly. She felt a little uncertain, and that made her a little ill in turn, but by now they were there, and she could not turn back.

Within she first saw Willas, at the head of the table, leaning on his cane as he surveyed a map held down at the corners by candle lanterns. Closest to him were Brown Ben Plumm of the Second Sons and the Tattered Prince, him of the ragged cloak, leader of the Windblown. But then, along the right-hand of the table, were more unexpected faces: she recognised one of the Redwyne twins, and there Ser Oswell Rowan, and there one of Lord Grandison’s sons, and an Estermont. And across from them, the Dornish contingent, whom she knew more readily: Jeyne Fowler, Hubert Wyl, then some Godsgrace knight, and now – Tyene Sand.
“Arianne!” her cousin said, forgetting her current stoicness and embracing her. “It is good to see you.”

“And you, cousin.” It felt as though they had been apart for years. Her cousin drew her closer to whisper, “Arianne, you will have to convince your Lord Willas—”

“Would you care to share your conspiratorial whispering with us all, Tyene?” she heard Willas say, in a hard voice. “No? Tell me, was sending you here my foolish brother’s prerogative as well.”

Tyene turned slowly. “My lord, I cannot claim to understand Ser Garlan’s decision.”

“Neither can I.”

Arianne was lost. “What is this?”

Her cousin commenced a reply, but Willas cut over her. “My brother, it would seem, has seen fit to disobey my commands almost exactly. He has left Highgarden in the hands of our cousin Garth the Gross, and, it would appear, he is marching to meet us as we speak.”

“For what reason?” That was Varys, sounding most aggrieved.

“I had hoped that you might answer that, my lord,” said Willas. “According to Lady Tyene, Garlan received orders to do so. But unless I wrote them in my sleep, I do not recall such a thing—”

“And you suppose I might?” said Varys.

“You are the master of whisperers, are you not?”

“It is not only that,” Tyene interrupted. “The message was… unclear, I admit. But once Garlan had gotten into his head even the slightest notion that you might need help, he could not be dissuaded.”

“And I am sure you tried very hard to do just that,” said Willas scathingly.

There was quiet for a while. Then Jeyne Fowler said, “But, my lord, you cannot send us away now.”

“You are right,” he replied. “I cannot. But I do not have to host you as my guests either. You are more intruders than anything else. So be thankful that I will allow you stay within the bounds of the encampment at all, never mind—”

“Ser Garlan had hoped we might make you more amenable to this news,” offered Ser Oswell Rowan.

“In that,” said Willas, “I am afraid you have failed miserably. Though it is through no fault of your own, Ser Oswell. I daresay no man could have tried harder.” He turned back to the table, and gave it a withering look. “I am done for the day.” And then he went out.

The others were a little stunned by the violence of his outburst. But Arianne recovered the quickest. *It is not surprising,* she thought, remembering Willas in the tent on the night of Aegon’s death, pleading that his brother spare himself, and return home safe. This situation contravened all his efforts.

Tyene moved to her side. “You need to talk with him,” she said out of the corner of her mouth. “Convince him.”

“You say that as if it will be easy.”
“It will be far easier for you than for anyone else.”

She was right about that. Though he would never admit it, Willas was still reliant on her for some things; comforts that only she could understand — though she was never sure that she actually did.

She went to his tent; he did not resist her entrance, merely acknowledged it with a haggard look, as if it were inevitable. “What?” he said sharply.

“I came to check on you.”

“No, you didn’t. You came because they told you to.” His mouth became a thin line. “Damn Garlan and his bloody stubborn heroism! What is the point of it, I ask you? So he can see my face a week earlier, is that it?”

“It might very well be,” said Arianne quietly.

“What a very romantic notion on his part. A bloody romantic folly.” He paced angrily across the tent, back and forth. “I suppose you’re going to tell me that I should be grateful for his devotion?”

“No. I’m not naïve enough to think that would quell you.” She stepped forwards and put her hands on his shoulders. Willas was taller than her, but only by a few inches, and not enough to make the idea of her comforting him seem ridiculous. “And I know why you’re angry.”

“What a very romantic notion on his part. A bloody romantic folly.”

“I don’t know what that’s like. But I know the opposite, and that is equally frustrating. I know what it’s like to want someone’s help, but to have them refuse to come to you, no matter how loudly you beg.” That was perhaps cruel; her father’s gout, which prevented him from leaving the Water Gardens, was genuine. “Sometimes we just have to accept that the people who love us don’t always love us the same way we love them.”

Willas gave her a sour, sideways look. “That’s very hopeful of you.”

“Yes,” she said, stepping in closer, leaning up to put her hands around his neck. “But nowadays, hope is something we might have to rely on.” He seemed to stiffen; his lips thinned. “You don’t like that.”

“I don’t like believing in something I can’t see. I don’t like blind faith.”

“All faith is blind, Willas.”

He refused that. “Not mine.”

_Time to change tactics._ “It doesn’t matter. I’m not talking about blind faith. I’m talking about your brother. And I know you have faith in him, otherwise you wouldn’t have sent him back to Highgarden to act as lord in your absence.”

“I have faith in Garlan, aye. But not in his judgement, and not at a time like these. You weren’t there at the battle of Oldtown. I told him to leave the walls, and leave me. But he came back, and that was how he injured himself, and damn near killed the rest of our army as well. And it was all unnecessary and dangerous. And don’t you go telling me it was chivalrous.”

Arianne stared at him. “Would you be able to stand by and let your brother die like that?”

“Better one of us than both of us,” said Willas. He sounded cold, but she did not think he really
meant it. But better me than him. He has his wife to live for, and his children. What do I have?”

“I hope I don’t have to answer that.” She moved closer up against him, embracing him, and letting him embrace her.

“We shouldn’t,” Willas said.

“There’s no harm in it. We already have.”

“Varys.”

“Fuck Varys,” she said. It seemed absurd that he did not already know.

“No.” Willas stepped away from her. “How far along are you?” he said, pointing to her belly.

“Three moons.”

“Three.” He nodded. “You should go back to your tent, Arianne.” His voice was tired, wordly-tired. Ultimately she went, though she did not think it would do either of them any good.

Back in her tent she found Tyene sitting crosslegged on her bed. “A fine palace you’ve got here,” her cousin said flippantly. “Proper blankets and coverlets and all.”

“It’s not for me,” said Arianne. “It’s for the baby.” She knew that was really what Varys and all the others wanted. “If they could kill me and keep the baby, then they might.”

“Are you sure it’s his?”

Arianne was taken aback. “I – Aegon?”

“Well, I would hope so.” Tyene smiled. “I know what’s happening. Fortunately for you, I am your cousin, and I will not betray you. And also fortunately for you, I am your cousin, and know you better than most. I know the signs, from our early days. The same ticks you used to get when you spoke of Ser Daemon.”

_Ser Daemon._ Gods, that had been so long ago. And gods, she had not thought of Ser Daemon in… what: weeks? Months? Not since leaving King’s Landing, for certain. Not since the battle, more like. And there had been a time when he had meant a great deal to her, in his way. The same for her uncle Oberyn, and her other cousins, Nym and Obara, and the other Sand Snakes.

This truly was a different time, and it still left her unsteady on her feet. Still, _I am a newborn child in this world, yet I am no innocent._

The next morning was drab and grey, though the storm had receded somewhat. “It will be back soon, have no doubt,” said Brown Ben Plumm of the Second Sons, mounting up close to Arianne. The sellsword captains now rode in close proximity with the lords and knights.

The tensions between Willas and his newly arrived allies seemed to have calmed. He had not spoken to her this morning, so she could not be sure, but the interactions he shared with his cousins and his bannermen seemed calm, from a distance.

Arianne turned to Brown Ben. “Let us make the best of the weather before it turns ill, then.”

“It is not the weather that is likely to doom us,” said the sellsword. “You know that as well as I do.”

_Yes, thought Arianne._ _And I also know that if the worst should come to the worst, we will probably_
not have you to stand by our side. Sellswords were half of their army, maybe more. Without them, they were even more futile a force than they were already. And unlike the last children of the Reach, the hirelings did not have to stand with them.

It was ten miles to Ser Garlan’s camp. The weather, mercifully, did not betray them, and by noon they were on the outskirts of his camp, down on the banks of the Mander river. The army gathered there was modest, about eight thousand or so by Arianne’s count, though what remained from the King’s Landing campaign was mostly the green and the lame. But it heartened her nonetheless.

She would have been present for the reunion of Willas and his brother, but as they reached the top of the ridge, she felt cramps grab hold of her belly, and her breath shortened from the pain of it. She tried to hide it with grimaces, but Varys saw, and the eunuch was never one to take unnecessary risks like these, and especially not with King Aegon’s heir. The next she knew, men were nearly dragging her down from her horse, supporting her as she walked shakily through river mud. They were quite rough, but then Tyene appeared and shoved them aside, and took charge of Arianne’s arm herself. Gently she steered her into a tent, and into the company of a goodwife. The men and Varys still remained, but Tyene told them to avert their eyes, and shut the tent flaps, and it was just the three of them alone.

The goodwife was aging, with some blue kohl around her eyes. Dornish, Arianne ascertained. That was good. Dornish women were discreet. If there was anything untoward about things, she might be sworn to secrecy.

“It is nothing ill,” the goodwife said eventually, after listening awhile with a strange, large-mouthed instrument. “The travel may bring undue stress, that is all. And when you are tired, the babe knows it too.”

Arianne nodded. “It will not harm him, will it?”

The goodwife shrugged. “Him, you say?”

“Do you know otherwise?” It was said that some wise women could ascertain the child’s sex from their kicking.

“No, princess,” said the goodwife. “I always find it curious, that is all. Men and women alike, they always want a son. Yet to me it seems that all sons do is fight, and fight some more, and die fighting. Theirs are the hands that spill all the blood. And we the ones that have to deal with their dust.”

“That may be true,” said Arianne. “But a son would make a better heir. A better ruler.”

“You do not know that,” the woman said.

“Westeros has had two queens: Rhaenyra and now Daenerys. Neither of them succeeded in bringing about peace.”

“Perhaps that is because neither of them had the chance.”

“Careful,” said Tyene. “That is perilous close to treason, woman.”

But Arianne was more willing to hear it. “You may be right,” she said. “But again, it is not to be. We will never know.”

“We may,” said the woman. “When you are princess of Dorne.”

“I will never be princess of Dorne. When I wed Aegon I gave up my claim. Even now that he is
dead, my brother Quentyn comes first.”

The woman stared at her. Her eyes went huge for a moment, and hurriedly, she stepped back. “You may go, princess,” she said.

Arianne would have done just that, but Tyene stepped in. “What do you mean ‘when she is princess’? You said that, just now. When Arianne told you Quentyn would come first, you looked at us strangely.”

The goodwife retreated yet further. “It is not my place to say, my princess. Forgive me.”

“No,” said Tyene. “You will tell us. Has something happened to Quentyn?”

The goodwife looked at her with tight lips, then at Tyene, then back to her. But just as the woman was about to speak, the tent opened again, and the swarthy face of Ser Bronn of the Blackwater looked in. “You finished yet, princess?” he asked, in an oddly solemn voice.

In the brief silence, the goodwife took up her instrument, stepped round Tyene and evacuated the tent, muttering back courtesies. Ser Bronn watched her strangely as she went. Then he turned back to look at Arianne. “Princess, I have been asked to escort you to Lord Tyrell’s tent. He wishes to speak with you.”

“About what?”

“He didn’t say.”

She looked towards Tyene. “I’m headed after that woman,” her cousin said. “You go with… Ser Bronn, is it?”

Ser Bronn made a mocking bow as Tyene left, and then offered his services to Arianne. They walked out into the overcast day together. “Were you with Lord Willas when he and Ser Garlan met?”

“No.” Ser Bronn spat in the grass. “A lowly reprobate like me isn’t permitted to bear witness to the meetings of better men.”

“You say that like you’re bothered. But I don’t think I really care.”

He shrugged. “Believe me, I don’t.”

“You know,” said Arianne. “I never told you, did I?”

“Told me what?”

“That I was grateful. For your rescuing Willas.”

Ser Bronn snorted. “Your eunuch didn’t leave me much choice. Put a knife to the boy’s throat.”

“The boy?” said Arianne. “Your… son?”

That drew a mirthless laugh. “Son? Ha. No. Sometimes I’m not sure he’s even a boy. Womanish, like. But that’s what you expect from a—” He broke off suddenly. “Look. He’s not my son. And that’s all you need to know.”

“But you protected him nonetheless,” she said. But she realised that she had gone too far, and prying would only anger him. And he was a sellsword once, too; he is no true friend of ours.
They had come to Willas’s tent now. Ser Bronn made the first exploration, then ushered Arianne inside. Willas was sitting at his desk, much as he had been the night before, deep in thought. “Arianne,” he said, and his voice was throaty. Not princess or my lady, just Arianne.

Ser Bronn had left them now. Arianne walked towards him. “So,” she said. “You met your brother.” “I did.”

“And how was he?”

Willas did not reply, and at once his lack of a reaction – of pleasure, of anger, of anything – told her something was wrong. “Arianne,” he said. “Sit down.”

“No.” She did not know why she said it. “I’ll stand.”

He looked too tired to argue. “Very well. I – there is no easy way to say it. Your brother is – dead.”

For one mad moment she thought he meant Trystane. But then she remembered the goodwife, who had surely known – when you are princess of Dorne – and it was Quentyn whose face flooded her mind. She said his name, very faintly.

Willas came to her swiftly, not embracing her, but offering firm support. “I’m sorry. Him – and Loras – and Margaery a prisoner at Casterly Rock.”

She was numb. The feeling would come later. For now, it was just numbness.

He was still talking. “Garlan – he’s here. I thought he might be riding to King’s Landing to fight her – Daenerys. I thought he was being foolish, putting himself and our men in this danger. But really, he just came because he couldn’t afford to lose me, too.”

Chapter End Notes

I think in this chapter, Arianne really is something of a living, breathing camera. The chapter is, in my eyes, at least, more about Willas and Garlan (who we never actually see "on-screen" than it is about her). True, she delivers some useful exposition, but the relationship between the two brothers (the B-story, if you will) is the one that plays into the themes.

This chapter was never supposed to exist. I wrote some stuff for Arianne, then decided it would be better if Willas told it, then decided to put both bits together, and hey presto - we get this.

Which might just be an unholy mess, because I am not at all objective as a reader/writer.
Burned Men

Chapter Summary

Tyrion Lannister was starting to think the dragon hunt had not been so great an idea after all.

Chapter Notes

PREVIOUSLY: The last time we saw him, Tyrion was about to set out on his bold (and possibly stupid) plan of a dragon hunt, accompanied by Shagga son of Dolf of the Stone Crows.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

TYRION

Standing in the mouth of the cave with a torch in one hand and a flimsy wooden shield in the other, Tyrion Lannister was starting to think the dragon hunt had not been so great an idea after all.

They had spent two days in the hills, searching for Viserion. And now they were here, at this narrow and unlikely-looking cleft in the rock where the dragon was rumoured to lurk. After a long time hoping they would find the damned thing before Shagga decided it was easier to kill him and Penny both, Tyrion’s absolution had come. But it was not quite as easy as he had hoped. Because Shagga, contrary as he was, had decided he would sooner not risk his own men.

So here he was, with his torch and his shield, and a rusty piece of ringmail that fit awkwardly across his chest (for the Stone Crows, it was a mail shirt; for Tyrion it was more like a dress).

The cave extended a long way upwards in vertical height, but it was narrow, only a few feet wide. That span of width was mostly taken up by Shagga son of Dolf himself, who would, naturally, never cower from a fight, and by Dagmar son of Hagmar, as his sworn second man. But it was he, Tyrion, who was leading the way, out of the dusk, and into the darkness. He brandished his torch before him, but it served to illuminate nothing save the rocks he was walking on. There was no great shape lurking in the dark as he might have hoped. Only the gloom.

“How far does this go?” Tyrion asked.

“Hard to say,” Shagga replied. “But it is here.”
“You are certain?” He thought they would have known by now, that the telltale signs would have revealed themselves. And then, on cue, a sudden rain of dust started from the ceiling, and fell down among the stalactites. Tyrion felt rumbling beneath his feet. He raised his shield to cover his face, lest everything should turn at once. The shield was a Lannister shield, from his father’s armouries, with a chipped lion in gold on the crimson.

“Aye,” Tyrion replied to himself. “Certain.”

They came to a fork in the path. Two equally dark tunnels bent off in opposite directions. All Tyrion could do was stand in the partition and gaze down each in turn, peering over the rim of the heavy shield. He was not sure what he was hoping for. Not altogether quietly, Shagga and Dagmar came up behind him.

“Which way, Halfman?” asked Dagmar.

“These are your caves, not mine.” But that would not do for an answer. Instead he knelt, his mail shirt jangling, and picked up a small rock from the cave floor. Raising himself very slowly and deliberately, he tossed into the abyss on his left. It was a long time before he heard the impact, a small soft crack reverberating back to him.

Then the right path; this time the echo was much louder. Shagga frowned at him. “What does that mean, Halfman?”

“It means the left path is deeper,” said Tyrion. “Dragons like the dark.” So he had read. Only many of his books on dragons had been written after the last one died out in Aegon the Third’s reign: so what did they know? And how much practical knowledge of dragonlore could a maester realistically amass?

Nonetheless, he had no other ideas. Warily, he crept round the rock, and proceeded steadily down the left tunnel. Still nothing. Still only sullen shadows, and silence, and yet the drifting dust persisted, and he knew, in his throbbing heart, that they were not alone. He felt, deep within his veins, the first of his foreboding fear. He ought to be more afraid, he knew. He had ridden Viserion exactly once, when they had been both escaping. For all he knew, the dragon might have forgotten him and gone entirely feral.

As they advanced deeper down the slope, bits of rock tumbled free and bounded towards the abyss, where they struck ground hard, and echoed; if Viserion had not heard them coming before, he certainly had now.

And then the confirmation arrived, and it came in form of the smell. The smell of hot, raw iron, and brimstone, and burnt meat. Tyrion unstuck his throat. “Viserion,” he said, softly, “it’s me, Tyrion.” He waved the torch through the darkness. “I’m – we’re – not here to hurt you.”

The only answer was a rumbling noise from someplace anonymous ahead of him. It might have been a roar, it might not have been. But Tyrion was not willing to take his chances. He took a step back, yielding the ground. “Viserion,” he whispered again. Then he realised there was no point in half measures. “Viserion!” he called, louder. “I am here!”

Then he felt something, as though the dragon were talking to him out of the darkness, and he felt its suspicion, and he knew why. The swords. He turned back, towards Shagga and Dagmar. “Put down your swords.”

“Halfman,” Shagga said.
“Do as I say,” Tyrion insisted. “We do not want to threaten—” Then he stopped, for both Shagga and Dagmar were looking somewhere beyond him, and their eyes were going comically wide, and he thought, of course. He’s behind me.

Very slowly, he turned his head, a quarter-circle, a third-circle, a half-circle – and then, he saw the eyes. Huge and inquisitive. Gold with pinpricks of black in the very centre. And they had been watching him the entire time.

And then the dragon came alive. It lurched towards him, and its great jaws peeled back, and Tyrion threw his shield up just in time as red-hot wind buffeted his face, scalding his brow, making his hair fly back. Despite its shield, it knocked him clean to the ground, and sent his shield flying, clattering, from his grasp.

On the ground, Viserion’s shadow rose above him; as he stumbled to his feet, the massive white wings beat the air and rock dust rained from above with impunity. The sound was like a furnace, and the cave was now blisteringly hot; he was sweating, and his breath seared in his throat. Somehow he staggered back to his feet. When he turned, he saw Viserion approaching on Shagga and Dagmar, his massive scaled head extending, the great muscled neck coiling upwards. And Tyrion thought for a moment, maybe it would be for the best if he did burn Shagga. But then, before he knew it, he was stumbling forwards, slapping the dragon’s flank like a man possessed, screaming “VISERION!” though his throat burned and it was hard to breathe. And now, miraculously, the dragon turned away from his cowering pray, and back to him. Its expression was inscrutinable, but he could see its huge nostrils dilating.

He is trying to smell my fear, Tyrion decided, as the huge neck loomed over him again. “Down, Viserion!” he shouted. “Down, now, down!” He must sound like a squalling child.

And then, impossibly, the massive neck bent, uncoiling itself towards the ground, like a turtle’s, or a great old man’s. Almost unconsciously, Tyrion found himself reaching out, with one stubby hand, fingers closer and closer, now against the dragon’s flank, feeling the rough, cracked scales beneath his fingers. He is still wounded, he realised, not expecting the imperfection of the surfaces. Like me. And those wounds, he knew, were not necessarily visible.

But for now, what mattered more was getting away from here. He laid his torch down on the ground, and let it roll away. Then, very slowly, and hoping Shagga would not see until it was too late, Tyrion climbed up onto the dragon’s wing, clutching the sturdy bones of the joint, and then, in one fluid movement, he scrambled up onto the spine, and locked his sweaty fingers around the ridged back. He pushed his way forward, and then he saw Shagga and Dagmar, cowering at the edge of the cavern.

“Shagga!” Tyrion shouted over the roar created by Viserion’s wings, “Shagga, son of Dolf!”

Shagga looked over the crest of the dragon’s head, and saw him. “Halfman! What are you doing up there?”

“Right now I am leaving!”

“You said—”

“I made a promise, yes! And if you journey to the encampment of the Burned Men on the morrow, I will keep that promise to you! But for now, I must bid you fond farewell!” Viserion started forwards. As he did, Tyrion called out over the wing, “and one other thing! If you hurt a single hair on Penny’s head, you will not live long to regret it!” That done, he knelt down close to Viserion’s neck, and whispered the Valyrian: “sōvēs!”
The dragon did not need to be told twice. He pushed his way through the cave, crashing through great pillars of rock as though they were made of butter; Tyrion kept his head low to shelter it, as the dust fell heavy all around him. And then, ahead of them, advancing at incredible speed, the burnt orange of the sky reaveled itself to them. And as the cave widened out, Viserion unleashed his full wingspan, and Tyrion locked his fingers tight around the scales, and prayed they would hold. And then the ground was tilting beneath him, only it was not actually the ground that was tilting, but them, and the great wings stirred up a thunder, and the crowd of Stone Crows gathered around the mouth of the cave disappeared into obscurity. Very soon the clouds thickened, and darkened, and they were entirely alone. Viserion unfolded his wings, and they glided, slowly, and only the stars remained above them.

For a while they simply flew, onwards and without direction, revelling in their peace. They had until morning; he was fairly sure the Burned Men could be subjugated in a matter of minutes. Couldn’t they? He was betting quite a lot on that.

Best to arrive with the dawn, he thought.

Viserion gave a soft call of warning, and they turned sharply sideways, avoiding a spiny spear of rock that rose up from the fog. Then they dived again, and turned around another mountain peak, and then the dragon unfolded his wings and they ascended, up through the mist, up and up. It seemed for a while that this mountain had no end, but then, suddenly, it too fell away beneath them, and Viserion brought his feet down, solidly, on a parapet of flat white stone. He wobbled precariously a moment, and Tyrion had the hideous vision of them falling backwards into the abyss, but then the dragon stepped down neatly from the rampart, and they descended a few feet before coming to rest in a small courtyard.

He knew where they were at once. He did not have to see the marble walls entombing them, nor the godswood with its strange and angry branches reaching up, nor the stone falcon statues, arranged along the ramparts. Very softly he slid down Viserion’s wing, and dropped into about a foot of snow, enough to cake his boots. He realised then that they were about five feet too high, the arched windows of the cloister seemed too short, the marbled roofs too low. There must be snow beneath the snow, too, he mused, frozen hard with a sheen of ice.

Oddly he was not that cold. Great waves of heat radiated from Viserion’s scales, and his breath was so hot that the air seemed to tickle from the heat. Tyrion walked forwards, and the dragon followed him. Up the stairs he went. Icicles hung long and lank from the stone overhangs, sharp enough to pierce a man’s eye and kill him instantly. The bushes that lined the cloister walk were frozen like glass. He walked up the steps, his small feet echoing endlessly in the otherwise-silent night. Viserion left him there, and the air grew cold, so he hastened his pace as he marched along the cloister walk, to the great window at the end.

The wind picked up. And now, at last, he understood why men called this place the Eyrie. The word meant an eagle’s nest – or a falcon’s in this case – far away and inaccessible to men. And surely the route up the Giant’s Lance was blocked entirely now, and its waycastles as deserted as the Eyrie itself. But he, like Visenya Targaryen before him, had come soaring over the walls, and what men had thought impossible had been defiantly proven otherwise.

Not just Eyrie: but eerie too. The last time he had been here, the courtyards had been full of squabbling courtiers, and the high impassioned shrieks of Lysa Arryn and her brat. And the great waterfall they called Alyssa’s Tears had been a-trickling always, day and night. But now, were it not for the brief sight of its glinting frozen majesty through the wide window, he might have forgotten that it existed at all. And it was just that; merely that: existing. Not living or breathing. The same for the flowers and the trees and the vines, all choked by ice. And for me, thought. Someday I will open
He heard then, behind him, a rustling. But when he looked there was no one. Even Viserion in the courtyard was no longer visible. And then, like a vine winding itself down into his ear, the word *Tyrion*, just that, his name, floated to him. It was close, but it sounded like it was coming from far off, like in that game you play as a child where you whisper words into a hollow reed and listen at the other end. Like the echoing of waves on a foreign shore, or of rats in the walls behind his bed in King’s Landing. *Lord Tyrion,* he thought it said again.

His mind did that thing where it fixed on something without reason, with no connection at all, only impulse. And the thing was him standing in the great hall of Winterfell, like a man on trial, saying, *I have a tender spot in my heart for cripples, bastards, and broken things.*

And then the trance was over. It was insane to think that he was not alone, when he so obviously was. The castle was deserted.

He made his way back to the stairs. Down to his right was the courtyard; to his left was the door to the main hall. But, with its oaken-beam frontage already marred by frost, it was no doubt frozen shut. And, besides, he did not really want to try.

He made his way back down the steps to where Viserion was waiting. The dragon hissed softly at him as he climbed up over his wing joint, and sat among the spines. Then, softer than they had in the cave, the wings flapped, and they rose, magnificently, into the sky. The seven lance towers of the Eyrie disappeared beneath them, their pale spires fading into mist. Presently the sky grew silent, and all was still. Already he felt like drifting away.

The dawn sky was bleeding blue over the Vale of Arryn when they finally broke through the clouds again. And the dragon came with it, his scales a renewed bright white in the morning light. And on his back was Tyrion Lannister, dwarf of Casterly Rock, dragonrider, about to conquer the Vale of Arryn.

It had not been hard to find the camp of the Burned Men. Viserion had somehow known where it was, but even then, it sprawled across the grey hillside, ringed by hundreds of fires. They passed over it twice before descending, high in the clouds so they would – hopefully – not be seen. But now they dropped lower over the woods, and Viserion revealed himself to all the world with a roar loud enough to shake the crude civilizations of the Vale to their foundations. The village suddenly loomed large beneath them, and Tyrion felt rather than heard that the world had become quiet. He and Viserion landed heavily in the central square, before the longhall, a hulking construction of vulnerable wood and straw. The great white dragon unhinged his jaws, and let out a great, thunderous roar that set the canvas of the tents to flapping uncontrollably and drowned out all the fires.

The warriors were coming out from between the tents, armed with pikes and swords. Yet they did not advance beyond the prescribed circle, and as the dragon turned and snarled at them, Tyrion saw a few step back, these brave men of the mountains now ready to flee. A hundred wary eyes watched him from every quarter, but no mouths spoke, no swords moved. He had them captive; he would speak, and he would be heard.

“Some of you may recognise me!” he shouted. “I am Tyrion, the halfman, son of Tywin, of Clan Lannister! A few years ago, I came to you asking for your swords and your shields! And when I came, I made a promise to you in exchange for your life! I promised you the Vale of Arryn! I have come to deliver upon that promise! Not to fight you!” He glanced about the crowd. “I recall that a Timett son of Timett once led this esteemable clan!”
There was a pause, and then a man stepped from the ranks. “I am he, Halfman!” called that same Timett through the silence. “And I remember you!”

*Thank the gods.* Tyrion turned Viserion towards the chieftain. “Have no fear!” he called to the cowering wives and children who stood outside the ring, protected by their menfolk. “Viserion and I are no foes of yours! We will not harm you!”

“This fearsome beast is *yours*, Halfman?” called Timett incredulously over the wind.

“He is. Or at least, he is mine so far as a dragon can be tamed by man.” Tyrion had no illusions that complete obedience from the dragon was possible. “But he will not harm my friends, unless they should prove to be my false enemies.”

“What do you want, Halfman?” asked Timett.

“I want to talk.” He realised, then, that he also needed their trust. “Give me one moment. I am coming down.” He hooked his leg over Viserion’s wing joint, slid down the scaly wing, landed lightly, and looked up at Timett. “We will talk inside your hall.”

Timett nodded. He had no choice but to accept, of course.

They spent the better part of an hour within the longhall, talking. There was not much to be said, but Tyrion was aware that he had a good amount of time to fill. One of the very first things he had learned was the ability to speak in long, needlessly eloquent sentences, about not very much at all. Even so, his voice was wearing thin when a clansman hurried into the hall, went up to Timett on the dais, and whispered something urgent in his ear.

Timett turned to Tyrion. “I must leave you, Halfman. It would seem we have other troubles to deal with.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” Tyrion rose in turn. “Problems like the Stone Crows, perhaps?”

The leader of the Burned Men frowned. “How did you—?”

“And perhaps, more surprisingly,” he continued, “they have come bearing tokens of peace?”

And so they had. There, on the moor below the encampment of the Burned Men, the clansmen of the Stone Crows had gathered. Tyrion stood with Timett at the crest of the hill and watched them. “Shagga son of Dolf,” he said aloud, a smile creasing his lips. “Now there’s a wonder.”

“You know about this, Halfman?” asked Timett.

“Of course I did,” Tyrion said. “I led them here.” And at Timett’s angry stare: “I promised you all the Vale of Arryn, Timett. Not just the Burned Men. And unless you want me to call down Viserion again, and decide you want to live up to your name, you had best let them in.”

Timett did not have much choice in that either. Viserion was faintly visible up above, circling over the bluffs that shaded the hillside. Tyrion, reassured in his own power, went back to the longhall with Timett and there they waited. *They came.* He breathed a sigh of relief. *Now there’s a wonder.*

Very soon the longhall doors opened again, and Shagga son of Dolf came in. Timett made to offer some sort of greeting, but Shagga cut over him with an angry roar of “Halfman!”

“Greetings, noble Shagga,” said Tyrion. “I did not think you would come.”
Shagga looked suspiciously from Tyrion to Timett. “What is this? Some treachery? I have four hundred warriors outside, waiting—”

“As does Timett. And I have a dragon that will burn both your villages to ashes.”

“Dragons can be brought down—”

_Not with your weapons, mind._ Tyrion ignored him. “Did you bring Penny, Shagga?” he said. “Like I asked?”


“Bring her. We will need to put our minds together for this plan. She has more sense than the pair of you combined.”

“What plan is that, Halfman?” asked Timett.

“I had thought,” Tyrion said. “That rather than spend our time killing one another, we might create an alliance. An alliance that will bring together not just the Stone Crows and the Burned Men, but the Moon Brothers too, and the Black Ears, and all the other clans of the Vale. Against our common enemy.”

“What enemy?”

Could they really be so stupid? If so, this would be even easier than he thought. Tyrion smiled. “A Lannister always pays his debts,” he said. “My lords, it is high time you were restored to your rightful seats. It is time to conquer the Vale of Arryn.”

Chapter End Notes

Soooooo...

Tyrion has his pet back. By “pet”, I mean murderous hellbeast that probably wouldn't agree with that definition. And yes, Penny has survived - I just didn't have time to show her here. But I know how she's a fan favourite and all. :)

There was not much to be said, but Tyrion was aware that he had a good amount of time to fill. It was no trouble to him. One of the very first things he had learned was the ability to speak in long, needlessly eloquent sentences, about not very much at all.

This made me laugh. Which might be quite sad, considering that I wrote it.

Anyway, I'd like to take the opportunity to thank everyone once again for reading. The story is picking up speed now (both in terms of the pacing and the number of uploads I'm able to make). I've been a little patchy recently, but now that this is underway again I think it's only right to thank you all for making KNIGHTS OF THE NIGHTINGALE as enjoyable to write as it is for you to read (I hope).
The Strange and the Familiar

Chapter Summary

“When you know what it is like to lose something, then you know how important it is to protect it.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ARYA

Arya pulled the bowstring back to just below her chin, letting it settle restlessly there for a few moments. She looked across, to Anguy the Archer on her left and then to Thoros of Myr on the right, both training their bows on the deer. She knew that even if she missed, Anguy would hit the deer for certain, and would probably bring it down in one shot. She had never known Anguy to miss. Then again, if he had ever missed, would she have remembered it?

Then, curiously, she did remember something. Anguy standing beside her, in a different forest. “Never aim your bow,” he said, “never aim, just shoot.”

Maybe she had remembered it wrong, because it looked like he was aiming now. Or maybe it didn’t matter at all.

Or maybe it does, said a whisper in her ear. If you remember one thing, Arya, you might remember another.

That was Bran’s voice, she was almost certain of it. He must be speaking to her from Winterfell, from behind the great wall of snow and frost that had fallen across the Neck. Or maybe she was imagining that, too. Maybe Bran was dead. Maybe everyone north of the Neck was dead.

That was when the deer moved.

Arya released the string just in time. Her arrow darted forwards with a low hiss, and struck the deer through its hind leg. It might have run off, but Anguy and Thoros had both been paying attention, or both had better luck. The deer crumpled in the clearing, breaking a crust of frost beneath its corpse, one arrow in its neck and another just above its heart. Anguy gave a whoop of delight. “That’s mine, I think!”

Arya let out her breath and followed them down into the clearing. The deer was still stirring, very feebly, so Anguy went up with his dagger and sliced its throat. “Fair shots, my friends,” he said, standing, “but I believe mine is the one what killed it.”

“Yes, well done,” said Thoros flatly. “You must be very proud.”
“Nothing wrong with a little pride, my friend.”

Thoros smiled ruefully. “The red priests in Volantis would disagree. Something I learned to my sorrow.”

“Why?” asked Arya.

“Some of us are too good to sit among stuffy manuscripts for years on end,” replied Thoros. “They tried to punish me with the impossible task of making King Robert see the Lord’s light, hoping that a few years sleeping in alleys and living off bowls of brown would teach me some humility. But they underestimated how easily some men are pleased by the sight of a flaming sword.”

“You were fat then,” she said. “Weren’t you? When I first saw you in King’s Landing. You aren’t anymore, but you were.”

“And you are very impolite for a lady,” said Thoros. “And as I recall, you always have been.”

Anguy grinned. “Didn’t anyone at Winterfell teach you manners?”

“Winterfell,” Arya said. They must have gotten that from Hot Pie. “And yes, they did. I just don’t think I listened very much.”

“Not much of a lady, are you?”

She seemed to remember that Gendry had said that to her, once. But nevermind that. Gendry was stubborn and stupid. He didn’t matter anymore.

“No,” she said, “I’m not much of a lady at all. That hasn’t changed, at least. I don’t think I’ve changed that much.”

The last was more to herself than to them. But Thoros shook his head. “Everything changes child, even when you try to bring it back the same. You saw what death did to your lady mother. And to Lord Beric.”

“But I didn’t die in Braavos,” said Arya.

“A part of you did,” Thoros replied. “Same as a part of your sister died when she went to King’s Landing, and a part of your brother when he left Winterfell.”

“I’m not a child,” she snapped. “I know everything won’t be the same, when we get back to Winterfell.”

“I don’t think you do,” said Thoros sadly. “And I think you are afraid of it.”

She wasn’t afraid of it. At least not in the way Thoros was implying. It was inevitable that some things would change, yes. When they got back to Winterfell, the castle would have been ransacked and maybe burned, and the rooms and the people would not be the same, because they had been uprooted during the war. And Bran would not have his legs: no more climbing. But some things would stay the same. The heart tree, she thought, in the godswood. They will not have uprooted that. And Jon. I will go up to the Wall and see Jon, no matter what Sansa says. And he will laugh when I show him Needle and he will muss up my hair and call me “little sister”. Won’t he?

Shortly thereafter, she, Thoros and Anguy left the clearing together. Thoros slung the carcass of the deer over the back of his big horse, while she and Anguy rode a little ways ahead of him, scouting out for dangers. Not there would be any. The only dangers on these roads were outlaws and wolves;
outlaws would surely run and hide when they saw the vast Northern army coming, and wolves preyed on those weaker than them, and did not attack on armed encampments.

The ride back to the encampment took them about an hour, by which time all the tents had been set up and makeshift palisades had been established. The sun had gone down, and the moon rose up in its place, a bright white eye without a pupil. It turned trees and hills into dark silhouettes, and on the hill above the camp Arya glimpsed some strange silhouettes indeed: jagged shapes, craggy and tall, but definitely manmade.

“Oldstones,” said Thoros of Myr. “There was once a castle here. The seat of House Mudd.”

Harrenhal was a sorry ruin, but at least it was serviceable, once you put up tapestries over the gaps in the stone and set the fireplaces blazing. But as they drew closer, Arya saw that Oldstones was far worse. No one had lived here for hundreds, or maybe thousands, of years. The stone was cocooned in weeds and moss, with tiny dying flowers spreading through the cracks. What must once have been walls had lost their shape and were now slowly bending over, like hunchbacked old men.

Like Harrenhal, it had been great once. But like all great things, it had come to an end. And no matter how hard you tried, you could not put it back together.

They rode back towards the Brotherhood’s tents, but as Arya dismounted she found Sandor Clegane waiting for her. “A dog come to see a wolf?” Thoros asked mockingly.

“Why are you here?” Arya said.

Clegane scowled. “Girl,” he said brusquely, without any respect. “Your sister wants you. In her tent.”

“I’m with Thoros and Anguy—”

“She isn’t expecting you to refuse. And it’s for your own good.”

Arya was a little shocked by the boldness of it all. But then Thoros of Myr said, “go on, child. He’s right about that.”

She was about to shout at him, to remind him that, at the Crossroads Inn, they had sworn to follow her, and accept her orders. But she forced herself to follow the Hound, if only to deny Clegane the pleasure of reporting her defiance to Sansa. She wasn’t stupid. She knew that her sister had tasked Clegane with spying on her. And the Blackfish. And maybe even Rickon.

So, then. It was time for another supper with Sansa, populated by lies and things unsaid.

She expected to see the Blackfish and Rickon waiting with her. But tonight it was just her and Sansa. Her sister waved a hand to dismiss the Hound. And there they were. Sansa sat at one end of a long table, finishing a last reply on a bit of paper.

“What are you writing?” Arya asked.

“A letter.”

“Obviously. To who?”

“To whom,” said Sansa irritably. “But if you must know, it is for Bronze Yohn Royce. I was wondering if he might do us the favour of reducing some of our grain tariffs between the Vale and the Riverlands.”
“Well, they should. They don’t need it as much as we do.”

“If only it were that easy.” As she spoke, Sansa poured a neat blob of hot wax onto the envelope, sealed it with her stamp, and set it aside. “You may sit,” she said.

“I am thankful for your ladyship’s gracious permission.” She sat.

“Well, you looked like you might stand there all night.” Sansa glanced away from her, through the tent flap. “Cold night?” she asked.

“Colder than you might expect.”

Sansa reached over to the middle of the table and unveiled two platters: roasted pork, greens, crumbly cheese, baked plums. She passed one platter to Arya, along with a knife, then sat back down with her own. “I have sores,” she muttered. “And that’s just from riding. I’d hate to be walking in this.”

“Wear more padding in your clothes,” suggested Arya. “That should soften the impact if they’re chafing.”

“I know. But it was midday by the time I figured that out.” She scoffed. “The march stopped because her ladyship’s thighs were hurting. Do you know how foolish that would make me look?”

“Yes,” said Arya, “but then they wouldn’t hurt so much.”

There was a long pause. And then, almost impossibly, Sansa smiled. “You were always better with practical things.”

She is being too nice. It made Arya wary. “I suppose I was.”

“I know that… there have been things in your past. Things you might not want to talk about. And I have things like that, too. I think… I think we should put it behind us. Whatever we’ve both done is done. Our past is our past.”

Arya nodded slowly, though in truth this all felt too easy to her. “That sounds like a good idea. But… you don’t seem sure.”

Sansa deliberated, chewing her food slowly. Then: “You said something when you first arrived at Raventree. About…”

“A list,” said Arya.

“A list,” her sister agreed. “A list of people you’re going to kill.”

“Yes. What are you asking?”

“I’m asking…” Uncertainty seemed to flood through Sansa. But she had come too far now to turn back. “I’m asking whether you… whether… you haven’t actually killed any of them, have you?”

She could have lied then and Sansa would never have known. She had not played the game of faces as Arya had. But Sansa wanted truth, no doubt. It was time to see which sort of ‘truth’ she wanted. “I have.”

Sansa should have known better than to be shocked by that. Her mouth fell open a little. “But… when?… why?… how did it feel?”
“Which question do you want answering first?” Arya said acidly. Then: “There were many times. I did it because I had to.”

“And... how did it feel?”

“How did it feel?”

“I don’t think I’d be able to actually kill someone,” said Sansa.

Arya was reminded of the waif hitting her with the switch. You lie, she thought. “You’d be surprised what you can do when you’re in real danger. The first person I killed... he was a stableboy, in King’s Landing. He said he was going to take me to the queen. To Cersei. She’s on my list. The very last person, actually.”

“Are you going to kill her too?” Sansa asked.

“No.”

“You’re not?”

Why did she sound so surprised? “Cersei is at Casterly Rock. Hundreds of leagues away. It wouldn’t be worth my time. And... I’m here with you now.”

For a long while neither of them spoke.

“I wouldn’t have survived what you did,” said Sansa eventually.

Arya thought about it a moment. “I wouldn’t have survived what you did, either. I wouldn’t have let Joffrey imprison me. I would sooner have died.” She softened her tone a little. “And I would have. Died, I mean. But it’s like you said. The past is the past.”

“The past is the past,” Sansa agreed. “The future is all that’s worth considering.” Another pause ensued. Then she said, “The Blackfish wanted to talk to you, by the way. About Oldstones. I told him I’d send you to him. You don’t have to, but—”

“It’s all right,” said Arya. “I’ll go.”

So she did. She went and found the Blackfish sitting outside his tent. He did not say much. Only, “Come and walk with me.”

They climbed the hill together. Neither spoke until they reached the top, where the cracked stone sepulcher of King Tristifer Mudd, the Fourth of His Name, awaited them. The long-dead king’s stone visage had worn away; all that remained was the vague suggestion of a face, and upon it what was surely a crown. But beyond that, it might have been any king. It might have been Robb.

“Your mother was here,” said the Blackfish. “She and your brother both. They came this way when they rode up to the Twins.”

“To the Red Wedding,” Arya said. Had she and the Hound come this way too, trailing after them, minutes too late to save them?

“Aye,” said her great-uncle. Then there was a pause, and then he said, “but she came this way again.” He turned to stare very deliberately at Arya.

She tried to hide her surprise, but the Blackfish was not easily fooled. He knows. Somehow he knows. There was no point in hiding it. “Stoneheart,” she breathed.
“So you met her,” said the Blackfish.

Arya confirmed. “I did.” And so had he, obviously. But her next thought was an odd one. “Does Sansa know?”

The Blackfish stared at her. “And what if she does?” It was meant to be probing, no doubt, but Arya had been playing the game of faces for years. “She doesn’t know,” she said, “and neither does Rickon.”

The Blackfish’s slight twitch confirmed it. “Your mother,” he began. “Would have wanted—”

“Would have wanted me and Sansa to exist peacefully,” she said cynically. “As though nothing had ever come between us at all.”

She received a sage nod in reply. “And what has come between you?” the Blackfish asked.

It was the sort of thing a child might ask. She could think of a dozen answers.

*The years*, she might have said, but that was wrong; for it had only been a few years. Sansa had not changed unrecognisably, and neither had she.

*Our goals*, she might have said, but they wanted the same thing – to go home – even if they went about finding it in separate ways.

*Ourselves*, she might have said, but they had reconciled. Hadn’t they?

Yes, it was the sort of thing a child might ask. And yet it left her stumped. “I don’t know,” she had to say.

“Well,” said the Blackfish. “It seems to me that there’s nothing for you to have grown apart over. But forgive my ramblings. What do I know, eh? Just the advice of one old man… one old man, mind, who made the exact same mistake with his own brother. When I came back to Hoster at the start of the war, it was the first time I had looked upon his face in fifteen years. My own brother! I thought, for a time, that I hated him. Yet when I looked him again, saw him lying weak in his bed – and when I saw his face, I knew that I loved him still.”

Did she love Sansa? Well, she thought she did. But she would never admit it, and she would certainly never say those three words out loud. Not only to her sister, but to anyone.

And yet they were truth. Unspoken truth. Stark truth.

“I was here too,” she heard herself say. “Not when she died. Before. Me and the Hound, we were riding up to the Twins. We missed them – Robb and Mother – by minutes. But I know that if we had gotten into the hall with them, we would have died too. And sometimes, in the days after the wedding, I wished I had. But I didn’t, and now I’m here. And I think that’s better.”

The Blackfish stood staring at her for a long time. “When you know what it is like to lose something,” he said, “then you know how important it is to protect it.”

After that he left her. Left her with the words still ringing in her ears, and they were truth too. Sansa had said, *I have to protect you*, and Arya had looked upon that proclamation with scorn – how can you protect me? But now she realised that it was not so much the reality that mattered as it was the sentiment. And, she thought, *I have to protect you too.*

Jon had given her Needle, but it was Father who had sat her down with it on the steps of her cold
King’s Landing room, and Father who had told her what it was really for, and it was Father’s words she recalled now. Not for the first time, but now, she chose to say them aloud. “The lone wolf dies, but the pack survives.”

Arya set off at a walk. The ground was grey and mushy under her feet as she crossed beyond the sepulcher, and descended from the summit. She needed a place away from the camp to think, though she had no doubts that she would soon return to Sansa and the others. Maybe she would find Rickon by the campfire, and apologize to him for being so distant lately – though she was not sure her brother had noticed.

Then something moved in the bushes ahead of her and her senses came alive at once; her hand danced, with instinctive violence, to Needle’s hilt, and drew it a half-inch from its slim scabbard. The air bristled, brushing at the back of her neck. And then, before it ought have been possible, she heard the bushes parting, and from between them came the wolf.

It was not any wolf, and she knew it instantly, even without seeing its massive size. She had, in all these years, never forgotten. For how could you forget part of yourself?

“Nymeria,” she said, and the name, which had been a pup’s name, seemed equal parts absurd, for the direwolf now stood near as tall as a horse, and fitting, for there was surely no other beast of the forest who so befitted the name of a warrior queen.

The clearing was very silent. The sounds of the camp below, the smell of its smoke and the light of its fires, had become non-existent. And the silence was so perfect that it could only have been fashioned by the gods, to give them this moment alone.

She harboured, for half an instant, a hope that she might bring the direwolf along with her, as Shaggydog did for Rickon. But Nymeria was wild, that was plain. And Arya herself was the cause of it.

There was still a part of her in Nymeria, though. Even in this great beast of the wild, there was still some girl. And the reverse was true. As she stretched her hand out towards Nymeria, she thought, maybe, that it was not so much a gesture of affection as it was a formalisation of the exchange that must needs take place. She could imagine it now, like the writing of a will.

To Nymeria, the wilderness. To Arya, the world of men. Each had their role to play. One the conquering warrior queen, the other the stalwart protector of the hearth. Each bound to live in their separate spheres, and each free to follow their separate ways.

Chapter End Notes

In the title of this chapter, "familiar" is a three-way pun, referring to:

a) things that are recognisable and normal
b) the idea of a family
c) the idea of a witch's familiar

I think there are quite a few ideas of duality going on in here. A lot of this chapter is about Arya separating the natural Arya - the ordinary ‘Arya Stark of Winterfell’ - from the supernatural Arya - who does crazy shit like joining murder cults and talking to wolves. And at the end of this chapter, she sort-of-resolves to separate the two, as
symbolized by her parting with Nymeria. She is 'setting free' her wolf, but also another part of her life that she recognises can't exist anymore.

To Nymeria, the wilderness. To Arya, the world of men. Each had their role to play. One the conquering warrior queen, the other the stalwart protector of the hearth. Each bound to live in their separate spheres, and each free to follow their separate ways.

You might say that they've been charged with different things, or, as per my inspiration:

PROSPERO: I’ll deliver all,
And promise you calm seas, auspicious gales,
And sail so expeditious that shall catch
Your royal fleet far off.—(aside to ARIEL) My Ariel, chick,
That is thy charge. Then to the elements
Be free, and fare thou well!


Oddly, I don't think Arya's necessarily right in what she does. We have to remember that Arya has a character has a very black-and-white outlook on things. She claims to be leaving part of the past behind, but at the same time, she's retaining a lot of it, and is ignorant to it. Despite her assertion here, I think she's still very much the same confused, dualistic Arya.

I've always wanted to return Arya (and Sansa and Rickon) to Oldstones and have her reunite with Nymeria there. After all, in the wider history of the Starks in ASOIAF and TCOS, it is the definitive coming-together-place of the old and the new.

“I wouldn’t have survived what you did,” said Sansa eventually.

Arya thought about it a moment. “I wouldn’t have survived what you did, either. I wouldn’t have let Joffrey imprison me. I would sooner have died.” She softened her tone a little. “And I would have. Died, I mean. But it’s like you said. The past is the past.”

I sort-of stole this from the show, but I also think this conversation is inevitable for these two meeting up. I do think Arya is being a little critical of Sansa here when she says she "would sooner have died". But Sansa, meanwhile, is hardly innocent; she unconsciously quotes Littlefinger in this scene with “the past is the past” (GoT 4.04)

Sansa: “Cold night?”
Arya: “Colder than you might expect.”
...Sansa: “The march stopped because her ladyship’s thighs were hurting. Do you know how foolish that would make me look?”

Eagle-eyed readers (read: probably only me) may recognise this passage from somewhere else in the series. That's because I directly lifted it from Tommen and Myrcella's (last) supper in *The Sunset Kingdoms*, when they're travelling to the Golden Tooth. Make of that what you will...

Also, finally, I looking love the Blackfish.
Dust Thou Art

Chapter Summary

“In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”
- Genesis 3:19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

WILLAS

Without warning, the column began to slow. Various carts and horses fell behind, and some lords called their men off the road to erect their own shelters for the night. Then the order went up from the front, and the army halted completely. Willas looked to Ser Horas Redwyne. “What is happening?”

Ser Horas shrugged. “Your brother must have called a halt.”

“Here? Why? It is only rain.”

“It is a rain storm, cousin.”

“But still only rain.”

That won him another shrug. “By all means, go and ask Garlan.”

Willas could not argue with that. He spurred his horse forwards, and rode up the left side of the column, past siege engines under awnings and wheelhouses with camp followers and orphan children riding on top. The men were already quick at work with canvas and pegs, erecting the Tyrell command tent.

Ser Horas had certainly not underestimated the rain. It seemed to be falling sideways, so heavy was the torrent; everyone everywhere was wet. The leather reins of Willas’s horse felt greasy to the touch, and he saw that he was not alone in having removed his helmet; if you wore yours in a downpour like this, the unceasing percussion of the rain beat hard on your helmet and could send you mad from headaches. Even the waxy coverings which protected the salted meat and grain in the carts were caving inwards and failing; underneath, women and children hunched, trying in vain to keep warm. There were puddles of muddy water everywhere; in the meagre moonlight, they seemed like black blood. Stray dogs and unbound horses stalked up and down the column. Their eyes were strange. They had smelled something in the air.

The visibility was so limited that Willas did not see Brown Ben Plumm until he nearly walked into him. “Lord Willas!” Plumm had to shout to be heard over the rain. “Was this your command?” He
gestured about him.

Willas shook his head. “My command is my brother’s!” He pointed a gloved hand towards the command tent-under-construction. As they watched, the tent burst free of its constraints, and the men carrying the poles sprawled to the ground; the wind was so strong that it nearly carried the canvas away with it. Even at its diminished strength, the wind dragged the covering across the muddy waste to the left of the column. Fifty Tyrell men went chasing after it.

They were trying to light torches and braziers too, but the wind was having none of it. A few candle lanterns had succeeded, just about, and there was one big brazier than managed to stay lit, with a hundred knights pressing close around it. Willas, aided by Brown Ben Plumm and Kasporio the Cunning of the Second Sons, forced his way through; “make way for his lordship!” they shouted. Eventually he reached the centre, where he found Ser Garlan, Lord Yronwood and the Tattered Prince, and a dozen others whom he would have recognized at a glance on a sunny day, but now could not see because the rain was so heavy.

Garlan was saying something he could not hear; all the other lords were shouting too, interrupting one another, nothing was clear. Somewhere behind them there was a colossal boom of thunder; Willas used the brief silence to get his brother’s attention. “Garlan! Why have we stopped?”

“Bridge!” Garlan shouted back, though he was all of five feet away. “The bridge!”

“What?”

“The bridge’s come down! We can’t cross!”

Willas swore. They must needs cross the Mander here, one last time one the Roseroad’s meandering course back to Highgarden. If the bridge was down, and the banks of the river were overflowing, then there was nothing that could be done.

“We’ll wait till morning!” shouted Garlan. Then he was done with Willas, turning to answer some query of Lord Yronwood’s.

Someone was tugging on his arm. Tyene, he realised, recognising her young face. “Arianne wants to know—!” she shouted, before another thunderclap cut her off.

“Where is Arianne?” Willas shouted back.

“With Lord Uller and Varys!” Tyene drew a breath. “This rain will not be good for her, you know! Nor for the baby! She was wondering if you might—” Another thunderclap. “If you might find some way to send her on early to Highgarden—!”

“The bridge has fallen! There’ll be no chance of that!”

Tyene pushed wet hair out of her eyes. “And have you seen this bridge?”

Willas shrugged. “Garlan wouldn’t lie—” But Garlan never told me about his other plans. A strange paranoia came over him. Leaving Tyene, he forced his way back to Garlan. “Show me this bridge!” he commanded in the voice of Lord Tyrell. “I want to see that there is no way through!”

There was no way Garlan could refuse. He took Willas by the arm and all but dragged him towards the front of the column, past the first line of Tyrell pikemen. Willas’s leg was starting to throb again by the time they reached the bridge, followed by a score of knights and anxious lords. Garlan pointed. “There you are!”
Willas stepped forward, careful with his footing, to the bridge. The river had burst its banks long ago, and the water had risen to above his boots; he had to wade out a little ways into the mire to get a better look. It was so dark that it was difficult to see anything, but he knew at once there was no way across: the gap was two hundred feet, or more. It was impossible to say where along its length the bridge had broken, since not even its wreckage could be seen. Black water ran up inside his boots, and with the wind now blowing into his face from the west, he was all but blind.

Garlan grabbed his arm as he stepped back. “You see now? There’s no way across that! All we can do is wait till morning! Come, now, back to the tent – if they ever get it up, that is!”

Willas nodded, and moved back. But as Garlan’s lantern moved across, he caught something. “Wait!” he took the lantern, held it up. And felt horror that shook him to his bowels. For on the ruins of the bridge at the near end, were dark patches, that, to him, only spoke of one thing. Scorch marks.

“No,” said Willas. “No, no, no!” He turned to Garlan, already running. “We have to go, we have to scatter, we have to—”

Dogs began to bark. Even from here he heard them. And there was howling from the woods, and next the shouts of his own men, as they too became away. And then Garlan was pointing, and then, even through the rain, they saw it: the shape in the sky.

“Back!” Willas shouted, running already, “back, back, get back, get to cover!” He was running, knowing he could never outpace it, but all the same—

The black shadow passed over him, spreading its wings low. Willas turned back, and as he did, he swore that he met the gaze of its rider, though she could never have seen him. And then the sky blew apart, and the rain became a torrent of fire, and the flames were almost black as they cut, sword-like, through their lines. Willas threw himself on the ground, but even then, he felt the searing heat above him, blistering the air. He fell into the mud, his feet gone from under him, and rolled ten feet down the bank. Desperately he dragged himself back up to his feet, coughing and spitting out clumps. His leg was in searing pain, but then a hand caught him under the arm, and hauled him up. Garlan grabbed him by the shoulders. “Get to the horses! Get to Arianne, and go!”

“I’m coming with you!”

Garlan did not respond, just shoved him away, back into the throng. Willas caught a glimpse of him drawing his sword before the tide caught up with him and buffeted him along, back down the road, and Garlan vanished into the crowd. He had no choice but to go along with the rest of them, fleeing back towards the tents from whence he had come.

Faces hurried past him: was that Bronn of the Blackwater there, and Horas Redwyne there? All streaked with soot and sweat, like him as he pushed against the crowd, knowing it could only be so long before—

“DOWN!” someone shouted, and Willas, instinctively, threw himself flat, with no regard for his poorly leg. He did so just in time, for then the dragon hurtled out of the darkness, and once more fire consumed the night. He heard men screaming all round him, not far away, and the smell – dear gods, the smell.

“The river!” came a yell, and then the crowd was retreating the other way, and pushing back against them, and the great mass – dismounting, screaming in pain or fire – swarmed for the river, and Willas felt himself being pushed with them, and he was powerless. And where was Arianne? He had left her near the back of the column, only an hour, but now that hour was unthinkable.
The crowd pushed him along, back towards the river and the bridge. The men knew off the current, of course, but in their folly they thought they could swim it. Perhaps that was not folly for some, but it was for Willas Tyrell in his bits and pieces of steel armour and with his broken leg. They pushed through the narrow gaps between the carts, towards the broken bridge, and he knew what was about to happen a moment before it did.

The dragon came down from the clouds again, facing the approaching swarm now. Its lips peeled back, and Daenerys Targaryen, on its back, whispered a word, and then – fire and blood, and not a drop of mercy in it at all. Just the single, endless, purifying torment of hellfire, tearing straight through them like a scythe.

That scythe tore mercilessly through the Reachmen: the Reachmen in their clothes sewn with golden roses and wine-grapes and sheaves of corn and wheat, and it reaped and reaped. Oakheart’s leaves, Rowan’s golden tree, Merryweather’s cornucopia of fruit, all consumed by fire, turned to black ashes. Then the dragon flapped its wings, and the ash flew into their faces and stung their cheeks and blinded their eyes, and when they looked up again, the dragon was gone.

The screaming fell quiet, and the shouting rose over it, as men squabbled over which way to run, over which way to go next. And those at the very centre were pressed together, boys and women were knocked underfoot and trampled, and Willas was pushed back against a cart, squeezed by the tide of his own men. He tried to shout for order but someone hit him in the belly and his shout meant nothing but pain.

The dragon screamed above them. Willas threw himself to the ground again.

There was a gap of maybe a few inches beneath the cart. Urgently, and not alone, he crawled underneath, oblivious to the pain in his leg. And behind him, he heard the screaming start up as the mortal purge began, and he could do nothing but keep crawling, even as the tide of ash rose and crept up his legs and blew into his face from all around, and he was a man trapped in a storm of dust and fire, and he could not breathe and then all at once he was out in the air, coughing, staggering, stumbling through bits of burning wood and metal. Behind him, the cart under which he had been crawling collapsed under the weight of red-hot fire; screams emanated from underneath for a few seconds, and then were snuffed out.

Above the carts, Drogon turned a wide circle, his wings once more gathering up the storm of ash. The ash flew through the fires and ignited, and the very air was alive with stuff that burned like a cloud of dusty fireflies.

And the fireflies ate the grass, wet and oily as it was, and they tore at wood with their blazing jaws. They melted metal, split leather, and then they met flesh and they consumed that too, they boiled blood in its vessels and imploded greasy eyes and charred bones and offal alike, and then they turned it all to ash, and the foul ash blew up into their eyes. And then that caught fire too, consumed like niter, and the whole thing was a cloud, a maelstrom of dark hellish fire.

The ash and the darkness turned men to beasts. Then the fire came and turned men to roast meat.

Willas watched it all with a look of undeniable horror. Drogon’s fire went on and on, and the tempest rose up over the carts and filled the air, and he stepped back, tripping over himself in his haste to get away, and all around him, men – some of them already burning – threw themselves into the wet grass, even as it began to burn.

Then there came a great screeching noise, and Drogon suddenly spun sideways, wailing. Willas squinted, and just barely made out something planted in his side – a spear, a ballistic spear, maybe six feet long. Then another, thudding hard into the dragon’s side.
Garlan, he thought. Garlan has gotten to the scorpions. Willas did not know what scorpion bolts would do to dragons, but plainly they did something, for Drogon suddenly rose higher. Then a bolt caught his wing joint, and he fell back to earth, landing in the smoke somewhere beyond the burning carts, between them and the bridge. Willas only barely glimpsed the dragon, but he heard its roaring.

And through it he heard the screaming of the Reachman. Of his people.

Sense – though it was not good sense – returned to him.

There is a point where a man sees such horror that he can no longer stand by and watch, and stay true to any morals he might have. Some choose to flee those morals altogether, and run for the hills. And some – the heroes and the fools, though truly the two are synonymous – take up a stand.

Willas was not entirely sure how he found himself mounting the horse, or taking up the lance. But there he was, and more than that, the lance felt sure and steady in his grip. He had not ridden at the tilt since Prince Oberyn knocked him from his horse, all those years ago, but some instincts never left you, and as he levelled the lance – it was really just a great splinter of wood, that was all – towards the smoke, he felt a great surging beneath him, and all at once his lessons came flooding back. He and the horse were one creature, hurtling towards the fire, and the lance was a part of his arm, sure and straight. Their course was true; he had his instinctual mark, and nothing, nothing would distract him from that.

“Fly,” he said, very softly, leaning close to his horse’s ear. And Willas Tyrell, cripple, lord of Highgarden, flew. They thundered past the others, up the column of wagons and carts, weaving round burning carriages and loose oxen, leaping over wreckage, down towards the dragon. There was a great blast of flame from somewhere close by, and he ducked down low and felt it pass red-hot above his head, and he was pretty sure the plume of his helmet caught fire as they rode. But still he hurtled past them. He was quite alone, too – any that tried to follow were felled by fire left and right, but he continued, as though the gods had granted him this in return for the years as a cripple, this one moment that would confirm his name in the annals of history.

Suddenly the red-hot cloud of fire broke, and he was alone, out in front of the rest, and the dragon was before him, and on its back among the horns he saw a figure who could only be Daenerys Targaryen. His breath scorched in his throat. The sound of the battle and the screaming men behind him disappeared into dust. All flesh went dumb, save for his pointing, unstoppable arm. Time ate itself, and its passage became unnoticeable, like something out of fairytales.

The dragon raised its proud head, its jaws peeled back. But Willas kept going; his arm was there, a hundred feet, fifty feet, twenty—

There was a crack like thunder, and the sky above his head exploded. He was thrown from his horse, faster than he could comprehend. Or rather, as he saw in slowed-down-time, the horse kept at its course, now burning, a lance clean through its ribcage – or so he saw for half an instant, before it entered Drogon’s maw and was consumed by the fire – while Willas Tyrell himself flew violently above the beast’s dark wing, somersaulting like a dunce, crashing down on the hot baked black mud.

He became faintly aware that the plume of his helmet was burning, and his mouth filled with mud. Everything hurt. It would be easier to just die. But somehow he got the helm off and tossed it away into the dirt; it rolled, and extinguished. The feathered plume collapsed into ash, and Willas’s conscious mind joined it.

When he came to, it was morning again. Yet all his illusions of the past night being a dream vanished at once as soon as he looked around from where he lay. The ground was a charred black desolation, the grass burned into dust. The sky was black, the snow-ridden ground a dirty white. Everything
between those two planes was a band of strange grey fog and smoke: ethereal, almost.

He was lying on his back, on a slab of wood, and someone was dragging him along. He blinked thick dark soot from his eyes, saw a leather brigandine with a meaningless badge, then blinked again and saw a reassuringly familiar face.

Funny how fate always brought you back to the same people. “Ser Bronn,” he tried to say, but his mouth was full of mud and ashes.

Ser Bronn heard his moaning, nonetheless, and offered a half-pitying, half-disgusted look in reply. “Shut the fuck up and lie down,” he said roughly. “You’re broken.”

“My leg?” It certainly felt broken. Again.

“All of you,” said Ser Bronn. “Your head most of all, unless suicide was your intent.”

Ah. That explained it. “You pulled me out, then,” Willas said, though to Ser Bronn his words were doubtless incomprehensible. Then, deliriously: “You killed my horse.”

Ser Bronn did not reply, just kept dragging him across the battlefield. As they went on, and as Willas grew increasingly sensible to the world around him, the smell of ashes grew. And… something else. Not just ashes, he decided. Meat. Did someone—?

Then he realised what the smell was, and he vomited, all over himself. Ser Bronn’s disgusted look grew. “Make sure he doesn’t choke,” he said. A hand grabbed Willas under the shoulders, and dragged him towards a more upright position. Some boy. Bronn’s son, mayhaps?

“He’s not my fucking son, before you ask,” said Ser Bronn harshly. “He’s nobody. Nobody you need to worry about, unless you’re planning on making him a knight for spotting you out in all this shit.”

Willas was about to reply but suddenly a cough overcame him. After he’d finished he decided it would be best if he stayed silent. After all, the others might not know that he was alive. Ser Bronn could slit his throat here, and no one would ever know.

Fragments of grey ash floated through the air. They fell like petals of some great golden rose. And then, panic overtook him. “Where did she go? Daenerys?”

“South, they said. South by southwest.”

“Highgarden…”

“That would be my guess,” said Ser Bronn.

Mother is in Highgarden. He did not dare say it aloud, because that would make it true. “You’re sure she was going to Highgarden?”

“Where else would she go?”

“We have to go back there, then. We have to take back the castle.”

Ser Bronn spat. “I’d sooner burn in hell.”

They were approaching the tent when the full force of those words hit Willas. Sooner burn in hell… and you should have. “Ser Bronn,” he croaked. “You knocked me off my horse. But you were coming in from my left. And that was where the dragon… breathed fire. So how did you survive it?”
“I didn’t,” said Ser Bronn.

The reality dawned upon him. “You’re dead,” Willas breathed. “And I’m dead too.” He looked around him at the desolate, ashy field. Where else could this be?

“Seven hells, boy,” said Bronn’s rough voice. “Did you lose all your wits in that charge? You’re not dead. This is hell, aye, but not that kind.”

“You said you didn’t survive.”

“I said I didn’t survive knocking you off your horse, because I didn’t. No.” And Willas knew, a moment before he said it. “That was your brother.”

He made a noise, a weak, thin sound, like a man trying to swallow air that was not there, a word that might have been “No,” but never fully formed itself. And Ser Bronn went on speaking, but what was there to say?

Garlan. Gone.

Inside the tent, they stripped him from his broken armour. They fed him dry bread and hot wine. They dressed him again, as befit the lord of Highgarden, only the clothes were dark in mourning. They were Arianne and her cousin Tyene, but it was a long time before he realised it.

Then she was kneeling before him, and her eyes were curiously without mercy. “He’s gone, Willas,” she said sharply, and he fell out of his reverie. “I’m sorry, but he’s gone.”

“I want to see him.”

“No, you don’t.”

He had children. Osmund and Alysanne. Now without a father. And a wife. Leonette. “He saved me.”

“Yes, he almost certainly did.”

“Why?”

Arianne: “Why?”

Him: “Yes… why…” But it didn’t matter. Did it? He didn’t know. He never would. All he knew was that his brother was gone, like that.

He stared at her. “We’ve had this conversation already, haven’t we?”

“We have,” she said, “three times since they brought you back.”

“And you’ve told me the same thing every time.”

“You’re in shock, Willas.”

“And nothing’s changed.” Except Garlan is dead.

“Nothing except the urgency of our situation.” Arianne helped lace his boots. “She will be back, you know that. Daenerys. And when she is, we must be gone.”

“We?”
“You and I, and what remains of the army.”

“Garlan’s army.”

“Your army, now.”

“Where will we go? There is nowhere to go.”

“There is always somewhere to go. Not Highgarden… not Dorne, either, but we will think of somewhere.”

“You should leave me here. Let me…”

Suddenly Arianne stood up and grabbed his arm. “He’s dead, Willas. I’m sorry, but that’s that. Garlan is dead. And you are all we have left. Now, you can stay here if you like. I won’t stop you, and I can’t stop you, either. But I want you to remember that Garlan saved you for a reason.”

He didn’t know what it was. *He would have made a better lord than me. He was a better man, a better brother, a better… everything.*

“Garlan saved you for a reason,” Arianne went on. “And if you give up here, then you are betraying him in that.” Her voice was entirely ruthless. But, Willas realised, she had to be. Because she was right. And because her ruthlessness hid her fear.

From his right came a light coughing noise. When he turned, Varys was in the entrance of the tent. “My lady,” said the eunuch, bowing. “My lord. We are ready to leave at your pleasure. I… I could not help overhearing your uncertainty with regard to a destination. Now, if you do not mind my intrusion, I have an idea.”

A few minutes later, they were on the road again. Or rather, off the road, cutting north to where the black burned plains turned verdant again – or so they hoped. Behind them, they left the ashes of the Mander battle. Somewhere among those ashes they left Garlan the Gallant, and for him, Willas Tyrell left behind the last few hot tears that remained to him. It still did not seem real, and yet the sky burned so hot and bright and cloudless that it must be. It *must* be.

Chapter End Notes

**Thank you all so very much for reading and reviewing. This is going to be another one of those chapters where I put out a big appeal and say “PLEASE COMMENT” because this was the culmination of a very long story for me.**

First things first:

Dear Tommyginger,

I dealt with your lingering trash problem.

Sincerely, SGH.
It occurs to me, bleakly, that I have depicted loss so many ways in this series that I seem to be going through a sort of catalogue. This, really, is the first attempt I've done with catatonia. The ending of this chapter doesn't make sense in my eyes, but I don't think it should, because what happens to Ser Garlan the Gallant doesn't make sense either. "He's only in one chapter," you say, "surely he can't be dead. We never got to 'meet' him again." But I say, "did you really need to?"

Garlan is a secondary character, true, but he's one I've come to love, in a strange, perverse way, as he represents a certain type of heroic knight who shouldn't exist in Westeros, and yet, he does. He's hardly without faults - but I never got the sense that he was happy with the more devious aspects of the Tyrell plan. And I think the one thing that is truly undeniable is that he was a better brother than Willas ever was. He and Loras are probably the best brothers in the whole series, if you ask me.

I always knew Willas or Garlan had to go out here. At first I was hesitant to get rid of Ser Garlan - one of Westeros's few truly good, truly gallant men. Along with Tommen, this is one of the few times I've felt truly cruel writing this story. Getting rid of Garlan the Gallant is merciless, yes. But more than that, it's the fact he's not only killed, but reduced to ash. There is no grave for this man who truly deserved some sort of monument.

But this is where his story ends. And now his watch is ended.

I do think Daenerys's attack is, weirdly, secondary to this chapter. It was the last bit of it I wrote, possibly because no matter what I wrote, I don't think it's possible to capture the sense of utter destruction we witness 'firsthand' in "The Spoils of War" (7.04). It's weird that I can say "I really liked the roast meat" bit, which I think is the part of the chapter that, for me at least, was the most horrific. What I was trying to capture here was the sheer confusion of it all.

***

What's next?

We have one chapter left in what I consider Part One of KNIGHTS. In the words of a certain bow-tied individual, "I think it's gonna be a whopper." But after that, we've got lots of exciting stuff, which I will be teasing in the next set of Author's Notes.
The Shock of the Fall

Chapter Summary

It must be so.

Chapter Notes

Despite the position of this chapter, you should be aware that it takes place earlier in the narrative than some of the more recent events, about a week after Chapter 2 (Theon).

When reading this chapter, you may want to zoom in your browser window a bit. It will probably make it easier to keep track of where you are. Also - at the risk of sounding patronising - you may want to read it aloud.

Everything is meant to be read exactly as it appears on the page.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

THE DEAD BOY

The sky was golden, blazing in the light of the newborn sun that shone loud and angry from the east. The spindly, needled branches of the trees turned the same colour, and the pools of melting snow on the ground turned to liquid gold. Leaves lay on the snow, corpse-red turning corpse-grey and bleeding sap through the layers of hard-set frost.

He could hear the wind howling, too, through the grove of pale-limbed trees at the crest of the hill. Only there was no wind. It was screaming he heard. Some were the screams of the living, some of the dead; it was impossible to tell, when you weren’t quite sure what you were yourself.

He ought to be dead. The lacerations and wounds on his body, bleeding sap and blood into the cold winter night beneath Winterfell’s heart tree, proved that. And yet… if he was dead, then what was this?

There was only one explanation for things and he knew it to be completely true. It had to be. He was the three-eyed crow now, and, like Lord Bloodraven beneath the hill, he had never really died on that night in Winterfell. His physical form, his earth-body, his lungs and heart, had died, to be sure, but he was much more than that.

The more he thought about it, the clearer it became to him. He’d never felt the knives, because they’d
never stabbed him. They’d only stabbed the boy he had been, the vessel that had held his essence for the first sixteen years of his life, and they had left it a husk, drained of blood and life. But even as the boy’s eyes closed to the world, the crow’s eyes had opened, and the stabbing had been nothing more than a formality to ensure his escape.

He wasn’t sure where he was now. Theon Greyjoy had brought his body out from the crypts in a covered cart, weeping all the way, and Summer had taken it from there, dragging the cart through miles of snow into the deepest depths of the wolfswood. But he was not there either, not really. The three-eyed crow was not constrained by mere mortal things of flesh and blood. No longer was he the Prince of Winterfell, the Warden of the North. His kingdom was not the kingdom of gods and men. His was the kingdom of earth and open sky.

Sometimes, on rare occasions, he still remembered that his name was Brandon Stark. Or had been. His mother had called him Bran. He would say it to himself, over and over, “Bran, Bran, Bran.” And in the forests and the mountains and the hills, the earth would hear him, and it would echo; it would say Bran, Bran, Bran.

Once upon a time there was Brandon Stark and Brandon Stark and Brandon Stark. And why not? It seemed as good a name as any, as Brandon Stark’s mothers and wives and daughters told themselves. After all their brothers and husbands and fathers had all been called Brandon, so what better name was there to remember them? And the cycle accommodated for greatness too: in Winterfell’s crypts – or, now, out of them – were Brandon the Builder and Brandon the Shipwright and Brandon the Burner and Brandon the Breaker and Brandon the Daughterless and a dozen other Brandons who had all been sons of Winterfell. He was just one of them, and yet, at the same time, he was all of them. There had been bad Brandon Starks, too. The Night’s King, who had been Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch had been he, Brandon Stark. And after his would-be-wife allured him he became less of a man and more of something else. When he gave her his seed he gave her his soul too and we called them the Others, for what do Men fear more than that which they do not know? Or so the story went he wondered if his love for Meera had made him a crannogman much as his earlier love for Her had made him into an Other. Probably not his love for Meera was bounded by the things he had seen in his visions his love for his Other bride had been all encompassing a love song not of man and woman but of more. Woman known under many names. Avarice gluttony love is the bane of honour the death of duty. And he should know that because she’d nearly ensnared him too. But down he called them from the Mountains, giants and clansmen of all kinds, and Starks from Winterfell, the greatest army the North had ever seen. And there from sea to shining sea, they built the barrier that would keep her folk out.

The Wall.

At first he’d prisoned her in Winterfell, he Brandon the Builder, she ringed by stone Starks on stone thrones trapped in a prison of hot-blooded walls with swords of hated steel which threatened to melt her flesh. He still wasn’t sure how she’d escaped and managed to seduce him at the Wall but eventually they’d bound her again and drag her back to the Winterfell crypts. He still remembered the last he’d seen of her smirking, knowing face twisted into the visage of his much-loved late wife as he bound her down there where she’d stayed silent for another few thousand years till the time when the wolf maid and the dragon sung their song till the Tower of Joy was pulled down by his brother and made into cairns by his father till the bones of the dead Lyanna had been carried north and entombed where they never should have been entombed. And there were other stories too. One day he went down into the crypts and she was there looking at him through her blue eyes through the door through his soul through the weirwood tree and he looked back at her and said Other under his breath all the while remembering the stories his great-grandmother had told him but that he’d never believed. Click, went her knitting needles, click, click, click and she said Oh, my sweet summer child, click, click, click, what do you know of fear? and he said his name because it would all be all right if
you remembered his name his name was Walder. But now all he saw was the Other, Other, Other, Other, Other, Other, Other, Hothor, Hothor, Hothor, Hothor, Hodor, Hodor, Hodor only now Hodor was dead, he remembered that yes Hodor had died holding the door in the entrance to the godswood, as he bled out on the ground and so the gentle giant’s sacrifice had been worth nothing he had made it so yes he was dying right now.

And as he died he remembered his father standing in the godsdow, cleaning Ice with an oily rag that dripped pearls of weirwood into the roots and he was in the roots he was the roots and he pictured his father saying you will be going to the Eyrie but next he was on his knees in the throne room and the Mad King whispered burn them all because one day just after Summerhall he’d heard it whispered to him in his sleep and the madman sees what he sees. But Father said the man who passes the sentence must swing the sword and he swung the sword and Father’s lips moved speaking to the man in black, to the man in black he said Baelor and he nodded to the statue and the man in black said don’t look and then he said who are you and the sword came down and crows and— She the girl said no one because she was, but that wasn’t the truth she was his big sister or his little sister then as he mussed up her hair and he said stick em with the pointy end and there he was bleeding out in the snow. His blood the same colour as his mother’s hair or maybe it was his cloak that was her hair hers black like his maybe or maybe it was Ghosts fur or maybe not he didn’t know he had never known his mother he was a bastard and could: Never forget what you are, bastard, the rest of the world will not. Bastard boy bastard sword. He stabbed with the sword and then the world was on fire, the island burning, stone dragons rising from the depths and they were descending on the forces of Night, that was what he had to do – and then the vision was gone again. Or was it a vision at all? He didn’t know didn’t really remember much but a king must be brave he had said so a king must be brave, yes, my father was weak and now the rains weep o’er his halls with not a soul to hear.

The man who passes the sentence must swing the sword.

He had been born in the snow. She had been born in a storm. She said, I promise you, those who hurt you will die screaming, and they screamed back, they screamed Mhysa, Mhysa, Mhysa. Fire and blood: vengeance, justice, fire and blood, and now he is weeping over his son’s corpse, and he knows that wisdom makes a good king. But there are things more important than that, he is closed away in his chambers in the dark and the boy climbs up outside his window and looks in and sees him and that can’t be so he takes the boy by the neck and says How old are you boy? Ten? Ten. Well. The things I do for love. He gives him a short sharp shove. The boy, and the brother, and his wife stumble backwards, his her their feet slipping on the wet marble. For the longest time, there is no sound but the wind as they go down and down and down summer wind howling round them. Make the little man fly, the boy said. But not this little man. This little man is going home, and now he’s flying on a dragon, he’s flying over the island, the island is Dragonstone, and he’s going to save them all he is. It must be. Someone wrote it in fire and blood so very long ago and a Lannister always pays his debts and the things we do for our loves like her. Like Cersei Lannister; she was a sweet girl – and so was his Dornish bride – but the voices told him he must do elsewise – the dragon has three heads, three heads, three heads has the dragon – and there had been three in the old days – in the beginning when the stones were still shifting – named Aegon and Rhaenys and Visenya. Only that was beginning, and this is ending cause the Stormlord’s hammer never smashed Aegon Targaryen in his chest as it smashes him now, never knocks him from the seat of his horse, and the rubies go flying, red rippling pearls of fire and blood – BURN THEM ALL! the Mad King screams, and now his nails are as long and sharp and black as the Iron Throne, his smile as wicked. He slits his wrists on the Iron Throne and bleeds fire to BURN THEM ALL! he screams as the Kingslayer puts a sword in his back. BURN THEM ALL! and they never listen because they think he’s mad, but he’s right, but that’s what they have to do because he was told it must be so. All the prophecies agree. Azor Ahai draws a burning sword from his wife’s heart, and flames consume the blade. Lightbringer. Who will be his Nissa Nissa? And what will be his Lightbringer? He didn’t really think
about this, but he has infinity to think now, in the instant between the hammer hitting his body and
him falling back into the river; the rubies are no longer bright blood-spots, they are weirwood sap,
and he whispers a woman’s name Lyanna and she lies in the tower under the dusty Dornish sun.
They say and now it begins and he says no now it ends. They fight. They die. Lives. All so mortal
they are. All things of dust and so easily burned. He sees Mother screaming and she says Daenerys
Tyrion Jon oh Ned he mustnt know oh Tywin he is my son and yours oh Darry keep them safe they
are the last of their house. She is giving birth to him weeping on her knees the tears running down
her bloody haunted cheeks and her last words are no or so she thinks don’t cut my hair. Ned loves
my hair. She has no lips now she has no voice now she has nothing but her heart and it is stone and
it is a blazing hot coal burning her up. He blinks and there is wildfire, rising above the castle towers
and she says I choose violence and he screams BURN THEM ALL! And a million miles away as he
falls into that ruby-strewn river an eternity of time across the world whispering Lyannas name and
wondering if it means anything at all but knowing it must knowing they are coming that ice and fire
together is needed to stop her Nights bride. She at his side as the Northern cavalry, accompanied by
Joramun’s howlers, descends upon Long Lake, cutting through his lines of men, enslaved men, it is
no fault of their own, but the Night’s King must be defeated: he has put all of House Stark at risk. In
fact, he thinks, it would help if the Starks had more power in the land. I will build a great fleet. So he
does. But now his father is dead, so he will burn the fleet which wasted all of his life and years. King
Aegon has asked him to King’s Landing. Aegon the Third, that is, the boy-king. For some strange
reason, he has been made Hand of the King. He is the second to hold that position, after his ancestor
Cregan Stark. Can you blame Robert, really? He needs a Hand, and I am the only friend he has. And
Catelyn has told him that he must. But the truth is that he doesn’t really know. Father had died, in
Aerys’s throne room, before he could teach him everything. He had forgotten to tell Ned, because
Brandon is a fool, and bound to die: Ned is quite, meanwhile, and conscientious, but that isn’t really
what he thought, because he spent the whole time screaming as he was cooked alive in his armour. It
was a good thing he knelt to Aegon before he burned them all; as he did for the Tyrells and the
Lannisters on the Field of Fire. And now he is back to the battlefield. The men of the Night’s Watch,
ensnared by their Lord Commander, are dying. Part of him wants to cry. It isn’t their fault. It isn’t
their fault. He was only ten. They should never have made him Lord Commander. Only a boy as
scared as falling from a high tower. Only a boy falling falling falling but you must kill the boy kill the
boy kill the boy kill

The sky was golden, blazing in the light of the newborn sun that shone loud and bright from the east.
Summer had brought his body out here to the grove for reasons he could not really understand. He
was weak, but with every mealtime, he grew a little stronger. There was nothing the taste of blood in
his mouth could not cure.

Days passed. He thought about Meera, and about Hodor, and about Jon, and more: in short, about
everyone he had ever known. He knew, for example, that Jon was dead. Samwell Tarly was now the
Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch – Fat Sam, who he’d met at the Nightfort. Gods help him. It
didn’t make sense – Jon, the son of ice and fire, was supposed to save them – and yet, it did.

Bran sat up, sweating profusely, and leaned back against the trunk. His already pale skin had turned
somewhat translucent now, giving off a slight ethereal hue. Under his heavy garments of furs and
leaves his chest was a map of scars where the knives had gone in. There were places where the
gouges were so deep, it made him sick to look at them, because he could almost see his own organs
through them. The skin was healing, but very slowly.

“I am Brandon Stark of Winterfell,” he said aloud to the silent night. “Second-born son of Lord
Eddard and Lady Catelyn.” It was rare that he forgot who he was nowadays, but it did not hurt to
remind himself. “I am the Lord of Winterfell, and I am supposed to be dead.”

That still made no sense to him. He looked like a corpse, and his heart scarcely seemed to beat
nowadays, and his veins ran with sap as much as they did with blood, but he was still alive, in a way, and his body, broken and tortured though he might be, still worked. More than that, it seemed to have healed. He recalled that, while he was dead, Euron Greyjoy had gouged out one of his eyes to send it in a box to Jon as proof of his conquering of Winterfell. Yet when he woke up on the hillside he had seen just fine. A new eye had inexplicably appeared in the socket from which the old one had been lost. It was not the same colour – his mother’s Tully blue had been replaced by a frighteningly bright green that glowed even in the deepest darkness – but it worked the same. And there was more than that.

Just then he heard a sound of twigs breaking, about a mile off. Leaves trodden underfoot. The smell of blood. A few minutes passed, and then Summer emerged at the edge of the weirwood grove, dragging a bloody mess behind him. Bran watched him all the way, and reached out with a pale, bloodless hand to pet the wolf’s soft fur. Then he turned to see what Summer had brought him today.

The meals had made him sick at first. But ever since he’d woken up in the grove, he’d found that only one thing would nourish him, and if they were ever to defeat the Others, they had to survive.

The man had been one of Euron’s soldiers, once. He had the look of an Iron Islander. Bran wondered if he had still been enslaved at the point of his death, then decided it did not really matter. Summer tore off an arm, and brought it to him. Half-frozen blood dripped from the limb as Bran brought it close to his face.

After his meal, he leaned back against the tree once more, resting his eyes for a few moments. When he opened them again Summer was inches from his face, panting, almost playful. Bran smoothed down his fur again. “I think you’re right,” he said. “I’m getting nothing more than I was yesterday. Yes. The Great Barrow.” Euron had stopped there on his way from the Iron Islands. If there were any more secrets worth knowing, they would be there.

Briefly he thought about searching out Arya again, or Davos Seaworth, or Princess Myrcella: anyone who might listen. But his efforts were never worth their exertions; every time he attempting to speak to one of them, he spent the better part of a day recovering. No. Tomorrow they would set out for Barrowton. And for that, he needed all his strength.

Summer had by now curled up beside the trunk, an inviting place for Bran to rest his head. But Bran had a more urgent bodily need: heroes do not piss themselves. He got up, walked over to their cesspit at the edge of the grove, unfastened the laces of his trousers, and pissed relaxedly into the pit. Then he walked back to the tree, lay down, and fell asleep almost at once.

Chapter End Notes

Right...

So what do you want first? The linguistic stuff or the plot?

We’ll start with the plot. It should be easier.

As if this whole thing wasn’t confusing enough, the bookends reveal that a) Bran is alive - well, sort of, and b) he can walk.

The extent to which he is "alive" is something I’ll explain later (or in the comments), but it shouldn’t come as too much of a surprise to you, considering that evidence of Bran’s
consciousness - he identifies previous interactions with Arya, Davos and Myrcella towards the end of this chapter.

Now onto the fact that he can walking, which, actually is easier to explain, but comes into the fact that he's not exactly alive. Again, I'll explain later, but you're welcome to make guesses / give your theories.

Also, he survives off an... erm... all-natural diet.

***

Now for my favourite bit. The style of this chapter is inspired by William Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury*, which I found basically incomprehensible the first time I read it. It's stream-of-consciousness-esque, taking a bit more inspiration from James Joyce. Obviously it doesn't aspire to the lofty heights of either of those authors, but I thought those styles would be a good basis upon which to create a narrative that is, in fact, about a thousand different narratives occurring simultaneously. Bran visits the past, the future and alternate universes, all within four paragraphs.

The sentences may be horrible to read, and it's probable that only I'll ever know the meaning (or lack of meaning) of every word here (probably), but I hope you found it somewhat different and/or interesting. And congratulations on persevering through this one. It's a toughie, and probably unique within the story.

***

Once again, as on the last chapter, thank you all so very much for reading and staying with KNIGHTS OF THE NIGHTINGALE as we move into the second part of this story. Which is going to have big explosions and stuff.
Unflinching

Chapter Summary

A Myrcella for a Tommen; a Tommen for a Myrcella.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

MYRCELLA

Peckledon Castle, like so many in the Westerlands, sat atop a high and precipitous fist of jagged greyish stone, its many turrets and towers filed to sharp, individual points. A lone ugly road led up to the gatehouse, wedged between steep cliffs. Watchtowers safeguarded the whole way up, manned by soldiers in the purple-and-yellow livery of House Peckledon.

When Myrcella asked Josmyn Peckledon what the words of his House were, she was surprised by their brevity: Unflinching. Yet now she saw why. They had visited Silverhill and Sarsfield both thus far, and a ranging was headed to Cornfield and Castle Myatt along their southern border, and a second to Paynehall in the east. But all of those castles were places of pleasure, to some degree. Peckledon Castle seemed different: older, grander, and most importantly, stronger.

Lord Martyn Peckledon received them in the castle’s great hall. His father had died at the Tumblestone, and both his younger brothers – Jasper and Josmyn – had fought for King Tommen, so it seemed that his loyalty was bound to her. Lord Peckledon’s fidgety young wife might have felt differently, sneering at Myrcella from under heavily arched eyebrows, but whatever brief authority she might usually have held over her lord husband had vanished.

Bread and salt was passed round. “Be welcome to my hearth and my table,” Lord Peckledon said. “Your Grace, we are, of course, your humble servants.”

“That is good to hear.” Myrcella was still not yet a crowned queen, but she did not object to the address. She would have to get used to it eventually.

After the pleasantries were made she had Lord Peckledon take her up to her chambers, in the keep’s highest square tower. There would be a war council in the castle below, but Myrcella had nothing to offer on the subject of troop movements, and was much too busy to waste hours listening to things she did not really understand. Instead she went to her writing desk over by the window and took out her notary books. Down one side the parchment sheet displayed a list of sigils, shields bolted to a paper wall, with the names written underneath. Beside the sigils she had drawn a grid of filled squares: one hundred men, two hundred men, three hundred men, four hundred men, and so forth; a rudimentary system of counting. The Peckledons, for example, filled six squares. But then a further five squares were present, but empty: the Peckledons had eleven hundred men for her cause, but had
only given six hundred of that. Which meant there were still five hundred men somewhere, loyal to her mother or otherwise. Harys Swyft, that chinless craven, had squirreled away nearly a thousand men she did not know about, and—

“Your Grace?” Tybolt Serrett, the young heir to Silverhill, stood in the doorway, looking small and nervous. “I… I was wondering if you had the ledgers. The notary books, I mean. I was going to work on them.”

“I thought you were at the council.”

“Wars are not my strength, Your Grace.”

“Hmm. Nor mine, Master Serrett. But you are good with numbers, they say.”

“Better than I am with a sword, Your Grace.”

Myrcella nodded to the chair opposite her desk. “Then come in, by all means. I’m trying to make sense of them myself.” It was only then, glancing through the shutters, that she realised it was raining. How long have I been here? And doing what?

“I don’t find those very useful, Your Grace,” said Tybolt. “If you don’t mind me saying so.”

“Why should I mind that?”

“Well…” He chewed his lip. “They were your idea, weren’t they, Your Grace?”

“They were. Though I doubt I’m the first to come up with this revolutionary new system.” She stared at him, then realised something strange. He will not meet my eyes. Or cannot.

“Are you afraid of me, Master Serrett?” she said sharply.

She didn’t need him to speak to know his answer, only the pause before he spoke. “That was never my intention,” she said. “Why are you afraid?”

“I don’t know, Your Grace.”

“Maybe that’s why you’re afraid. Fear of the unknown.” She paused. “I get that sometimes. With these ledgers. Not knowing whether any of this shading is true or false. You may be right, Tyg.”

“Tybolt, Your Grace.”

“What?”

“I’m Tybolt. You called me Tyg.”

“Oh. Sorry. I meant….” Her words died off. Had she meant Tybolt at all? Or had she forgotten? Tywin, Tybold, Tygett, they had all become one and the same in her head. Tytos, Tybolt, Tyrion, Trystane, Tommen.

“I was sorry to hear about him too, my lady,” said Serrett. “Tyg was… a good friend. And a good archer.”

“Yes,” said Myrcella. “He was both of those things.” Suddenly the air felt tight, and she had to walk to the window and take a few good deep breaths before she felt like speaking again. The sudden dizziness had not come about because she felt guilty about what had happened to Tyg, she knew. It was because of how easily she had forgotten him. In the end she had meant everything to him – a cause to live and die for – but to her he had been little more than her instrument.
There was something else, too. She had never asked him why. Why in seven Hells, knowing all her changeable moods and all the poison in her heart, would he ever choose to love her?

“Tybolt,” she heard herself say. “I have a question for you.”

“Your Grace?”

It just spilled out. “About my brother.”

Serrett drew a breath. “What about him, Your Grace?”

“It is…” Why am I confiding this here, to Tybolt Serrett of all people? “…he was able to win your support in the war. All of the Companions, and many of his lords too. He was very good at that. I just… I was just wondering how I could be more like that. More like him. Now… I am of a feeble sex, I cannot fight beside you as he did, but… is there anything you think I can do?”

Serrett considered a moment. “Are you asking my honest opinion, Your Grace?”

“I am.”

“Then you should consider this first and foremost: you are not your brother, you are not like him, and you never will be. In age, sex, disposition, you are different. But we would not expect you to be him, either. The king… King Tommen was… he never wanted wars, Your Grace. But they were delivered to him by Lord Stannis and later by your lady mother. Every time he waited till the last opportunity before he chose to fight, and even then, he was concerned more with defending his people than he was with killing the enemy. At Sarsfield, he chose the course by which we would lose least men – tried to, at least – even if it meant we were less likely to win. Now… that might have been unwise, in the grand scheme of things. But it was the fact that he cared that set him apart. We never saw Lord Tywin, nor Ser Kevan, nor any of the others, true. But they never saw us either. Or they did, and did not care. With the king, though… I remember, on the road back to Lannisport, we lost our first man. He was a kitchen boy, that was all. Ordinarily he would have been burned in a field somewhere. But the king had us wrap his body up and treat it properly, and then he had it escorted back to Lannisport, and his mother, who wept on seeing it, I heard. He wrote her a letter too. He didn’t have to do it, but he was good in that way.” Serrett shrugged. “I am not too eloquent. But I think that is what King Tommen meant to us.”

Myrcella looked down at her hands. “While he was here being… good, I was in Harrenhal, in the viper’s nest. I plotted, and I planned. The things I planned were evil things, I know that now. I would have killed a boy: one as small and afraid as my brother. And after that, no doubt I would have done worse things.”

“They say the best men are moulded out of faults,” said Serrett.

“They say the Father is unfaltering in his judgement,” replied Myrcella. “Well. Maybe he is. Maybe he just got confused somewhere. Maybe I was saved by my brother’s virtue, and him struck down by my wrongdoing. A Myrcella for a Tommen and a Tommen for a Myrcella.”

“I do not know, Your Grace.”

Of course not. Servants never did.

Just then there was a knock on the door. And then Rollam Westerling came in. “My lady,” he said. “We have a visitor. She says she wishes to see you, and only you.”

“A visitor?” Myrcella asked. “What – from the other rangings?” Has something happened to them?
“No, my lady. She came from the east.”

“She?”

Rollam nodded. “Yes, my lady. A woman. Alone. In armour, though, and carrying a knight’s sword. Valyrian steel, she claimed. Her arms were—”

“No need to tell me. I know what her arms were. I know who she is.” But what in seven Hells is Brienne of Tarth doing all the way out here? Only one way to find out. “Send her up,” Myrcella said. “And then you may go, Rollam. And you too, Tybolt.”

“I’ll take the ledgers with me,” Serrett said. “If it please Your Grace.”

“If it… yes.” Myrcella saw them out. Then she waited inside the doorway for a long minute, listening to the steady rain, until that sound fell away beneath footsteps ascending the stairs. Then Lady Brienne emerged, wearing the same blue steel armour Myrcella had last seen her in on the day of her trial, wearing her sword with its lion’s-head pommel in her scabbard.

“My lady,” said the lady knight, inclining her head a little.


Brienne paused a moment, then nodded. “If you say so, Your Grace. I have come with a message from Lady Sansa—”

“I find it strange that she sent you. Then again, I find it strange that you would come here to me at all.”

“Truth be told, my lady, it is your uncle I seek. Ser Jaime. But from what I have heard, he is not at Casterly Rock—”

“But my mother is.”

“Lady Sansa’s message is one she could not entrust to your lady mother—”

“Oh, so she trusts me now, then.”

The Tarth woman persisted. “If I may be frank, my lady—”

“—Oh, please do.”

“—some might say that you owe Lady Sansa a debt. She spared you from the justice of the Vale, after all.”

“Only because it was in her own interests,” Myrcella scowled. “I am no fool. If it had not gone according to her plan, she would have let me die without batting an eyelid. And if she even suspected me in the slightest of poisoning Robert, she would not have helped me, either. And unless you are a fool, Lady Brienne, you will have worked out what that means.”

Maybe the Tarth woman had. But she gave no sign of knowing, and if she did, she chose to ignore it.

Myrcella sighed. “On to important matters, then. This message of yours.”

“Yes.” Brienne of Tarth took a breath. “This may sound outlandish, my lady. Or even impossible. You may wish—”
“All I wish is for you to get to the bloody point—”

“The dead are marching on the south.”

Not in a thousand years did she expect that outburst. Yes, she had heard the rumours, but... *The dead are marching?* It was too much to believe. *Is she lying, or just mad?* The simple way the world worked dictated it must be one or the other, but Brienne of Tarth had said it entirely sincerely, and besides, she was too dim to have any tact. And if she was lying... well, what would be the bloody point of it? “…I see,” Myrcella said.

“With respect, my lady, I don’t think you do,” said Brienne.

_Hmm._ “You are right. I don’t. To be forthright with you, it does sound mad.”

“My lady.” Brienne touched two fingers to the hilt of her sword. “Your uncle gave me this sword in good faith, to honour a vow he had made to Lady Catelyn Stark, and in turn I made a vow to him. Oathkeeper, it is called. I mean to honour that name. And so I swear to you, on the Seven, on this blade, on the grave of Lord Renly, whom I first served, and on my name and my house, that what I say to you is true. The dead are coming. Lady Sansa received letters from her brother, Lord Brandon, and her bastard half-brother Jon Snow, the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch—”

“I know.”

“You do?”

“Eleyna Westerling told me. She said that he was sent letters, too. Tommen was going to send Bran help, but he never did. Now, maybe he believed the letters, and maybe he didn’t; but either way, it doesn’t matter to me. My war is with my mother—”

“With respect, my lady, any feud you have with your mother pales in the face of this.”

Myrcella flared with anger. “And who are you to tell me that? She killed my brother. Doubtless she’d kill me too, to get her hands on a crown.”

Lady Brienne nodded. “I did hear this story, on the road. I am sorry for your loss. I know your uncle Jaime loved your br—”

“If he did, he would be here. Or he would have died with him.”

“Do you know where he is now?”

“No,” she said venomously. “And I don’t care either.”

“With all respect, my lady, I think you do.”

Myrcella wanted to hit her – mostly because she was right. “…Well,” she said. “He isn’t here. But in the common interest, humour me. What is this grand quest of yours, Brienne of Tarth? And on that matter, who in seven hells are you? While I was at Harrenhal, I heard the words ‘Kingslayer’s whore’ banded about, but my mother has already taken that title, so they must have been mistaken.”

Brienne paused. “I am no whore. But I am a friend to Ser Jaime, and he is a friend to me.”

“A friend? What sort of friend?”

“Ser Jaime and I share a history. Lady Catelyn commanded me to bring him back to King’s Landing during the War of the Five Kings, in exchange for the freedom of her daughters. I was there when
Ser Jaime lost his hand. He told me why he killed Aerys, and later he rescued me from Vargo Hoat’s bear pit. Then—"

“You call him ‘Ser Jaime’,” Myrcella said curiously.

“He is a knight.”

“Most people would disagree.”

“Most people are too quick to judge.”

Is that a barb aimed at them, or at me? Brienne looked too dumb to be capable of both. But at the same time, she looked too dumb to be lying, too. Myrcella decided to test her. “As Ser Jaime’s… niece, one might argue that if there is any way for you to find him, it is through me.”

“I might agree, my lady.”

“I do not know where Ser Jaime is, that is truth. But what I can do is offer you my hospitality, and what few resources I do have. We share a common goal of finding my uncle, even if it is for different reasons.”

“Thank you, my lady.”

Myrcella glanced out the window at the darkening sky. “It grows late. We’ll speak again tomorrow, unless there is anything else—”

“There was one thing, my lady. I had heard a rumour that Lady Margaery was travelling with your party. I would consider it a great favour if you would allow me to see her. To offer my sympathies at her own losses.”

“Well you might,” said Myrcella, “but Lady Margaery is not here. I have sent her, in the company of Eleya Westerling and twenty knights, back towards the Riverlands. I have, I suppose, commended them to the mercy of your Lady Sansa.”

“That seems… a wise course, my lady.”

“I didn’t ask your opinion.” She was fast growing tired of Brienne of Tarth. More than that, she was growing tired of everyone. “You may go, Lady Brienne.”

“Go where, my lady?”

Myrcella chewed her lip. Then she picked up a loose parchment from the table and wrote on it. “Give this to Lord Peckledon’s steward. He’ll find you a place. On the morrow you may ride with the rest of the baggage train.”

“Ride to where, my lady?”

“Crakehall. That is where we are going next. I am told that Lord Roland is a friend to our cause.”

Brienne thought about that for a moment, then nodded. “I will ride with you, my lady.”

“I wasn’t asking permission. But really you have no other choice. If my mother hears of you and your intentions, she will have you hunted down.” And in that, you may share the same fate as the rest of us, she thought cynically.

Not long after that she went, and Myrcella was left alone in her tower. She was already starting to
wish Tybolt Serrett had not taken the ledgers with him. At least then she would have been left with something to do.

She did not have long to feel pity for herself, though, for then there was a knock at the door. For half a moment she startled, thinking it was Tommen, through some impossibility, but then his eyes looked up and his face was different and it was only Ty Frey. He said, “I thought you might like to know what they were discussing.”

“They?”

“The war council. Your war council.”

“Oh. Them.” It did seem like something a queen should remain knowledgeable about. “How was it?”

“Awful and tedious. I wish I was you. I mean, then I could choose not to bother with them.”

Was that a barbed insult, too? “You wish you were me? If you knew, I think you would have second thoughts, Squire Frey.”

“I think,” he said, “you mean Lord Darry.”

When he smiles, he looks like Tommen too. She bit her lip. “You presume too much sometimes, Ty.”

“Indeed. Are you going to let me in, or not?”

She stepped aside. He walked to her window and peered down. “You have a much better room than the one they gave me. Mine’s barely a turret.” Back to her: “Can’t you do anything like that? You are the queen.”

Myrcella felt something go out of her, then. Hope, maybe. “I barely feel like it. What sort of queen spends her days running from one castle to another, seeing enemies in every corner, fearing for her life?”

There was a long pause. Then Ty said, “I don’t know. But you’re right, I think. When we were on the road... and when I saw you at Harrenhal... well, you seemed like a princess. Definitely a princess. But a queen’s different. I never met a queen, but I know that.”

“And what about my brother?” She could not hold back. “Was he meant to be a king, or only ever a prince?”

Ty shrugged. “I’m not important enough to be able to answer that. But does it really matter?”

“No,” said Myrcella, and it was easier to convince herself of that.

He never left her room that night. Fraught conversation led to nervous cups of wine, and one cup led to another, and then to other things. Come midnight, she found herself lying abed under the crimson curtains of the four-poster, dressed only in her thin nightshift. Ty sprawled beside her, muttering very quietly in his sleep, one bare arm reaching across her waist. The bed smelled faintly of shame and lust. Yet, oddly, sleeping in the darkness, he looked more like her brother than ever. In the light of her candle, his face seemed the same colour as Tommen’s had been, the same hair, the same way of sleeping, entirely lost to the world. Now, said a voice in her ear that sounded suspiciously like her Uncle Jaime, there’s a thought. Did you realise who he looked like before or after you slept with him?
“I am not my mother,” she said.

All of us have a bit of our mothers in us. And our fathers.

“Not me.” She loosened Ty’s arm, walked barefoot to the window, and stared out towards the mountains. The peaks closest her were well-lumined. The snow that crowned them glowed iridescent. But as she looked past them, as her gaze followed those mountains stretching on through the valley towards eternity, their outlines became vague and indistinct. Yellows and whites became purples and blues, and light became obscurity.

You can’t deny it, said the voice, What were you trying to do, I wonder? Hoping it’d bring him back to you somehow?

“No… I… I…” But it was true, in a subconscious, not-waking way. It was hopelessly true. A Myrcella for a Tommen. A Tommen for a Myrcella. She had escaped the justice of the gods, and her brother had not – and maybe that was deliberate. Maybe that was divine prejudice, the result of whatever pact he’d made with the gods. A desperate, unselfish sacrifice that she never could and never would be able to comprehend.

It occurred to her, then, in a moment of epiphany, that the people of the Westerlands did need her after all. They needed a queen who would be merciless, and cruel, and mortal, in every way that their king had not been.

But it still didn’t make sense. It still wasn’t fair. “I did what you told me to,” she said, knowing how absurd it was to talk to the mountains, for they could not talk back. “I sent Eleyna someplace safe. And your squire Willem. And Margaery… I could have killed her, but I sent her back, too. I did everything you would have wanted me to do.” Her hand hardened around the rail of the window. “I tried mercy. But the fact is, I wish I hadn’t. I wish I’d been just and not merciful.” But more than that, I wish… I wish…

“You wish you had been better?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “I wish you had been.”

Chapter End Notes

The chapter title is perhaps a bit ironic (again).

So Myrcella is mentally unstable and pretty deluded. But we knew that already.

There are a few Shakespearean references dotted around. But there's also a bit of ye gode historie in here too. I've been sat here a while trying to think of a corresponding English queen, and the best I've come up with is “a more incompetent version of Margaret of Anjou.”

Other things:

1. Tybolt Serrett is not a character who has occurred before, I've just made him up completely. I was planning to use Tymond Vance to fulfil his role. You may remember Ty from THE SUNSET KINGDOMS, where he was one of the more responsible King's Companions. Unfortunately, he also died in that story (in Tommen IV, during the
Battle of Lannisport), and I sort-of-forgot about it until I was on the verge of uploading. Not the first time I've done it, since I accidentally teleported Justin Massey from the bottom of the Braavosi lagoon to Stannis's camp the first time I uploaded KOTN Davos I, but... well, you know. So Tybolt Serrett isn't that important. Trust me.

2. Ty Frey is probably more important. And... worryingly close to a sort of quasi-incestuous partner for Myrcella. Seeing as he looks basically like her brother.

3. Speaking of which, I don't think it's cheating to include Tommen in the character tags because he does turn up every now and again. Death isn't going to stop him from being all moral and stuff. Though I think it's also important to note that Myrcella whitewashes Tommen very heavily. What I'm really saying is that this isn't the last time she's going to wax eloquent about how great he was, et cetera, et cetera.

4. Anyhow, Brienne is back, and better than ever. Hopefully. I'll admit that she had a fairly lackluster arc in TSK, but she's back with... erm, well, not with a vengeance, really. But she'll be doing cool stuff and exciting things, and Oathkeeper might finally get something more to do.
Crocodile

Chapter Summary

“It is not over and it never will be.”

Chapter Notes

**TRIGGER WARNING: MATURE CONTENT**

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

JAIME

He had been down in the bowels of the castle for so long that the sudden light that flooded his cell now seemed like nothing less than divine providence. But it was only two guardsmen, attired in the Lannister colours – and Qyburn. Jaime fell back from the light, cringing. He would have stood, but his legs had gone numb ages ago, and so they had to support him under his arms, and lift him up, as if it were not just his hand that was crippled, but his legs too. From there, they stumbled down the dark hall, to a flight of stairs, up those, and then along a little ways further, through torchlit darkness, till they reached the winch lift at the far end.

Another pair of guardsmen operated the lift, turning the heavy wooden crank. Jaime watched them disappear below him as they slowly ascended. From across the lift, Qyburn stared at him in a decidedly dissatisfied fashion. Jaime wondered how hard it would be to lunge across the lift and strangle him to death before the guardsmen got the better of him. But he felt barely strong enough to stand on his own legs again, and when he opened his mouth to say something, he found his throat too parched to speak.

Eventually the lift came to a halt, on an unfamiliar level of the Rock. They stepped out, and he found himself in one of a thousand meaningless corridors, all carpeted and tapestried in rich red and gold. And he, in the midst of it, in his filthy ragged shirt, his face and hands with mud ingrained deep in their calluses. When they reached the end of the corridor he fell to his knees and began to retch, but nothing came out. Qyburn’s soft voice came through. “Raise him up,” he said. “Gentle, now.”

They must have done that, for the next he knew he was in a spacious room, sitting on a chair, while maids walked in and out carrying soapy water for his bathtub. He watched them come and go for a while, and then he realised that he knew one of them. “I know you,” he blurted out. The first three tortured syllables he had spoken in earnest for weeks, or months. “I *know* you.”
The girl looked up at him, terrified, as if seeing a ghost. “I…” she began, but her words stuck as well. She had yellow hair, Jaime saw. *No. Not yellow. Gold. Lannister gold.* “You’re my… cousin, aren’t you?”

She looked around furtively, checking nobody else was listening. “I am, ser. I’m—”

“Joy Hill,” said Jaime flatly. “My uncle Gerion’s daughter. Aren’t you?”

“Yes, ser.”

“Joy.” Jaime tasted the name; it seemed ironic given his situation. “And you were… her handmaiden?”

‘Her’ meant Cersei. The girl knew that. “Not anymore, ser. I was… disobedient, she says. That’s why he sent me to you.”

“And how were you disobedient?”

“I didn’t tell her—” At once she stopped herself, and looked as tight-lipped and gaunt as Ilyn Payne. “I shouldn’t say.”

He reckoned she would have told him if he threatened her. But he was too feeble to make threats right now. “Go,” he said to the girl, raspingly. He watched her go out. Faintly he remembered a conversation with Sybell Westerling, a thousand years ago at the siege of Riverrun – if that had been *his* lifetime at all. “Your lord father said that Raynald should have joy of him,” she said, all smarmy and grinning. When Jaime informed her what that meant, she said, “You want a Westerling to wed a bastard?” He wondered if Lady Westerling had reconsidered those words, now. And then he remembered that they no longer mattered.

They had to drag him to the bath, in the end. He did not resist. They scrubbed him with sharp bristled brushes that scraped off more skin than mud, and cut his hair, which had grown matted again in his imprisonment. They would have cut his beard too, and left him clean-shaven, but he still had strength enough to grab the servant’s hand and say, “if you take all of it off, I’ll tear your guts out.” He would not let them tame him so easily. The beard was his price, even if by the time all the necessary tangles had been sawed through it was little more than ugly stubble. But he still recognised himself. In appearance, at least.

They pulled him naked from the bath and led him into an adjoining room to be attired. The clothing was formal: stiff breeches, dark red leather tunic with golden buttons. His hand, of course. What was he if not Goldenhand the Just? And then he was ready. It was not hard to guess where he was headed.

Before, she had taken chambers in the ringfort, where they had first slept as children. But now the ringfort was gone, and instead they descended, deeper, back towards the bowels. When the lift stopped, they were – by his reckoning – one level above Casterly Rock’s throne room and great banqueting hall. Where else to be, if you had delusions of power?

Qyburn was outside the door. “Ser Jaime,” he said with a sly smile. “You are quite recovered?”

Jaime looked at him incredulously, and did not answer.

The door opened and a herald emerged. “My lord,” he said, “and Maester Qyburn. The queen will see you now.”

*Queen,* he said. *Not Queen Regent.* Jaime had no choice but to step over the threshold. The solar
within was ludicrously vast, no doubt formed by knocking several rooms together. The ceilings
loomed fifty feet high, supported by thick stone columns with crimson draperies hanging. The back
wall was all irregular lancet windows, curtained and closed fast against the snow outside. Enormous
sofas and chaises crowded the main floor, beneath swaying golden chandeliers. The walls hung with
tapestries and frescoes of bizarre heroism. And in the middle of it she who would be a hero awaited
him, on the room’s only chair, a great gilded throne raised on a platform. At Cersei’s side stood Ser
Robert Strong, implacable, his armour dented but not to his detriment. That armour was now no
longer the pale enamel of the Kingsguard, but burnished gold.

The herald called, “Your Grace, may I present Ser Jaime Lannister and the maester Qyburn.
Goodmen, you are in the presence of Her Grace Queen Cersei of the House Lannister, First of Her
Name, Light of the West, Lady of Casterly Rock, Queen of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First
Men, Protector of the Realm.” Then he added, “it is expected that you will bow.”

Qyburn did just that. But nothing in the realms of gods or men could compel Jaime to answer that
demand.

“You will not bow, ser?” Cersei asked. “Some might take that as disrespect. I am a gracious monarch
today, but in the future, I would advise you to comport yourself with honour. Ser Robert does not
take kindly to insults to his queen.”

“You are not the queen,” Jaime said. But with her in her radiant splendour, and him supplicant below
the dais, his words felt hollow. “You have no claim to the throne.”

“My claim is to the West as lady of Casterly Rock, and to the Iron Throne as Robert’s wife.”

“Myrcella comes before you as his daughter.”

“Let’s not lie to one another while we’re in private, Jaime.” Cersei walked to the edge of the dais and
stared down at him. “Myrcella has no more of a claim to the throne than I do. And besides, she is not
here to claim this throne of hers.”

Jaime felt a stab of fear. “Where is she?” he snarled.

“Gone. Oh, she lives, do not worry. But she decided this was not her place. And that we are not her
family, not anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“I will let you see for yourself. You can read, can’t you?” She nodded to Ser Robert Strong, who
picked up a paper scroll from a side table, and brought it to him. Jaime unrolled it and read:

I, Princess Myrcella of the Houses Baratheon and Lannister, daughter of King Robert Baratheon
and Lady Cersei Lannister his wife, sister and Heir to King Tommen of the Houses Baratheon and
Lannister, do hereby declare I am the rightful Lady of Casterly Rock, Warden of the West, and
Queen of the Westerlands. I do hereby denounce my mother, Lady Cersei, who would name herself
Queen in my place, as a false queen and an Usurper, and ask that all men falsely following her
come to me, and bow before me, and declare their loyalty. In the name of the Seven, I swear they
will be forgiven their misobedience, for they have been cruelly tricked by Lady Cersei. No
remonstrations will be made against those who beg innocence and forgiveness.

Unto Lady Cersei herself, I command that she come kneel before me, and swear her own loyalty,
and thereafter be commended into the wardenship of my Crown. I swear that if she does so, mercy
of her life will be granted her.

This proclamation dated the tenth day of the first moon of the 303rd year since Aegon’s Landing, in the sight of gods and men.

“What do you make of that, ser?” asked Cersei.

All he felt was cold. It is Tommen all over again. And the only thing he could say was “Why?”

“Why? I have been asking that question myself. I made no threats against her. The throne was hers if she wanted it.”

“You honestly expect me to believe that?”

“I do. Because it is the truth, Jaime. I do not want a throne.”

Bile rose up inside him. “And yet here you stand, with a crown on your head, calling yourself Queen Cersei, the First of Your Name.”

“I did what I had to do. With Myrcella gone, there was nothing to bind the lords of the West to us. I have evidence that Lord Serrett was floating away to join Daenerys Targaryen, and that the bitch Lady Lefford had the same idea. Maybe while I held Margaery Tyrell it was enough to stop an insurrection, but now she is gone too, and the Reach will soon be coming to our borders, Jaime. Along with the Dornishmen—”

“Because you burned their prince alive! You murdered Prince Quentyn, just as you murdered Loras Tyrell, and—” Suddenly his voice failed him. “And—”

“And what?” Cersei’s voice was unnervingly soft. “Say it, Jaime. Say what you meant to say.”

“No.”

“Say it.”

He could hold it back no longer. “And you murdered Tommen! You murdered our son!” He rushed at her, but even as he did so, he knew it would be no use. Ser Robert Strong lifted him bodily into the air and threw him back down to the floor beneath the dais. Jaime sat up, winded, to see the dead-eyed golden giant advancing on him, reaching for the hilt of his greatsword. Then Cersei’s high, cold voice cut over the sound of clanking armour: “Enough.”

“I will speak with my brother now,” she said. “Alone.”

Qyburn spoke up in reply: “Your Grace, it may not be safe.”

“Alone, I said.”

There were sounds of retreating footfalls as both the maester and his golden monster quitted the room. Jaime rose up from where he had fallen; his exhausted limbs burned with pain. “Why?” he said again, very quietly.

Cersei was still for a long time. “It was not supposed to happen,” she said at last. “I did not think he would continue fighting. I…” She seemed uncertain. “I made sure that the Westerling girl and the Tyrell girl were well away from it all. He was supposed to lay down his arms when he saw that winning was impossible, and surrender.”
“And what then?”

“And then… I thought, fool that I was, that we might have supper. The three of us. As a family. As a—”

“Don’t you dare lie to me,” Jaime growled. “Don’t you dare. You would have thrown him as a cell as quickly as you did me—”

“I loved him!” Cersei shouted, “And he loved me! No doubt while you’ve been rotting in your cell you’ve been drawing the battle lines up, but there never were any battle lines, Jaime. Neither of us would have dreamed of hurting the other. And as he lay dying, he looked to me. He forgave me, and I forgave him. Because I loved my son from the moment he drew breath to the moment he didn’t, and you cannot say the same. It is over, Jaime. It is done.”

She could pretend whatever she liked. She could forget if she wanted. But he would not, and he could not. “It is not over,” he said, “and it never will be over. Because I will never forgive you, I swear it. You took the only good thing we ever created between us, and you burned it.”

Cersei took a long, hard look into his eyes. “No, Jaime. Because if I burned it, then so did you. We burned it.”

They took him back to his cell after that. Which was for the best, as he was not far from springing at her. Cell no longer meant the damp dungeon where he’d been kept for weeks previously, but a suite of chambers in the belly of the castle. “You will wait here until the queen returns,” Qyburn said.

Jaime’s voice grew hoarse. “One day, it is going to end for her. I don’t know when or how but it will. And on that day, you will not survive, Qyburn. And I do know that, because I will hunt you down myself.”

The not-maester smiled crookedly. “Is that advice, or a statement of fact, ser?”

“Advice. I’m saying ‘get out before my strength returns, or I’ll strangle you myself’.”

Qyburn went, though he was still smiling to himself.

There was only one way out of the room beside his guards and that was the window. Maybe Cersei had thought he might try, for the window was a good three hundred feet above the sea below, high enough to kill him no matter how he hit it. And if he hit one of the rocks, it would not even be a quick way to go.

Maybe he could fight with the guards until they had no choice but to cut him down. That might even count as dying heroically. But more likely they would just beat him senseless and drag him back to his cell. And even if he did die… what would he gain from that? Some sense of pride as he bled out on the flags, that he had never served his sister? No. That would be a lie, too. He had served his sister for many years before now, in more ways than was sane. Defying her once would be nothing but a pointless anecdote in his history. The Kingslayer, died trying to escape his cell, attempting yet another betrayal. Or maybe not even that: The Kingslayer, died in captivity.

The window beckoned to him again, though not for the same reason. Suppose, somehow, that he did survive the fall. The water might be deep enough to cushion him if he landed feet-first – which would be hard but not impossible. And that was only if he managed to miss the rocks. Or if he was right about the height, which he didn’t think he was.

Besides, what would he do if he did survive, without broken arms and legs to drag him out to sea? First: swim to Lannisport, and escape from it before Cersei’s men inevitably sought him out. And then where? It would have to be Myrcella. His daughter whose brother he had let die, who likely
hated him as much as her mother did.

He could do it now. Brave the fall and brave the water. How bad could it be, compared to a life with Cersei? And even if he died from the fall, that would only last a few seconds. Living and dying with Cersei was a death of a hundred years.

In the end, being the fool that he was, he did nothing but fall down and sleep. He dreamed he was down in the bowels of Casterly Rock again, with his ghosts. The sword in his hand – Oathkeeper, he supposed it must be – was the only light, faltering, sputtering and hissing like a bitch in heat. The dead came for him out of the shadows, with ghoulishly contorted faces and strange smoky arms. The Kingsguard came first, as always, led by Ser Arthur Dayne and Ser Barristan Selmy. “You swore to defend the king, ser!” they crooned, their voices billowing it like curtains of smoke. “And then you shoved your sword in his back. Kingslayer.” When they said that, he thought he heard Brynden Tully’s voice too. “I despise you, Kingslayer,” Tully said. Or maybe that was his nephew. It was hard to tell.

After that it was the turn of the great heroes of Robert’s Rebellion: Ned Stark, Robert Baratheon, and, for some reason, Jon Arryn, who always stood in the back while his wards did their work. Robert was screaming at him as he swung his warhammer, but Jaime could not hear what he was saying. Ned Stark, meanwhile, spoke clearly: “You killed your king,” he said. Then Jaime passed through them, and Stark’s form morphed into two: the small boy Brandon and the Lady Catelyn. “You are a man without honour,” said Lady Catelyn, screaming at him, as blood ran down her cheeks and inky tears dripped from her eyes.

Then there were other ghosts, in quick succession: the boy Edric Dayne, Sansa Stark, Brienne, Podrick Payne, the bastard Gendry, Aegon Targaryen, Myrcella – reflected at least three times; he thought she might be Cersei. But at last they too drifted away, and were replaced by the presence of his lord father. “You are no son of mine,” said Lord Tywin, and his voice echoed, and echoed, and echoooooed, until everything was forgotten except for that simple fact, that he was not Lord Tywin’s son. He was nothing.

When he woke it was dark and for a time he thought he was back in his cell, and that the meeting with Cersei had been part of his dream, too. But he recognised the rich velvets and fabrics of the room as nothing like his cell. He wondered what had woke him, and then the door opened, and as he stood up to approach, his sister entered through it. Ser Robert Strong followed her in, and filled the doorway, barring his escape.

“You have had some time to rest,” she said matter-of-factly. “I hope it has given you some time to think, too. And to make up your mind about what this is going to be.”

“This?”

“This.” She pointed to the crown, set neatly upon her head. “I am the queen. You are my brother, and my servant. And so you will cease your defiance, and you will serve.”

“I will not,” Jaime rasped.

“You will. Or you will die.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I would.” Her eyes hardened. “You know I would.”

She is right, he realised at once. She killed our son. She would have no hesitation. Yet still he
hesitated. *I swore a vow, as a knight, to defend the defenceless. But I also swore, as a Kingsguard, to protect my king, and I have failed in that so many times now. What are vows worth now?*

Cersei took his hesitation as a sign of weakness. “Your task would be nothing extraordinary. We must all do our duty in these difficult times, Jaime.” She advanced on him. “I must rule, and keep my people safe, keep our family safe. Ser Robert and Qyburn have their tasks, too, as do the loyal bannermen that remain to me. And then there is you, dear brother. You have your task.” She came ever closer.

Jaime swallowed. “If I do,” he said, looking up. “What task is this?”

And he could have sworn he saw Cersei lick her lips. “Stannis Baratheon has been seen marching down from Kayce, with an army of thousands. They say, too, that Lannister banners have joined his cause. Or traitorous uncle Kevan, no doubt. When they reach Lannisport and besiege the city, you will command our garrison that opposes them.”

“Why has Uncle Kevan sided with Stannis?”

“Discovering that will be your task, too. It may have something to do with Myrcella.” Jaime stiffened straight; she saw that and went on. “If you do not command, something may happen to her. She may be caught in the crossfire. That would be a shame.”

“Caught in the crossfire as Tommen was?”

“Don’t.” Cersei’s voice grew suddenly strained. “Stop it.”

“Why? Does our son’s name offend you now? Is the very memory of him painful to you?”

“You have no idea.”

“Tommen—”

“You have no idea how easy it would be for me to convince them it was you, Jaime.” Coldness flooded her face. “The Kingslayer, the murdering uncle, who wanted both his nephew and his sister gone so he could claim the throne for himself. He had already killed one king, so why not another? And in the end, that sister would have to take his head, though she would weep to do it.”

Maybe he would take her head first. Grab her to him, and throw them both out of the window before Ser Robert Strong could get to them. But then he looked up at her eyes, and he saw that there were tears there. Crocodile tears, to be sure, but they still proved one thing. There was a heart in there, somewhere. And his heart was twin to hers; it had started beating mere moments after hers had.

Her voice fell to a whisper. She said, quietly, “Please.” Then she unfolded her hand, and in it he saw his prize: the golden badge of the King’s Hand. *Or Queen’s Hand, rather. A mockery of him, perhaps; a Hand without a hand, as he had oft jested himself. And the same thing Tommen offered me that night.* Could Cersei have known?

“We were made to rule this world, Jaime,” his sister said. “Stand with me. It’s all I’ve ever wanted.” She was not a thousand miles from begging. She was in her rich colours and wearing her crown, but she was humble before him.

And it was all a lie.

Jaime Lannister made up his mind. “No,” he said. “I will not serve.”
That took his sister by surprise, but only for the barest of flickering moments. “You will,” she said, and her eyes were burned with some strange green fire. “Oh, you will.” She glanced over towards the massive form of Ser Robert Strong, standing guard in the doorway, and then immediately back to him. “Take off your clothes,” she said.

He stared back at her. “You are insane.”

“Yes. And you will do as I ask, before Ser Robert has to compel you. Take off your clothes. I have need of you, Lord Commander. And if you do not want to fulfil that need, I shall have you held down. Do as I say.”

“No,” he said.

Cersei seemed to accept that. She stood back a moment. And then, turning pale with rage, she threw herself at him. It was without warning, without cause, and he was without the proper footing to withstand it. He went down on the slabs, and she tumbled on top of him, arms and legs thrashing with rage. The crown came crashing from her tresses and rang out as it rolled on its side across the floor. She grabbed at him, yanking at his hair, trying to get her arm round his neck, her eyes crazed and bright. Her skirts came up somehow, and she had him firmly gripped, and in his still prison-fragile weakness there was nothing he little could do to withstand. He tried to hold her back, but she had pinioned his arm across his chest, and when he tried to strike with his golden hand, she batted that away without a concern and it cracked against the tile and rolled away too. “Jaime,” she was saying, “you take me, you have, I am yours, I am yours, I will be yours…” Her hand scratched up his leg, trying to tear through his tunic, her knee drove up into his belly, winding him. But Jaime had enough sense left in him to realise one thing. She will not end this. So I must. He grabbed Cersei by the wrist, ignoring her other scrabbling hand, and rolled her over, so that now he was on top. But his hold was still tenuous, she was a river and he was rowing with the current now but still wanting to fight it. His naked flesh touched hers beneath their robes, his fingers beat at hers frantically. All their gold was gone save for the gold in their hair, woven together in their sweat. They grappled as savages, grunting as they rolled across the hard stone flags, she driving into him and he into her, both wanting to hurt the other, to break the other, to make them bleed to death. His cock was now in her hands, now in her, without a care for any sort of gentleness, both of them scratched and bleeding and breathing in each other’s rage and hatred and then, suddenly, orgasm.

Cersei convulsed and screamed, not his name, but a sound of raw anguish and power, and then she fell sideways away from him, and Jaime slammed backwards into the hard wood of the bed, and sat up ringing all over. His sister rose over him. She brushed down her skirts, looking frenzied, mad, alive – and beautiful, horribly so. He tried to stand, but his legs would not obey. It was over. She had won.

“You are mine,” she said, cold as the sea. “Only mine. And you will never be anyone else’s.” She picked up the golden badge of the Queen’s Hand from where it had landed, and tossed it towards him in his dazed heap. Then she walked to the door, and the Queensguard knight followed her out.
Also, sorry if you're hearing this from me, but no TWOW this year, apparently (unsurprisingly). My disappointment is immeasurable and my day is ruined.
The Queen’s Justice

Chapter Summary

“Justice comes before mercy. It must.”

Chapter Notes

Vicegerent Son, to thee I have transferr'd
All Judgement whether in Heav'n, or Earth, or Hell.
Easie it might be seen that I intend
Mercie collegue with Justice, sending thee
Mans Friend his Mediator, his design'd
Both Ransom and Redeemer voluntarie,
And destin'd Man himself to judge Man fall'n.


See the end of the chapter for more notes

DAENERYS

Dany broke her fast under the bower of roses that grew out from the lord of Highgarden’s bedchamber, watching her newly obtained armies patrolling the roseroad below. The Tyrells and Princess Arianne were yet to be found, but it was not for want of trying. And while her evasive enemies would never surrender to her, the same could not be said for their men. Fossoways, Oakhearts, Caswells, Rowans, had all flocked to her banners rather than see their seats suffer the fate of Highgarden.

From here she could see all their banners, over the gatehouse towers – but none reigned so high as House Targaryen’s own three-headed dragon standard. Highgarden was hers, and no one would dispute that. She had taken Willas Tyrell’s solar, and stripped it of its green-and-gold hangings and carpets, and had put up her own in its place. The small retinue she had brought from Dragonstone on Drogon’s back were the only persons who occupied the castle’s Great Tower. The servants of House Tyrell had been thrown in prison, or dismissed to faraway duties. They could not be blamed for their master’s defiance, but neither were they entirely innocent of it.

A servant served her duck eggs and blood sausage, and a cup of hot wine with zest of lemon. It would be good for the child growing inside her. She ate entirely without relish; her thoughts were occupied by other things. The food had come from Highgarden’s winter stockpile, where Lord Willas and his father had gathered hundreds and thousands of tonnes of fruit and grain and salted meat to last the winter, all of which they had denied to the starving denizens of King’s Landing.
Another thing to see him punished for. Dany had given orders for wagons to be dispatched to the capital at once, to alleviate the hunger. It would do nothing for the bloody flux, though, which, she was informed, was spreading. And that was all she knew of King’s Landing, since the Lords Rosby and Celtigar neglected to tell her anything else. Traitors as well, she thought. Their time would come, too.

As she was eating, Ser Jorah Mormont emerged onto the balcony. “Your Grace might want to eat sparingly,” he advised. “That is to say, cut your breakfast short, and dress for your duties. You have noble petitioners awaiting you below.”

The queen barely looked up. “By which I assume you mean this Redwyne boy?”

“Horas Redwyne is the Lord of the Arbor,” Mormont replied. “And he and his ships will prove a valuable ally once your throne is secured.”

That was not true. She had no need of ships; her fleet in the Narrow Sea outnumbered any the Redwynes could muster. Nonetheless, certain courtesies had to be observed. “Tell him I will receive him in the great hall. And send in my maids.”

Her nameless maids entered at Jorah’s proposal. Irri and Jhiqui were even more afraid of flying than they were of sailing, so they had not come. This irritated Dany. They should have learned by now that cowardice is not something I expect in my servants. She was surely too lenient towards the Dothraki women. Yes, they were her reminders of Drogo, but she was much more than her first husband’s heiress, much more than just a khaleesi. She was queen, nay, Empress of New Valyria – and she must needs attire herself for that purpose. That meant a gown of heavy black samite, and a cape the colour of blood, held by a choker in the shape of a three-headed dragon. When she was dressed, they brought her a glass to see how she looked. And this, she assured herself, was the face of a conqueror.

And soon they would surely call her that – Daenerys the Conqueror. Her ancestor Aegon had taken Westeros more quickly than she had, but even he had not placated the Reach, Dorne and the Stormlands in two days. In the end, her hunch that all it would take was one decisive blow had been right. She had been admittedly lucky with the thick fog at the Mander crossing, and with the fact that the Tyrell army had been there at all, but her victory still stood. They had not even managed to deploy their scorpions and mangonels before Drogon descended upon the column, and lathered them all in black fire. Down she had come from the sky again and again, flying the same route until the mist cleared, and nary an arrow had struck them. She had landed, rallied the broken Reachmen to her inside an hour, and sent them in pursuit of the escaping force.

They had sent messengers back to the castle to warn of the danger, but in the end it had not mattered. When Dany descended upon Highgarden next evening, with four thousand Reachmen marching at her back, half the castle garrison had deserted. And those more steadfast defenders had held out for a time, launching great bolts at her and the dragon, but then, during a gap in the firing, she had descended upon the eastern battlements. From one bastion to another Drogon doused the whole thing in fire; along the walls hundreds of men flailed in black flame, and threw themselves over the ramparts in a vain attempt to reach the castle moat. Others drowned in smoke where they stood, or were reduced to ash in Drogon’s crosswind. The battlement fortifications had been completely blown apart; the wooden hoardings and siege engines collapsed into maelstoms of fire, and the very stonework of the battlements melted and the stones burned black.

Her second pass brought her round to Highgarden’s gatehouse tower, an impressively solid construction of pale stone, with a white rose embossed on every brick. When Drogon was finished, it was little more than rubble, crumbling on one side. Next were the archers in the green-slate-roofed
towers that surrounded the Great Tower. Drogon’s flames punched through them like a battering ram, sending heavy stone rubble tumbling down on the archers within. She would have done more, but white banners were by then flying all over the castle. And no sooner had she landed in the courtyard than fat Ser Garth Tyrell came running out in a fluster to present his official surrender. As her ancestor Aegon had, she allowed Highgarden’s steward to keep his life. But she took everything else.

The Tyrells might be finished, but their bannermen still persisted. And right now Horas Redwyne was waiting for her. It would have been well within her authority to force him to wait and let his anxiety grow, but there were only so many hours in a day, and she had no time to waste on idle frivolities. So she made her way down the stairs behind her solar to the throne room. She did not wear her crown today. She did not need it; even if she went naked before her petitioners, her authority was undeniable. With that in mind, Dany saw no reason to make herself uncomfortable for the sake of ceremony.

In the antechamber behind the throne room she met Benerro and Ser Jorah, who had travelled with her from Dragonstone. She had left Marwyn the Mage behind with Selwyn Tarth, probably for the best, as Marwyn had reacted with distaste even to her burning of Harry Strickland. But that had been a necessity, one he was incapable of understanding.

That did not mean the Golden Company were not present here, though. Lysono Maar, who had been Strickland’s spymaster, now commanded the ranks that had marched from the Kingswood to Highgarden to swear themselves to her. Also present were Kasprio the Cunning of the Second Sons and Denzo D’han of the Windblown, now commanding in the stead of their fled-or-dead masters, Brown Ben Plumm and the Tattered Prince. It might not have been wise to rally the sellswords around her, given the inconstancy they had displayed in the past, but she needed numbers to hold Highgarden, and truth be told, she trusted the sellswords more than the recalcitrant Reachmen.

“You may begin,” the queen said. “First, I would ask for any news of the Tyrells.”

The sellswords looked at one another, but none of them had anything to say. Finally Brown Ben spoke, “It would seem that they have evaded us for another day, Your Grace.”

Dany nodded. She was not too surprised.

“I have men searching in the ashes of the battlefield for any signs that Willas and Garlan Tyrell might have been among those that perished,” said Lysono Maar.

“If they burned, you may find nothing of them,” said the queen. In truth, she was not sure whether she would sooner find out that they had burned, or that they had survived. If they were dead, her troubles were solved. But she would never know that they were solved. She would always wonder if the burned piles of ash they told her were the Tyrells were actually the Tyrells, or if they would return from the grave someday to haunt her. No. She would prefer to see Willas Tyrell brought before her, to see him transformed from man one second into dust in the next.

“You Grace.” It was Ser Jorah’s turn to speak. “If I may offer a thought?”

“You may.”

“Our focus should be on the future. The Tyrells are in the past. You have defeated them to such an extent that they may never return. But with them gone, someone else must be chosen to rule in the Reach. And in Dorne, and in the Stormlands. There is still the matter of the boy Edric Storm.”

“The boy who continues to insult me every time he sits opposite me.”
“I have spoken some more with him, Your Grace,” said Jorah. “In his cell. He is… frightened, to tell you the truth. He saw what you did to Harry Strickland, on the beach at Dragonstone. I believe that now he will be more willing to hear what you have to say.”

“Perhaps so. But if he does not, we may have to look to another solution. One in which Edric Storm does not play a part.”

Ser Jorah gave her a sour look.

“…but you raise a fair point,” she went on. “With the matter of Dorne and the Reach. Who do we have in Dorne?”

“The Daynes are fled, so not them,” said Ser Jorah. “The Ullers – Ellaria Sand, Prince Oberyn’s paramour, was of that house, so not them. Lady Jordayne is still with Princess Arianne. Same for the Fowlers and the Tolands. There is… Lord Yronwood has a long-standing rivalry with Prince Doran. He has sons who marched with Arianne Martell and Aegon, but he might be convinced.”

“Yronwood, then.” Dany could support that.

“We will have to dislodge Prince Doran first, of course,” said the Tattered Prince. “If Your Grace wishes it, the Windblown could march into Dorne…”

The queen said, “When the time comes, I imagine we will all march together.”

“The last Targaryen who invaded Dorne was Daeron the Young Dragon,” said Ser Jorah Mormont. “As you may recall, that did not go so well for him. Nor for Baelor the Blessed, when he found himself held captive there, nor for Lyonel Tyrell, who met his end by red scorpions. I cannot recommend an invasion of Dorne, Your Grace.”

“Daeron had no dragons,” said Benerro. “Nor did any of these others you are mentioning, Ser Jorah. If our queen marches on Sunspear, she will prevail.”

“Perhaps,” Mormont replied. “But it will not be without a cost. If a time should come when Your Grace needs the Martells—”

“That will not come, I assure you,” Dany said. “I have no intentions of reneging on the justice I promised to traitors. I will not change my mind about that. I never will.” She could see that Jorah was not satisfied with that, so she decided to change the subject before he defied her again. “And what of the Reach?”

Jorah settled uncomfortably in his seat. “The Rowans have sworn their fealty to you, Your Grace,” he said tiredly. “As have the Merryweathers. But there are still others: the Tarlys, the Oakhearts, the Hightowers—”

“And Horas Redwyne is awaiting an audience even now,” said the queen. “I think it is time to see him. Ser Jorah, would you fetch Ser Horas for me?” She did not want to hear any more of Mormont’s criticism than she had to.

He went out, and minutes later returned with the red-haired Redwyne twin trailing behind him. Ser Horas sketched a hasty bow in her direction. “Your Grace,” he began. “I am at your service.”

“And is House Redwyne?” asked Dany. “I assume you have come here to swear your fealty to me, Ser Horas. Yours, and your brother’s.”

“My brother is dead, Your Grace,” said Ser Horas. “He died in the battle at Tumbleton, crossing the
river.” He attempted some sort of steely glare, but could not manage it and his eyes dropped away from her.

“He died fighting his rightful queen,” said the red priest Benerro. “One might argue that it was divine justice done.”

Dany raised her eyebrows to Ser Horas. “What say you on that matter, ser?”

Redwyne took a deep breath. “Hobber was… not wise. In anything, truly, but especially not in continuing to fight against you, Your Grace. Whether he was right or wrong, I cannot say. But he suffered dearly for it, as did my cousins and Princess Arianne.”

The queen straightened up. “You know of their fate? They are dead?”

“Perhaps not dead, Your Grace, but I have heard nothing from them. It would seem a reasonable assumption.”

_I need more than a reasonable assumption. I need Willas Tyrell’s head._ Nonetheless: “Thank you for the news, Ser Horas. In that, you have proved your usefulness. And now to the matter of your fealty. Will your father not be gracing us with his presence here…?”

He looked puzzled. “My father took a wound in the Battle of Oldtown, Your Grace, fighting Euron Crow’s Eye on the Whispering Sound. He has been confined to the Arbor for more than a year. In his absence, I speak with his voice.”

“And what of your grandmother?” asked the queen. “Lady Olenna is a Tyrell, but before that she was a Redwyne.”

“It is, Your Grace.”

“And?”

Ser Horas attempted a blank look, but it was too late. She had caught him out and he knew it. “She was at the Arbor, Your Grace. For a time. After the Battle at Highgarden, after the wildfire killed Lord Mace, she stayed awhile. I believe she had intended to stay there until she…”

“Died.” _If only the gods were so good._

“Yes. But one day, she changed her mind. Maybe she knew that Your Grace was coming. But the next I knew she was sailing to Oldtown, and then on to Brightwater Keep, where she is now, if what I hear is true.”

There was a pause. Ser Jorah said, “That corroborates with what we have heard.”

“And not just her, Your Grace,” said Ser Horas Redwyne. “Lady Tarly and her three daughters are there. The same for Lady Oakheart, and for young Lord Hightower. Ser Garlan sent him there before the battle.”

“All my opponents,” said Dany. “Well, then. It seems I have no choice but to fly to Brightwater Keep—”

“Your Grace—” began Jorah.

“—where I will do what I have to do.”

“That may not be what you think, Your Grace,” said Ser Horas. “I have… in truth, it was why I
came… a letter from my grandmother.” He reached into his cloak and drew it out. “I believe she seeks a parley, or negotiations of some sort.” He passed the envelope to her.

Dany slit it open and read. “So it would seem,” she said, placing the letter back down on the table. “I am not accustomed to answering the summons of those who serve me. But Lady Olenna is old and I will make an exception.”

Ser Jorah looked horrified. “Your Grace is surely not considering—”

“I am not considering, you are right. I will go to Brightwater Keep and accept Lady Olenna’s surrender in person, and that of the other rebel Reachlords, before they change their minds. And before you reproach me, Jorah, I am not such a fool as to go alone. I will take Drogon with me.”

“If things go awry, Drogon may not save you.”

“Who else will?” She softened her tone a little; this paranoia was not wholly his fault, she remembered. “I am going to Brightwater Keep. If they are true, they have nothing to fear, and neither do I. But if they prove disloyal, then they will burn. Ser, if I let my enemies continue to stand against me with impunity, what sort of a queen am I?”

“A merciful one,” said Ser Jorah.

“But not a just one.”

“Justice must be tempered with mercy, Your Grace.”

“No, ser. Justice comes before mercy. It must.” The queen looked away from him. She had decided. It was done. She turned and headed for the door.

“I cannot allow you to ride into danger alone,” said Mormont.

“Then by all means, ser, come with me,” Dany called back.

There was no time to waste. She called her servants back to her chambers and instructed them to bring her armour, dark metal inlaid with niello so as to form the scales of a dragon. Then Dany tied her hair back, and donned her magnificent red-and-black cloak, with the ruby pin at her throat. She did not wear a sword. But she did not need it.

Drogon was waiting for her on the landing, as were Benerro and the inevitable Ser Jorah. “Your Grace—,” he began, but she waved him into silence and mounted the dragon’s back. Mormont climbed up behind her. He wore heavy armour, but he and Dany were twenty times lighter than the basket that they had saddled him to on the flight from Dragonstone.

Now seated among Drogon’s spines, she turned back to Benerro. “We will return by dusk,” she said.

The red priest nodded. “I will have the castle ready for your return, Your Grace.” Then he stepped back to give Drogon room. The great black wings flapped, and they rose into the air. Ser Jorah held tight to Dany’s shoulders.

“Valahd,” she said. All at once the green slate roofs and pale towers of Highgarden fell away beneath them, and they were gone into the clouds.

The flight to Brightwater Keep took them only about an hour, and they did not talk much on the way. She sensed that Ser Jorah wanted to say something, but for whatever reason he judged it best to hold his tongue, and Dany did not question that.
It was nearing dusk when they finally descended through the clouds again on their approach to Brightwater Keep. The castle sat beside the Mander river, surrounded by miles and miles of dark green grass. It was stoutly built, and the central keep was tall, but on the whole it was nowhere near so imposing as Highgarden was. Nor was it defended so well. Even from up here she could spy the defenders on the ramparts, but they had no scorpions, no catapults, nothing to bring down the dragon.

Drogon dived low, descending a thousand feet in a matter of seconds. When they pulled out of their dive he flew slower, and Dany sat quite comfortably and watched as the dim orange lights of Brightwater grew and grew. The black dragon stretched his wings wide.

“Your Grace.” Ser Jorah tapped her shoulder. “I see white flags, there on the walls. They are surrendering.”

“So they are.” Dany was not sure why, but she felt curiously disappointed by that. So was Drogon. She ran her hand over the dragon’s scaly neck and whispered, “Quiet now.”

As they drew closer, she saw that they had cleared a section of the battlements on which she was to land, if the waving white flags there were any judge. Drogon turned a suspicious circle, seeking out any hidden dangers, then came down on the stone walk, with a crash that made the tower shake and tremble. Dany dismounted over the dragon’s wing and Ser Jorah followed.

A ring had formed around them, about twenty paces back. After an age, one of the men stepped out. “Your Grace,” he said, bowing a little. “I am Ser Moryn Tyrell, great-uncle to Lord Willas, late of the City Watch of Oldtown.” He was an old man, passing seventy, of Barristan Selmy’s era. “You may have met my brother, Ser Garth, whom they call the Gross.”

“Aye,” said Dany. “He surrended Highgarden to me. I presume you are here to do the same for Brightwater Keep?”

“Indeed, Your Grace,” said Ser Moryn. “Though Lady Olenna would like to share some words with you first, if it please Your Grace. She is in her solar.”

She thought Ser Jorah would say something so she moved in first. “I will see her.”

Ser Moryn nodded. “This way, Your Grace.” He led her up the stairs, and up another flight, and another. Drogon stayed snarling down below on the wallwalk. Eventually they reached a door, and beyond that a wood-panelled hall, freshly painted with some sweet varnish. Tapestries in forest green displaying bountiful produce hung from the ceilings. Ser Moryn stopped outside another door. “In here, Your Grace.” He gestured for her to enter.

The solar was very still. Only one figure was resident, sitting at a sturdy oaken table by the hearth, with a stack of papers, two cups and a flagon of wine before her. Lady Olenna Redwyne Tyrell, the Queen of Thorns, watched Dany all the way across the hall. “Your Grace,” she said throatily. “Forgive an old woman her humble hospitality. The fire is enough for your taste, I trust?” She pointed to the ornate fireplace, where a pile of green logs were burning hot with heavy smoke. Fresh rushes and herbs carpeted the floor. They smelled very sweet.

Dany decided it would be best to remain pleasant, for now. “You are ready to surrender the castle?”

Lady Olenna nodded, then pointed to the papers. “I fear I am rather old-fashioned, still reliant on quill and ink in this day and age.”

“What else would one sign their name in?”
“Fire and blood is becoming increasingly popular among the young. So I am told.”

Lady Olenna had already signed. Dany took the quill that was offered, but as she finished signing her name, it split, and the ink spilled all over her fingers. “A pity,” said Lady Olenna.

_Some feeble attempt at a humiliation, no doubt._ She rose to leave, but Lady Olenna said, “Not just yet. I would talk with you. Some advice from an old woman to a young one. Do not worry about your knight outside. My men will not put up a fight, though it pains their hearts.” She pointed. “Do sit, child.”

Again, the queen did not object. _She is old, she is no threat. More than that, she is broken._ It was plain to see in Lady Olenna’s unfocused gaze. _Is she going blind?_ wondered Dany.

“I am indeed losing my eyes,” said Lady Olenna. “Before you ask. But I hope you will forgive me. I am, as you may have noticed, very old. You are sitting comfortably? Good. So am I.” The old woman smiled. “Even though my eyes are worsening, I saw you coming down from Highgarden. I must say, child, you never cease to impress. Dragons and all. Yet somehow you still make it all seem rather graceful. Your mother was like that.”

“My mother?”

“Yes. Queen Rhaella. And her mother, Queen Shaera. A rival of mine, arguably. She was supposed to marry my husband Luthor. But then she ran away and wed Prince Jaehaerys in her place. A happy marriage, I am told. Till it gave birth to your father.”

“And my mother? What of her marriage?”

“I can only tell you what you have doubtless already been told, child. That marriage was _not_ happy. Not in the slightest. And that was of pain to your father and your mother both, and to your grandmother too. The old are inevitably doomed to dote on the young. It is one of two things they are good at, along with expressing their own regrets.”

Sometimes Lady Olenna reminded her of Galazza Galare, the Green Grace of the Temple of Meereen. Both had given Dany counsel at some point. And both had betrayed her.

“But we are not here to talk about the past, though there is so much of it,” the old woman said. “I hear you burned my grandsons alive. Willas and Garlan both, was it?”

“I am not certain. They may both yet live.”

“Or they may both be dead. And forgive my fatalism, but I am given to favour that option.” She sighed. “My son Mace died in the wildfire when Randyll Tarly attacked Highgarden. And now they tell me my grandson Loras died the same way, at Casterly Rock. And now Willas and Garlan are gone too, burned.” Her hands fell into her lap. “So. You and Cersei Lannister have burned the roses in their fields. You have all but incinerated House Tyrell root and stem. Even your ancestor Aegon never managed that. Your father would be very proud.”

Dany sat up straighter. “You say you have no interest in the past, and yet you keep bringing things back to my father.”

“With good reason. What I have seen in you is the same thing I saw in him. An aptitude for burning every bridge you come to. What friends remain to you in Westeros, Daenerys? Sellswords and cowering men, who will desert as soon as their courage returns to them or as soon as a better option presents itself.
Tywin Lannister was the worst man I ever met. He murdered women and children in their hundreds at Castamere, and in their thousands thereafter. But I can say this for Tywin Lannister: when he murdered, he did it with reason – rarely good reason in an objective sense, but because there was no other way to get what he wanted. I cannot say the same for you. Death follows you everywhere you go, Daenerys Stormborn. It lives and breathes inside you. And I tell you now, I would follow Tywin Lannister into war again a hundred times before I followed you once more.”

Dany paused for a long time. “You forget, Lady Olenna, that when you surrender to me, you surrender your good-daughter Lady Alerie, too. And your granddaughter Margaery may yet—”

The old woman sat forwards. “Don’t you threaten me, child. I have faced more threats than you could possibly imagine. So many clever men, and so many clever plots. And I have beaten them all, outlived them all.”

“Until now,” the queen said.

Lady Olenna nodded. “Until now. Well, I suppose no flame burns forever.” Then, ponderously, she picked up the wine flagon. “Will you have a cup?” She poured without waiting for Dany to reply.

“I will relent.”

“Don’t play games with me. ‘She has poisoned it’, you are thinking. And you are more right than you think, child.” Lady Olenna reached into her sleeve, and drew forth a vial of clear liquid. She unstoppered the cap, and then poured the entire contents into one of the cups. And then she took that cup for herself. As Dany watched, the old woman tipped it back, and drank half of it down in one. “There you are, see. Now, by my estimation, I have twenty minutes left. That should suffice.”

“For what?”

“Why, for my lesson. So: Daenerys. My lesson to you. Be afraid.” The words alone meant nothing, but in light of the old woman’s morbid actions, they had a prophetic quality. It is on our deathbeds that we speak the most truth.

Dany swallowed. “Of what?”

“Of what comes after. When you’ve conquered all of Westeros, when you’ve beaten down the Lannisters and the Northmen and brought them all to their knees, what will you do then? The armies of the Seven Kingdoms are in tatters. The cities are burned, the towns ransacked, the fields sown with salt and the orchards dying of plague. They tell me the flux has reached King’s Landing – what is left of it – and Oldtown is sure to follow, from what I saw when I was there a moon ago. The castles are ruined, their larders are empty, and winter is coming. And in winter, the people will look upon you and not see their glorious conqueror, but the cause of their starvation. And they will rise. You’ll never see them coming. They will pick up their pitchforks and their axes and their butcher’s knives and they will march on you in your castles and your palaces and they will crowd outside your gates begging for bread. And one day, they will break. They’ll storm the walls. They’ll break your windows and kill your guards, and—”

“And they will be stopped.”

Olenna smiled. “Yes, they will be stopped. You and your dragon will be waiting for them. You’ll burn them to ashes, as you did to my grandsons on the road here. And you’ll win. You’ll be queen. For a time.

“Except not for long. They say ‘when you play the game of thrones, you win or you die.’ But there
is something else about the game, a less glamorous truth. ‘Yes, you win or you die. But even then, no one wins for long.’ So. You’ll burn the peasant armies. You’ll put them back in line. But you’ll burn their homes too, and their granaries, and their fields. And they’ll rise again. Thinner and more hungry than before, but more numerous, and hungrier. Not just for food, but for blood. Because you’ll no longer be just the tyrant who starved them. You’ll be the tyrant who burned their fathers and mothers and sons and daughters. The tyrant who, when they came to your gates last time, turned them away with fire and blood. And this time they will not stop. You will kill them in their thousands. They will rise in their millions. They will not stop until you have killed every last one of them. And sooner or later, the time will come when your lords join them in their fight, when you become hated beyond your comprehension. And when that day comes… they’ll never even find what’s left of you.

“But I promised you advice. I promised to tell you how to avert them. Well.” She smiled wolfishly, and pointed to the cup: the cup with half an inch of wine still left in it. “There you go. You taking a sip from that bitter cup is the only way your people will ever be spared.” The smile grew.

Dany pushed back from the table. “I think I have all the advice I need. Farewell, Lady Olenna.”

“Forgive me,” said the old woman, rising slowly. “I have always had a secret passion for theatrics. Plays, performances, that sort of thing. I hope you will allow me to finish. One last story about your grandmother, perhaps? She and I were fine friends.”

She should have gone, there and then. But Lady Olenna was the first person she had met who had broached this subject. So she sat.

“Queen Shaera and I had a talk, once, about the duties we took on when we married our husbands. Well, I talked. She listened, as patiently as you have. And I said, that in the light of my husband’s incompetence, I saw the ruling of the Reach as my duty as much as it was his. To uphold the values of the land and protect her people. I would like to say that I have done my duty. In places I failed, but still… I protected my husband and his children, and his children’s children… not always, but where I could. I fulfilled my vows. I certainly fulfilled my vow when I fed Joffrey Baratheon poison on his wedding day. Don’t look so shocked. I thought he was dangerous, so I killed him, I confess.

“But even in all his madness, that boy was nowhere near as dangerous to me and my family as you have proved yourself to be. If I poisoned him, Daenerys, what do you think I could have done to you?”

Dany looked down at her almost with pity. “You have said some words, Lady Olenna. And they, like all your plots and your conspiracies, have come to naught. No one will remember you.”

The old woman smiled, and madness creased her brow. It was a long, long while before she spoke. “People might not,” she said. “But you will. I promise you, you will.”

Dany turned and left her there, to await her end. Outside the door she turned to Ser Moryn. “See to it that no one disturbs Lady Olenna. She has asked for peace and quiet. Then to Ser Jorah: “The others?”

“Have gathered in the courtyard below, Your Grace.” He hesitated. “Is it…?”

“Is it done?” asked the queen. “It is. The roses are pruned. Now it is just the Dornish we have left to deal with.” His brow creased at that; he could not hide it. “But for now, to the yard, ser. It is time to receive our new allies.”

As she descended the steps, she felt the child kicking gently inside her. They do not understand,
Dany thought, and for a moment she thought of a purple eye, blinking innocently in the darkness of her womb. *Jorah does not understand, and neither do any of the others. But you will.*

Chapter End Notes

A fond farewell to Granny Tyrell.

This chapter, "The Queen's Justice" does have a fair few similarities with its GOT episode of the same title. Most notably, there is the Olenna confrontation which rounds this chapter out. I had originally planned for this one to be a bit longer, but it's such a good ending note that I felt anything else would do her character a disservice. And I wanted her to steal the chapter. I hope she did.

I will freely admit that Olenna in TCOS doesn't have the same kind of presence she does in GOT - the main reason for this, of course, being that my Olenna isn't played by the tremendous Dame Diana Rigg - but she has still gotten around quite a bit. Her journey hasn't been as dramatic as it was in the show, but the wisdom she's offered from the sidelines has been worthwhile.

Olenna was not necessarily in the plan for KNIGHTS. There is the final conversation she has with Willas at the midpoint of TSK, where she declares that she is headed off to Dorne to meet Prince Doran, and at the time that seemed like a fair ending for her character. It might have been more poetic even, to just announce in conversation that Olenna had quite simply passed away. She is certainly a great deal more subdued in this fic than she is in the show, so maybe that would suit. But the scene that comes at the very end of "The Queen's Justice" is too good not to replicate, in some capacity. And I have difficulty believing that Olenna Tyrell in any medium would be so mundane as to merely roll over and die.

KOTN's Olenna isn't necessarily devious. But I do think she shares that aspect of her TV character in that she is very forthright. And I do think her speech to Daenerys exemplifies her willingness to say what others will not.

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You may choose to take the other view, that Olenna is overshadowed by Daenerys in this chapter. Certainly she is in stature, with the near-blind, ailing Olenna barely able to stand while Dany swoops in on her massive dragon and threatens to fry everything.

Dany in this chapter is probably at her most unlikable so far - I'm looking forward to your irate comments (which I really enjoy). And now, she's decided to turn her sights south, to your main man Prince Doran. I find it interesting that she uses the idea of her pregnancy to validate herself at the end of this chapter, perhaps proving that a queen's word is final - but, in the end, she also ends up repeating Olenna...

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Some assumptions you may reasonably make:

Daenerys's capture of Brightwater Keep proceeds as planned - she's not going to be abruptly murdered off-screen
Daenerys now has the Tarlys, etc., as captives, and is turning her eyes to Dorne.

We'll be back with her VERY soon.
It was so cold outside that her face felt like it was burning. *But*, she thought, *better out here than in there with them.* The Lannister soldiers, men and boys alike, did not want Brienne the Beauty around. She had never heard them say it, but they gave her strange looks, and she was pretty sure they whispered behind her back. She wasn’t sure they knew exactly who she was, but they knew for sure that she was a freakish big woman in an encampment that was as hostile to her kind as any.

Strangely, she wished Podrick were here. Not because he was particularly good company, but because he was an awkward outcast same as she was. And he was good at understanding. Strange how you only missed some things when they were gone.

*But not you, eh, wench?* said a voice in her head that was unmistakeably Ser Jaime Lannister’s. *No one ever misses you.*

*Go away,* Brienne wanted to tell him. It probably wouldn’t work. Ser Jaime was always on her mind now: always laughing at her stupidity. Only he wasn’t real, he was just in her head. She had to remember that as well. To pretend anything else would be insanity. *And the things they say about you already are bad enough, aren’t they, eh, wench?*

They were. She had found some respect among Lady Sansa’s garrison, but now, back among the Lannister soldiers, she was “freak” or “wench” or “cow” again. For some reason it bothered her more than it ever had before. To have found a place and then for it to be cruelly torn away was worse than anything else. With Lady Sansa, her life had some value, in that she was seeking an honorable cause and the fulfilment of a long-ago promise. With Princess Myrcella, her role could have been carried out by a particularly attentive dog.

Right now, for example, she was standing out on the balcony of Crakehall castle, while the princess met with her Companions. She was not allowed to listen in, for fear that she might report their findings back to Lady Sansa. That was ludicrous, for Sansa was not only hundreds of miles away, but travelling and unlikely to stop in any one place for too long. *And* there seemed to be no ravens anywhere they went that could even reach Edmure Tully in Riverrun. Yet still they did not trust her.
They had marched for five days from Peckledon Castle to Crakehall, where old Lord Roland had his seat. At every castle along the way more men joined them, yet it was never enough, and every evening Princess Myrcella would lament in a low voice that her following was so meagre. “They hate my mother,” she said, “so why will they sooner let her continue to reign than side with me?”

Brienne knew why. *It is because they hate you just as much, or what you stand for, Princess. They want peace, not another war.* But the princess never asked her opinion, and she certainly would not listen to Brienne of Tarth if she offered it unasked.

She heard footsteps behind her, turned and saw Tywin Frey, one of the princess’s close confidants. “Her Grace will see you now,” the boy said. (It was all ‘Her Grace’ and ‘Your Grace’ now, though the explicit title of queen was seldom used. The princess was not fully inclined to take it, for whatever reason.)

Brienne followed Ty Frey back into Princess Myrcella’s chamber. Her ladyship was sitting in the windowseat, looking out into the night, while several of her other Companions milled about the dim room. “You promised to serve,” she said without glancing round. “Is that correct?”

“Are you talking to me, my lady?” asked Brienne.

“I am.”

“I said I would do what I could to serve you, in the time that I am with you.”

“I thought you might say that.” The princess’s voice was full of scorn. “As… luck would have it, I am in need of someone to convey a message for me. Would that be within your considerable talents, Lady Brienne?”

“Where will this message be going to, my lady?”

“Casterly Rock, as luck would have it. If you are lucky, you might find your precious Ser Jaime there, too.”

Brienne wondered how anyone could sound quite so scornful. “Is the message to Ser Jaime?”

“No. It is to an ally we might have inside the castle walls. An ally who must be confirmed as genuine before we continue to talk with them. That will be your job, too. To find out if they are really on our side.”

“My lady, I have never been the greatest judge of character.”

“I thought you might not be. Which is why I have a mind to send Ty with you. Then one of you might possess some wits.”

It seemed that Ty Frey had not been aware of this. His brows arched together, and a flush came over his cheeks. “Me, my lady? Forgive me if I have made a wrongful assumption, but I thought you wanted – needed my help here. I helped you win over the Peckledons and the Sarsfields—”

“Peck helped me win over the Peckledons,” said Myrcella. “And the Sarsfields were as much your achievement as anybody else’s. As for what other uses you might have…” The princess sighed. “You are a good friend, Tywin, but it is allies I need right now, not friends. Allies who can muster soldiers to my cause—”

The boy spluttered. “I am the lord of Darry!”
“And Darry is two hundred leagues from here. Any soldiers you might call up would have three weeks’ walking before they reached us. Which might not be terrible, but you have no soldiers, remember.”

“I… I could raise some.”

“Not without Edmure Tully’s permission. And the likelihood of that, considering he still suspects me of having poisoned his scrawny nephew, is not high.”

Doubtless they thought Brienne was ignorant of the goings on around her. But she was a soldier, and soldiers heard things. They might hear, for example, that the princess had taken the Darry lordling to her bedchamber once or twice in the past week. And Brienne was certain that this was the moment of rejection, the casting aside of the past. *I cannot do this anymore,* the princess was saying.

The boy was still stammering. “But *I* am the lord of Darry. The lord of—”

“You are my friend,” said Myrcella, though her warm words were devoid of warmth. “And to be a friend to a queen is a great thing. But you must never forget that you are also her servant.”

Ty gave her a long, helpless look. Then his face suddenly hardened, he turned swiftly, and left the room without another word.

“Should I go after him, Your Grace?” said one of the others.

“No. Leave him to come to terms with it.”

There was a long pause. Princess Myrcella turned to face the window.

“It was the right thing to do, Your Grace,” said the one who had spoken before.

“I know that. I don’t need you to tell me that, Serrett.”

The silence lengthened. Brienne had half a mind to ask Myrcella if she might go after Ty Frey. After all, he was to be her travelling companion, and sullenness rarely made for good company. But as she opened her mouth to speak, the princess spoke. “What is th—?”

Then there was a great crash. The whole room shook; the tapestries and portraits fell unceremoniously to the flags. Brienne nearly fell; one of the princess’s companions did, and the princess herself stumbled from the windowseat with mad eyes. “There’s something out there,” she said.

Brienne wandered forward to look, pushing the princess back behind her. Outside it was very dark. The road that led up to Crakehall castle was ill-lit, so the only glow came from a strange fiery orb in the night, which was drawing slowly closer… and closer… and closer—

She dived left, tackled Princess Myrcella around the legs, and threw the both of them flat onto the pile of fallen tapestries.

The wall exploded above them. The ceiling beams splintered clean, and came hurting down; she had to roll to avoid their both being crush. Bits of masonry and tiles rained down hard, shattering the flagstones beneath them. The four-poster bed was blown apart, down feathers scattering in all directions, and oil from the lamps skittered across the floor. Leaving them all quite literally tarred and feathered.

Then she saw that the oil on the floor was taking light. “Up, up!” she yelled, dragging Myrcella to
her feet. They stumbled across the floor, through the drifting rock dust, and fell out onto the inner walkway. Somewhere over to her right, there was another great boom, and the whole wall shook; once again the princess lost her footing again. “The others!” she coughed as Brienne picked her up. “Tybolt and—”

“There’s no time,” she said. “We have to leave, now.”

The princess opened her mouth to dispute that. But she swallowed a mouthful of dust, and coughing, she had no choice but to accept Brienne’s command. Together they hurried along the wall, towards the stables in the keep’s undercroft. Archers ran this way and that – some of them towards the walls, and some of them away. Then, as they came down in the yard, Princess Myrcella called out to a figure. “Robert!”

Robert Crakehall, whom they called Smallboar, turned to them. He was stoutly built, about six foot four, broad and well-equipped to carry his greatsword. He was the commander of Princess Myrcella’s garrison of Companions. “Your Grace,” he said hurriedly. “I beg your pardon. I was coming to tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“The Lannister army—”

“We are the Lannister army.” Even now, the princess did not seem to recognise the danger.

“The other Lannister army, my lady,” said Smallboar. “They are here. No more of them than there are of us, but they have… well, I don’t know what to say. They looked like catapults, the small ones. But they throw… well, it’s iron, but hot iron, and – it knocked down the gatehouse tower in one hit.”

“And then they threw it at my tower. Yes. I realised.” The princess looked at him stupidly for a moment. “What are we going to do?”

Smallboar gaped back at her. “The walls are breached, my lady. They’ll be coming through any moment, an’ we’re already routing. The only thing we can do is flee. To Sarsfield, or back to Peckledon, or somewhere else we have friends.”

Suddenly, from the front gate, there was another massive crash. And as they watched, the great stone towers came tumbling down, down, down, and men were screaming as they fell, and then, through the rubble, came the loyal soldiers of Queen Cersei Lannister.

Smallboar glanced past Myrcella. “I have to go, my lady.”

“You’re coming with me,” the girl said very quickly. For the first time, the enormity of the situation seemed to have dawned upon her, and she reacted with fear.

“My lady, I have to rally our men, give you the best chance of—”

“I said you’re coming with me!” Myrcella nearly screamed it. “You too, Lady Brienne!” And she ran off – then changed her mind, and ran the other way. Brienne and Smallboar followed, trying to get ahead of her.

They ran, down with the rest of the crowd, stumbling down the undercroft stairs, to the stables. Somehow, Brienne managed to wrangle a horse, and brought it over to Princess Myrcella. The girl tried to climb up, but Brienne held her off, and climbed on first herself. “Now get up.”

“I’m not coming with you. I’m going with Robert.” She clung oddly to Smallboar.
“Princess,” said Smallboar. “You shouldn’t—”

“Do as I say!” the girl cried. Brienne decided it would be easier to do as she asked. She jumped down, and held the reins while Smallboar and Myrcella climbed up. Only when she looked back, Smallboar was not there.

“Where’s he gone?” Myrcella was asking. “Where is he? Where – what’s he doing up there?”

Smallboar had left them behind, running back to the stairs, down which the queen’s men were already spilling. He turned back and shouted “Go, Your Grace! Go!”

Myrcella looked down at Brienne, helplessly. Then, as she was about to speak, there was a great crash, and the front doors of the undercroft were filled by a huge figure, clad head to toe in golden plate. He advanced through the crowd of Lannister men filling up the undercroft, men of confused colours and loyalties, and his eyes never left Myrcella’s. And the girl’s eyes stared back, haunted, as this figure came on with his massive greatsword.

Brienne did not hesitate, though. She slapped the rump of Myrcella’s horse, and in the same instant, drew Oathkeeper, and charged the figure. Gods be good, she thought as she stepped forward, he must be seven, no eight feet tall. But now his eyes were moving, seeking out Myrcella’s horse as it struggled to depart the undercroft.

And Brienne came charging through. She did not have a choice. No choice, and no chance. They crashed together, and Brienne swung her sword high, hoping perhaps for a miracle. But the giant turned, ungodly fast, and caught her sword in his huge, gilded hand. And Brienne was pretty sure that he would have broken it with his grasp, were it not Valyrian steel. Even so, it took all her strength to wrench it free, and all her speed to catch his returning swing in a frenzied, hopeless motion. That set her on the back foot, and with each swing, she was retreating more and more. Oathkeeper barely held. The giant wielded a greatsword, but he was so massive that he could probably use it one-handed. And when those two-handed swings landed on her blade, Brienne could feel her very sinews tearing, her bones cracking. It was all she could do to keep hold of Oathkeeper. But Princess Myrcella was gone – where, she could not say, but it was away from here. That, for now, was enough.

But even now she could feel her grip weakening. I tried, Jaime, she thought, as his strikes battered down, I tried to reach you.

And then, as her hands were slipping, Smallboar Crakehall stepped out between her and the giant. He had time to look back at her, shout “the princess!”, and then he took her place.

Brienne never saw him fall. She was already running past the giant as he brought his sword down on his new enemy, who surely could not withstand him, pushing a path through the rest of the Lannister men. There were no more horses in the stables, but she could find one in the yard somewhere, surely. She pushed out into the night, and heard a cry of “Lady Brienne!” off to her right. For one mad moment she thought it might be Myrcella, but it was only Ty Frey, his face streaked with dust.

She grabbed the boy roughly by the shoulders; no time for caution now. “The princess?”

“I saw her riding! She went—” He coughed, and pointed. “That way!”

“The back gate?”

He nodded.

Brienne nodded back. “Well, come on, then. Unless you’re planning to die here!”
The boy chewed his lip. "I thought I might... if you see her, tell her I fought bravely. Tell her I died fighting for her heart..."

He was making no sense. "Come on!" Brienne said, dragging him with one hand, holding Oathkeeper ahead of her with the other. He did not really resist. They fought their way down towards the back gate, forcing a path through the smoke. Of horses there were none, but the attackers had not yet come round to this gate, so they were able to blunder through it as Crakehall castle burned behind them. Once they were out on the plain, it was only a matter of making it to the treeline. Despite fearing that someone would ride up and cut her head off any moment, they made it through, and hid themselves in the trees.

When things had died down to a quiet, Ty tugged on her arm. "What do we do now?" The boy was so frenzied and barely comprehensible he made Podrick Payne seem like the epitome of intelligence.

"Now," said Brienne, "we find Myrcella. And quickly, before the queen’s men do." She thought about things for a moment. "She won’t have gone back to the Rock, or anywhere near it. She’ll have tried to seek out her army... the largest part is at Peckledon, but the queen might have gotten there first."

"She’ll have gone to Peckledon," said Ty suddenly.

"You can’t be sure of that."

"I’m sure."

"How do you know that?"

The boy coughed a little. "I just... know. That’s where she’ll have gone."

Brienne made to argue otherwise, but the truth was, she had no better ideas. "Well," she said. "It is worth a try. How far is it to Sarsfield?"

"It was a day when we came down. A day’s ride. So... about two days walking. Myrcella will be there a day before us."

"Then we’d best get walking," said Brienne.

"Now?" The boy looked at her, horrified.

"Aye," she said. "No time to lose." She had learned that the best way of getting him to start walking was to simply walk off, so she did. And sure enough, he quickly caught up with her.

"Are you hurt?" she asked after they had been walking for a while. "From the battle?"

"I – no." He shook his head, then shook himself, as if to make sure. "I’m unhurt."

"Not everyone was so lucky," said Brienne gloomily. "There was... a giant. I know that sounds foolish, but—"

"Ser Robert Strong," said Ty. "He killed the king."

"He tried to kill the princess too."

They walked a little while further. "If she could hear us, she’d probably tell you to call her the queen. But she doesn’t mean it. I don’t think she wants it, not anymore. Not after everything that happened at Harrenhal."
“Did she tell you that?”

“No, but I can tell.” He sighed. “You don’t believe me. And why would you? You probably still think she tried to kill Robert Arryn.”

“It was Littlefinger,” said Brienne. “He did it. The lords of the Vale said so.”

“The lords of the Vale were tricked. That’s what Myrcella thinks.”

“By whom?”

Ty looked away. “I shouldn’t be telling you.”

“No. But you started telling me, which suggests that you mean to finish.”

He sighed. “Your Lady Sansa. Myrcella had a theory… she thinks she poisoned Robert… I know it sounds ridiculous, but—”

“It is ridiculous,” Brienne asserted. “Why would Sansa poison her own cousin?”

“To make sure Littlefinger ended up in prison. Or better still, dead.” He paused. “They were working together, Myrcella and Sansa. I thought you knew that. She said you were there when they spoke, in her cell.”

_I went down to the cell. I was never in there with them._ But it couldn’t be true, could it? That Sansa had made everything up, set it all in place. _But she did send me to find Clegane. And she told me that Myrcella would say something, and that would be his cue, and…_ “It does not matter,” said Brienne. “Sansa had nothing to do with it.” And she would believe nothing else. Seeing he was about to reply, she said, “When did Myrcella tell you this, anyway?” That shut him up.

By now they had climbed a little ways uphill, and came to a ridge where they could look out over Crakehall, about a mile to the south. Brienne looked about – and there, on another nearby hill, she glimpsed something strange. An encampment of sorts, horses and riders standing about, a few banners flying that she could not make out.

“You don’t think that could be—?” began Ty.

“It very well might be.”

Having spent the better part of a year looking for Sansa Stark, the prospect that this particular search might already be over seemed too good to be true. But as she and Ty climbed the hill and saw that the banners up here were Lannister, a sense of strange apprehension grew. And then they crested the hill, and Ty pointed, and, unable to help himself, he exclaimed “That’s Peck!”

So it was. Josmyn Peckledon was of Myrcella’s Companions, and obviously Ty Frey knew him well. The pair approached one another and conversed a moment, and then the Frey boy called Brienne forward. “She’s here,” he said quietly, as Peck led them through.

They found Myrcella at the crest of the hill, watching the smoke rise over Crakehall. When she saw them approaching, a visible relief came over her, betraying perhaps more than was her intention. “You’re all right?”

Now back on safe ground, Ty’s confidence had returned. “Not a scratch upon us. Lady Brienne and I made it out all right. Together.”
That was an embellishment, but Brienne did not betray him. “We did, my lady.”

Myrcella nodded. “I thank you,” she said, mustering all the humility in her heart to utter those three words – and then deciding that was probably enough for a lifetime. “What became of Robert? Smallboar, I mean?”

“He died, my lady.” Brienne did not soften the blow. “And I think he saved me in doing so, truly, though I hardly knew him. He… he fought bravely. Died fighting for you.”

“Crakehall was his home,” said Myrcella, heavily. “I suppose I was a fool to think he would leave it.”

*Yes, thought Brienne. But if you had not had your tantrum around the horses, he might have survived, too.*

Ty swallowed. “What will we do now?”

The princess turned to stare out over the windy moor. “My mother brought sword and fire to Crakehall. She slew my friends, my brother’s brave Companions. And I have no doubt that she will send her men to Sarsfield, to Peckledon, to Cornfield, to Silverhill, all before we can reach them, and possibly before my messengers reach them. But if the gods are good… and they owe us, I think, we may be able to organise. And then we will march. We will march back to Lannisport, and we will take the city. And then we will march to Casterly Rock, and we will bring the queen’s justice upon Cersei Lannister as she brought her treason upon us – or we will die in the attempt.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so Brienne and Robert Strong is the sort of fight you'd expect to find in a fanfic... huh. Though at the same time, I would not be surprised if it turns up in GOT at some point, which I will be perfectly content with. Though, of course, CLEGANEBOWL is what we all really want.

I haven't written Brienne in about 84 years, so this was a refreshing chapter to write. And she has a much better arc here than she did in TSK.

So, the main part of this chapter is taken up by a fairly medium-sized battle. I killed off Tybolt Serrett (random OC from the last chapter), and also Smallboar, which was sad. You can assume that many of the other King's Companions (Rollam, for example, doesn't appear here in this chapter, but he turns up later, I believe). This chapter also sees the debut of one of Qyburn's new technological innovations; he appears to have invented some form of rudimentary cannon, but I haven't really researched the plausibility of this so I can only say "just accept it."

As well as seeing Brienne's thoughts, I think it's interesting to get an outsider's look at Myrcella, a character who complete lacks any sort of function of objectivity - though she's not necessarily unique in that.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter. The next POVs will be Samwell or Daenerys - if you've got any preference over who will come first, feel free to comment below.
DAENERYS

The child kicked in her belly, perhaps reflecting her current displeasure. Her meeting with the boy Edric Storm had not gone well. No sooner had they brought him into Highgarden’s audience chamber than he opened with, “I heard what you did at Brightwater Keep.”

She wondered how he knew, but kept that to herself. “I gave mercy to the Tarlys and the Hightowers in spite of their defiance.”

“And Lady Olenna? What about her defiance?”

“Lady Olenna took her own life,” said Dany coolly.

“I don’t believe that,” Edric said, sticking his upper lip out at her. “You killed her, like you killed Strickland and anyone who defies you.”

“You defy me often. And yet here you sit.”

“Only because you need me,” answered the boy, full of spite. His eyes were devoid of their usual sea fire – so the days he had spent in prison had had some effect on him – but his voice was still hot with indignation. “You need someone to rule Storm’s End for you, because you’ve killed everyone else.”

“That is wrong. I have Lord Selwyn Tarth on Dragonstone, even now. If you continue to refuse my offers, I have him.”

“Fine. Then make him lord of Storm’s End and do to me as you did to Strickland.” When she did not answer, he snorted. “But you can’t, can you? You’ve angered them so much that nothing less than a Baratheon will suit.”

Dany said coolly, “Ser Barristan would not have been pleased with your defiance.”

“Whereas he would have been so pleased with you,” said the boy. “He was worried, you know. He never told me outright, but I could see in his eyes that he knew you would turn out like this.”
He was lying, of course. Lying to hurt her, as if that would do her any good. Edric Storm’s lies about Ser Barristan meant nothing to her. Nothing he said or did would convince her that her old brave knight had been anything but loyal.

_And now he is gone._

“See,” said the boy. “You know it’s true.”

She decided she was done with Edric Storm after that. _Let him think whatever he likes. If he wants to see me as a tyrant, fair enough._ A darkened cell would suit for him, and he would not be surprised by it, either.

By the time she made it back upstairs to the council chambers it was twilight. All her council were present and waiting – all, that was, save for Ser Jorah Mormont. When the queen asked where he had gone not even Benerro had an answer. “But we can begin without him, Your Grace,” the red priest pointed out.

She would sooner Jorah was here – or would she? Of late, Mormont had proved nothing but a stumbling-block to her intentions, grown as cautious and whiny as an old woman. He opposed her conquest of Dorne for some reason he never managed to express. Dany wished he would either admit his misgivings, or hold his peace. But no matter. Jorah Mormont would not hold her back from bringing justice upon the Martells. And especially not in his absence.

There was surprisingly little to prepare. Kasporio the Cunning and Denzo D’han both told her that their men were ready to march come the morrow. “I will fly overhead,” Dany told them, “and scout the marches for a Dornish host. But we are unlikely to find one, I admit.”

“Whereas they will be unlucky to find us,” said Kasporio.

Dany nodded. “And from the Marches, on to Sunspear.” It was a plan without complications, and in winter, she need not even make preparations against the Dornish heat.

Denzo D’han noted as much. “I have heard tell that by the time we reach Sunspear, it will be snowing.”

“Mayhaps so.” Dany turned to Maester Lomys’s, Highgarden’s quivering man of the Citadel. “Have you heard anything from Lord Yronwood yet?”

“Nothing yet, Your Grace.” Lomys shivered. “But it is, as you say, cold. The ravens may be d-delayed, Your Grace.”

Dany’s opinion of Maester Lomys was no fonder than her opinion of Grand Maester Gormon, who remained on Dragonstone. With the exception of Marwyn the Mage, no maester had ever done good for her. _If an alliance with the Hightowers were not desirable, I might burn Oldtown too._

She turned to the other men at the table: Horas Redwyne, and Orton Merryweather, the lord of Longtable. Merryweather had been by Mace Tyrell’s side for an age, and later by the side of his son, but he was dismally weak-willed. Dany had chosen him to be seneschal of Highgarden in her absence; he could hardly prove a worse choice than Garth the Gross, who had been Lord Willas’s choice. And Merryweather was so weak-willed that he would never mount a defense against her wishes, nor when the time came to move him aside. He had the air of a man who was grateful to even be alive.

“Lord Merryweather,” the queen began. “I trust your men are ready for the coming battles, too?”
“They are, Your Grace,” said Merryweather tremulously. “It may be… time… Mathis Rowan, for one, has proved slow in responding, but—”

“You should have time enough to do what needs to be done,” Dany replied. “And once Ser Horas sees to his part…”

“I am already exchanging letters with my father, Your Grace. He has his doubts, I will not lie, but our fleet – what we have of it – is ready to sail to the Shields at your command, and from there, north towards Casterly Rock.”

That was another thing. Aegon the Conqueror had not settled for half of Westeros, and neither would she. The Lannisters were next on her list, after the Dornish. She would ride up to their gates at Tywin Lannister had ridden to the gates of King’s Landing. Only this time she would play the part of the lord of Casterly Rock. And perhaps, if my suspicions are correct, I might find Tyrion Lannister somewhere in the vicinity. They had heard reports of dragons in the Vale, dragons in the Riverlands, dragons in the Stepstones, and she could not say how many of them were true, but she knew that Lord Tyrion must return home soon enough, with or without Viserion. Home, as she had.

When the council was done she heard petitioners in the Great Hall of Highgarden, but they had nothing to say. Lady Oakheart made some polite requests for comforts in her tower prison, by way of a guard. Dany granted them, though she was wary that Lady Tarly and her daughters might soon ask the same. A merchant banker who had been owed by the Tyrells made some remonstrations on the party of his Lysene masters; she sent him on his way. After that she tired quickly, so she went back up to her chambers, and the roof terrace where she spent her nights. When she asked her maids if they had seen Jorah Mormont, she was surprised to hear that he had been up here recently. They reckoned he would soon return. So she sat with a cup of hippocras and waited.

When Ser Jorah finally returned to her, he had changed out of his armour, and looked rather placid.

“Your Grace,” he said, though he did not meet her eyes. “I have – there is – a petitioner for you.”

Dany looked round. “I will hear no more petitions tonight.”

“I know, Your Grace. I beg your pardon. But she has been waiting since this morning. So I am told. It might not be wise—”

She silenced his protestations with a wave of her hand: a tired wave. Right now she wanted nothing more to sleep. But perhaps she owed something to Ser Jorah. “Send her in,” she said, not quite knowing why.

Ser Jorah stepped back and the girl entered the garden. It might have been more appropriate to call her a young woman, but she had a childish nervousness about her, even if it did not seem quite genuine. She stepped up to Dany and made a strange, ugly curtsey. “My…” Then, hesitating: “Your Grace.” She looked awkwardly about the garden; anywhere save for at the queen’s face.

“Do you have a name?” Dany asked.

The girl sucked in a breath. “I… Gilly, Your Grace. Named for the gillyflower.”

“The gillyflower? I must confess I have never seen one.”

“They... grow mostly in the North. Your Grace.”

“Ah. Then that resolves that question. I have never—”

“The far North, Your Grace,” the girl blurted suddenly. “I am... I am what you might call a wildling.
She was not sure how to respond to that. Wildlings, in Viserys’s stories, had always been tall and fearsome; the menfolk wore the bones of their conquered foes as crowns and the womenfolk were all witches. This Gilly was none of those. And yet for some reason, she felt some bold need to declare her faraway foreignness, something that would have turned nine of every ten Westerosi against her immediately. But not Daenerys Targaryen. Instead she grew curious. “Would I be right in assuming, then, that whatever you intend to tell me relates to the North? To beyond the Wall? And to…?”

“The white walkers,” said Gilly. Her eyes became wide, and all her naïve youth hardened like iron. “The Others. They’re marching on the Wall. They might be at Castle Black already. And…” The eyes widened yet more. “If they are, then that is the end.”

“The end of what?” Dany asked.

Gilly stared hard at her. “Of everything.” She summoned her resolve. “Your Grace, you must go North. The Others are things of ice. And your dragons… I was with Lady Tarly when I saw them first—”

“With Lady Tarly?” The queen became imperious. *This is surely some plot.* “The Tarlys are traitors, Gilly. And not just to me. You must be aware that your closeness to them does little to convince me of your story.”

“It’s not a story!” Gilly exploded into anger. “I saw them! I saw them, I saw the white walkers! They would have killed me, if not for Sam!”

“Sam?”

“Sam. Samwell Tarly. A brother of the Night’s Watch. My… my… husband, for all intents and purposes.” Dany was about to ask how a Sworn Brother could have a wife, but Gilly spoke over her. And thus she began her story, a tale of her father’s keep and a Great Ranging led by Lord Commander Mormont and the battle at the Wall and the arrival of Stannis Baratheon and their sailing down to Braavos and then to Oldtown and everything that came after. “That’s why I was with the Tarly women,” she finished. “Because they are a family. *My* family, no matter what Lord Randyll did.”

Dany paused. “You mentioned Jon Snow, she said. Lord Snow.”

“Aye. The Lord Commander.”

“I know of him. He sent a letter asking for my help. As it is, I have a fleet near Crackclaw Point, ready to sail north. And I would have, until I received word of this defiance of Martells and Tyrells. My wars must come first.”

“So that you can win the iron chair,” said Gilly. “But when the dead come marching, that war won’t matter any more.” Her courtesy was gone, supplanted by insolence. “Because we will all die, too. You will have no one left to rule over. The dead—”

“—are coming. You have said it enough times now. You have all said it. You, Benerro, Marwyn, Jon Snow, all the rest. The Great War is coming, you say. But I have seen no sign of these dead men. For all I know, you could all be deluded, or maddened by superstition. What I know for certain is that my enemies still surround me, that they plot against me in their secret corners and their knives are sharp. Until they are finished, I cannot help you.”

“Maester Aemon said you were our last hope. Our only hope. He said ‘Daenerys must be told. She
must be warned.’ He said it with his dying breaths. I heard them for myself, on the voyage to Oldtown.

“Maester Aemon? Ser Jorah mentioned him once, in passing. A relative of mine. I…” I wish I could have met him. The sad thought entered her mind for an instant, and was gone in an instant.

“He was a hundred and two years old. And yet as he died, he wept for you. He wanted you to hear. He would have wanted you to—”

“Ser Jorah put you up to this, didn’t he?” the queen cut in, icy cold. The reminiscence on Maester Aemon Targaryen had led her back to Jeor Mormont, who had been Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. And Ser Jorah’s father. “Did he tell you to say all this?”

The girl’s lip quivered. “He… I…” And then the eyes hardened again and she said, “yes. He did. But the words are mine, not his. My truth, not his. And I am asking you now, not him.”

Dany felt very cold. Yet another friendship proves to be poisoned. “You may leave,” she told Gilly, already turning her back. “But as you do, be sure to call Ser Jorah back in. He and I would have words.”

The girl was not done. “Listen to me!”

“No. Leave me, before I name you any more responsible for this than you already are.”

The shuffling of feet told her that Gilly was retreating. Dany turned and looked out over the parapet. It was starting to rain and the air outside was turning very cold.

Jorah’s presence replaced the girl’s. “You told her to come here,” said Dany coldly. “You went behind my back.”

For a long time Ser Jorah said nothing. She could hear him approaching, but she span about and glared at him, and he came no further. Then: “Daenerys—”

“You, Your Grace. I am the queen. You would do well to remember that, ser.”

“And I am the Hand of the Queen, by your own decision. If you do not want my counsel, you may have my badge back.”

“Are you defying me?”

“I am. Because someone has to, Daenerys. What you are doing… Harry Strickland, the Tyrells, the Martells, all of it, is dangerous.”

“The Tyrells threaten the security of my kingdom, ser. Of my people.”

“Do they? How? They have no castles, no armies, no—”

“I will not stand idly by and let traitors roam free,” she seethed.

“If you do not show them mercy, traitors will be all around you. Willas Tyrell is powerless now, as are the Martells. They are the least of your worries. Leave Highgarden and the Dornish behind—”

“And do what? Hide? Flee to the North and cower at the Wall?”

Ser Jorah sighed. “I will never betray you again, Daenerys. I have accompanied you from Pentos to Vaes Dothrak to Qarth to Slaver’s Bay. I have sinned, yes, I have proven forsworn, but I returned,
because I had nothing left to live for other than you. I cannot pretend to know why you spared me, but if I had to guess... I think it was because you knew, too, that if I had risked death by coming back to you, I would not do so with the intent of betraying you. In my eyes, bringing the girl to convince in does not constitute betrayal. But allowing you dig your own grave certainly is. As your Kingsguard, your Hand and your... friend, I counsel you three times. You have to leave this behind. Else all that remains will be ashes, and among them for certain will be yours."

The queen did not reply. She did not have to.

As Ser Jorah went the heavens opened, and the sky wept. Dany sat there for a while, until she felt the child kicking more urgently inside her. It did not hurt; rather, it was quite a peaceful sensation. You may be all I have now, she thought. She was glad of it, gladdened by the insistent but gentle kicking. The child had been kicking more in recent days, and she could feel some sort of mother’s sickness coming on. Soon she would have to tell them all the truth. But until then, it was just her and the child...

For a long time, while the child stilled, she sat there, staring through the rain. She thought, for the first time in a long time, of its father, of Daario Naharis. If he were here, he would tell me to fight them. More than that, he would say that she was destined for it. You are a conqueror, Daenerys Stormborn. You take what is yours.

And she knew that she had done the right thing.

That night she had a fitful sleep. It was not a complicated dream. She was standing by her bed, and thunder cracked in the distance, and lightning turned the window-panes bright white. And when they glowed, she saw in them the reflection of a second figure beside her. She did not have to look to know who it was, because it spoke and its voice belonged to only one person. “Wake the dragon,” whispered her brother Viserys. “You have to wake the dragon, wake the dragon, wake the dragon, WAKE THE DRAGON!” And then his screaming became incomprehensible and he was shaking her, shaking her so hard, not the child, not the child, and everything around her was flooded in bright white light.

And then her eyes opened, and it was morning, and it was time.

Things went by quickly. She remembered rising, she remembered finding Drogon on the balcony outside her chambers and climbing up among his spires, she remembered flying away and watching Highgarden disappear below her. She did not remember if Benerro or Ser Jorah had watched her go, or where she had gotten the armour – it was the same one she had worn to Brightwater Keep, she thought.

The hours it took to reach the Dornish marches went by like seconds. Dany felt light-headed, more so than usual, as they soared over the fields of grey grass giving way to burnt rock. She knew she would have to be watchful now. A Dornish army might materialize at any moment.

And then, like that, it did. The soldiers formed themselves out of the rocks far below, and they numbered in their hundreds, maybe a thousand. She watched from above as Drogon’s shadow passed over them, turning their world dark. She knelt close to the dragon’s black scales and willed him to descend.

They fell, rather than glided. Then Drogon spread his great wings over the Dornish army as they gazed helplessly upwards, and the queen said “Dracarys”. Bright black flame burst from his lips, tinged with Targaryen red, and it swallowed the army in an instant, tearing through their ranks, and all around was the smell of blistering flesh and burning blood. She more than smelled it; she almost felt it.
And then, abruptly, as they rose above the army, there came a terrible piercing pain that cut her all the way to the heart. It plunged clean through her like the sharpest dagger, and the pain was such that she could not hold on anymore; she was thrown from Drogon’s back, down and down and down, and the sandy Dornish winds entombed her as she fell. Above her the dragon was wailing, dying, and above her she saw his flesh turn to pure igneous fire, and he burned and smouldered and fell too, in blazing ash and flame, to earth.

Daenerys kept falling. She was falling impossibly far; she ought to have hit the ground by now, but she kept falling. And as she fell, she heard the voice of Mirri Maz Duur whispering across to her, uncoiling like serpents in her ear, only the words they spoke belonged to Olenna Tyrell instead: you will, she said. Oh, I promise you, you will. And then, on the skirling, keening wind, Viserys screaming “WAKE THE DRAGON!”

She woke all at once, choking out great breaths in the Highgarden bedchamber, while rain came hissing down from the dark sky. Her skin was pale, her bedclothes had tangled her legs same as the serpents in her dreams, and her hair clung silver and unkempt, from her head down to between her legs.

Down between her legs, where it was damp with blood. And she thought, when the sun rises in the west and sets in the east. When the seas go dry and the mountains blow in the wind like leaves. When my womb quickens again, and I bear a living child. Then you will return, my sun-and-stars, and not before.

She must have screamed then, because how else did her maids know to come and find her? They burst into the room, and they stood round her in shock for a while and then set upon her with towels and desperate hands, and she sat there in her bed, and half of her was crying, and half of her was laughing. When Ser Jorah told her, at long last, that it was ending, that it was over, that he was sorry and there was nothing they could do for the child, she looked at him and said calmly, “Child, Jorah? Child? What child?”

Chapter End Notes

I was very close to calling this one "The Sunset Kingdoms". But to be honest, I think the time has passed.

A few of you have suggested that Dany's child might not make it to the stage of being born. But it was Tommyginger who mentioned Mary I of England, albeit in a different context, and it's possible to draw a few similarities between her (at least the popular perception of her) and Dany, though the latter has a much greater potential for destruction.

Dany is not dead, of course. But a plotline that has resulted in descriptions of her as "The Mad Queen" becoming slowly more and more appropriate has culminated in her first outbreak of true, recognisable madness. There are a dozen different things she can mean by "Child? What child?” As with Mary I, don't even know necessarily that there was a pregnancy at all.

I would also like to draw attention to reviewer aeb's poison ink theory, re: Dany and Olenna. Whether you put stock in that idea - whether you believe there are external causes of Dany's miscarriage/phantom pregnancy at all - is up to you. I have my answer,
but as with an irritatingly high number of TCOS's more ambiguous points, I'm going to let you make up your own minds with this one.
Beside the Dying Fire

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SAMWELL

No word had come from Cotter Pyke at Eastwatch-by-the-Sea in two weeks. From Ser Denys Mallister at the Shadow Tower, there came no indication that he or his fellow defenders had survived their ordeal. From the Nightfort there was nothing; from Long Barrow there was nothing; from Greyguard and Queenslake and Sable Hall, nothing, and nothing, and nothing. The brave defenders of the Night’s Watch had, it seemed, become the brave defenders of Castle Black, and nothing more. And even if they were not alone, it would have not mattered. There was no way of getting any help now. They were all that remained. Three thousand men.

Othell Yarwyck, the Greatjon Umber, Lady Maege Mormont, Tormund Giantsbane and the Norrey stood before him in the Lord Commander’s chambers in Castle Black. Sam was at the head of the table, despite having little to say. But he did not think it would be right to step aside; the Northern lords and the wildlings were still prone to arguments, and he was, unwittingly, the arbiter of peace between them. He had no real clue what they were saying, but he made sure to weigh their ideas in equal measure – or pretend to.

Personally, he did not see why this brokered such argument, why matters of who defended where, or who manned the wall next to who mattered so much. *We are all defending the same castle. We are all fighting the same enemy.* But it was like that: wildlings did not want to defend next to Northmen and vice versa. Northmen would sooner fight on the snow-drowned ramparts, wildlings in the snow-caked yards. The Northmen were good swordsmen but poor archers, the wildlings were more versatile, but their weapons were poorer. Both shunned each other’s choice of swords, shields, axes. And no one wanted to fight alongside Ramsay Bolton.

Sam thought it might be best to leave them to it. After all, as many of Westeros’s Targaryen kings had proved, there was such a thing as ruling too much. Daeron the Young Dragon had been undone by his insistence on personally leading an army to Dorne; Baelor the Blessed’s inability to let the Faith be the Faith meant he neglected more important things. There was no harm in deferring to wiser men, surely.

Eventually, after what seemed like many hours, they decided that it was enough for the day, and departed in their different directions. Tormund Giantsbane remained when the others have gone. “You’re out of your depth, Tarly,” he said, without anything to cushion the blow. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

“I know,” said Sam miserably.

“Well.” Tormund shrugged. “At least you have the sense to recognise your shortcomings. That’s more than I could say for a lot of the others.”

Was this supposed to make him feel better. “They should have chosen another man,” said Sam.
“Emmett, or Mully, or even Dolorous Edd would have been better.”

“And better yet would have been if Lord Snow still lived,” replied the big wildling. “But there’s no use thinking about what might have been, Tarly, you know that. And aye, it’s true that you’re not him, and truer that you’re ill-suited to what needs to be done. But there are things you could do that Lord Snow couldn’t.”

“Like reading,” Sam said sourly. “Which will no doubt help us greatly against the Others. I am a steward, Tormund. Yes, Jon was a steward, too, but he was a different sort of steward; his service was a different service to mine.”

“Perhaps.” The Giantsbane had reached the door now. He lingered, and looked about to say something, then he changed his mind, and departed.

When he had gone Sam sat down at his desk with the masses of letters he had never sent because it was now impossible to get ravens off from Castle Black. We are truly alone now, he thought. As if he did not know that already. And then, resigning himself to the truth that nothing more could be done, he left his desk and walked down the wormway corridor to the Shieldhall.

The snow had been cleared away beneath the top level of the windows, so you could look out and see the blizzard going, and over the hour of supper it would surely build up. The wildling wives brought out tureens of stewed rabbit and beans, and loaves of rock-hard bread. At the high table they ate the same as anyone else. It had been different in Lord Commander Mormont’s day, but now the one thing Sam could not afford was the ordinary rank and file turning against their commanders.

There were too many lords and lordlings in Castle Black to seat all of them on the dais, so he kept a rotating schedule. Today he had the Greatjon Umber, the young Lord Lawrence Hornwood and his wife Lady Talia, and Morna o’ the White Mask, the wildling, among others. They made a strange coupling around him. Sam thought they would not co-operate, but it transpired that the Greatjon was strangely impressed by Morna. “I have women not unlike you on my lands.”

“Perhaps my ancestors were there, once,” said Morna, “before you drove us north of the Wall.”

Lord Hornwood said, “I thought your people chose to live north of the Wall.”

“And what sane man or woman would choose that?” Morna bit back. “No, we went north of the Wall because we had to, not because we wanted to.”

Just then, Sam saw Dolorous Edd entering the hall, and his expression was nothing good. Sam felt oddly sick. “Lord Commander,” said Edd: those unfamiliar words again. “There’s someone here to see you. With a message.”

“Who?”

Edd lowered his voice so no else would heard. “Theon Greyjoy,” he said. “And you’d best come quick, before any of the Northmen find out. ‘Cause if they do, they’re like to kill him.”

Sam did not need to be told twice. Putting down his bowl, he rose and followed Edd out of the hall, through the wormway that ran beneath the snowy bailey, and into the Lord Steward’s chamber, tucked at the bottom of one of the wormways.

There, in a small wooden chair by the fire, a pitiful figure sat hunched, staring with haunted eyes into the flames. “You are Theon Greyjoy?” said Sam.

“I am,” said the figure. His eye sockets seemed hollow, his face was fearful and sallow, grey skin
stretched too thin across it. A strange smile came over his features. “I know my name.”

“My name is Samwell Tarly,” said Sam. “I am the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch.”

Theon flinched. “Jon… Jon Snow, he was the Lord Commander.”

Sam was not sure if that was a question or a statement. “He was. But Lord Snow is dead. And now I…” He cleared his throat. “And now I command here. Do you have news of your uncle Euron?”

Theon’s whole body shook. “Euron,” he said quietly. “He is coming. Closer now.”

“How long do we have?”

“A day. Less.” Theon shrugged.

“That’s impossible,” said Edd. “Our scouts would have—”

“He has his ways,” said Theon. “He has – a horn. It lets him take control… your scouts would only have seen what he wanted you to see.”

A horn. Sam’s blood ran cold. *The Horn. From the Citadel.* “The Horn of Winter?” he asked.

“Y-yes,” said Theon. “It was broken. But now it is fixed. He blew it at Winterfell, and—”

“The Wall,” said Sam, understanding at once.

“If he wants, he could bring down what remains of it. All he has to do is blow the Horn once.”

“So why doesn’t he?”

Theon shivered. “I don’t know. B-but he sent me to tell you that. He said that if you come out and fight him, you might be able to win back the Horn.”

“He’s trying to trick us,” said Sam. “He wants us to come out and fight, so he can cut us down in the field.”

“Really?” said Dolorous Edd. “How nefarious of him. I never would have guessed.”

“—Which suggests that there is something stopping him from blowing the Horn again. Something that means we should stay here. But I don’t know what.” He looked at Theon. “Have you see the Horn?”

“Not since Winterfell. But yes, I have.”

“Was it intact? Not broken?”

“It was, yes.”

Sam felt a pit in his stomach. In Oldtown the Horn had been chipped and impossible to blow. But here, now…

“Well,” he said, “Whether the Horn is intact or no, it makes no matter. We must fight against Euron no matter what he brings our way.”

“He will bring everything,” said Theon. “His army is an army of thousands. *Tens of thousands.* Maybe more. I think he has enslaved the entirety of the Iron Islands to his cause.”
“How would he do that?”

“Some sort of curse.” Theon shivered, though it was not cold. “A spell or a binding of some sort. He had my uncle Victarion as his thrall, though Victarion died in Oldtown, and by rights should be no more than a rotting corpse.”

“He can raise the dead, then? Like the Others.” Sam felt fear creeping up his spine but he dared not give into it. “But he is still one man, he can be killed.”

“He is no man,” said Theon. “He is something else. If you want to kill him, you would have to find some way to pierce armour of Valyrian steel. And that… that is just him. There is the woman too.”

“The woman?”

Greyjoy swallowed convulsively. “The Night’s Queen. She was… there was something buried in the crypts. And it took her appearance. Lady Lyanna, I mean. It became her – she should have been bones and long rotted, but it took her form from her statue. She is flesh and blood, but cold to the touch. It is her as much as Euron who controls this army.”

Sam’s mouth was dry. “And what does she want?” he heard Dolorous Edd ask.

“To go North, I think,” said Theon. “To… to… I don’t know why…”

And at once Sam knew. “To meet the rest of them. The ones marching south.”

For a long time there was silence in the room. Then Dolorous Edd spoke. “So: enemies to the north. And enemies to the south. All much more powerful and more numerous than we are. And what do we have? You and me, Sam. Well, we’re fucked.”

Sam could hardly disagree. He let Edd handle Theon Greyjoy after that, sent Clydas to help the shivering man, and walked down the wormway, with only a single thought in his mind. They are pitting everything they have against us. We cannot afford to put anything less than everything we have against them. And that means all of us.

Melisandre had moved to small and dark chambers on the lowest level of the Grey Keep, behind the spearwives’ habitations and the nursery. “Tell her ladyship I have come to speak with her,” he told the squire on the door. “If she is busy, I can return later. But we must speak.”

The boy went in for a few moments, then returned to deliver a shy nod of assent: Lady Melisandre would see him, and she would see him now.

Sam ventured into the darkness. And darkness it was, for there was only a single candle in the room, and the rest was given to shadows. The red priestess hunched over that sorry, lonely light in the blackness, and her eyes – now dimmed – stared blankly out at him. She wore a thick wool shawl over her thin shoulders, and her once-graceful fingers now splayed out before her seemed alike to the twitching legs of a spider. Her face had no colour in it, and its lines were entirely mysterious.

Sam cleared his throat. “I apologise if I have interrupted anything, my lady, but—”

“You interrupt nothing.”

“I assume you know why I’m here.”

“I will after you tell me.”
“Well,” said Sam. “It’s about Euron Greyjoy. I just met with his nephew, Theon. He was travelling with Euron. He says he’s… close. A matter of days. The siege will start soon. If it is a siege at all.”

And not a massacre.

Melisandre gave him a blank look. “Why are you telling me this?”

“I thought… I thought there might be something you could do.”

“Such as?”

Sam felt closed in by her abruptness, out of things to say. “I-I don’t know exactly. But your magic —”

“My magic is all lies, Samwell. You are clever enough to know that. Powders and potions and pretty smoke. Any half-rate street performer could manage what I do. And all it takes to make prophecies is the ability to twist words. You could do it if you wanted to. If you bothered to.”

“I don’t believe that.”

She offered up a strange smile. “You have seen my failures, and yet here you are.”

“When Jon was on that table, I saw sparks from the fire, and smoke. It was unnatural; it shouldn’t have done that. Something happened, even if it wasn’t what you wanted. And the glass candle didn’t just explode on its own.”

“That may be so,” said Melisandre. “But I asked the Lord to bring back Jon Snow. And yet Jon Snow is still dead. Dead and cold. And the great victory I saw in the flames, Samwell, the great battle in the snow… all of it was a lie.”

“And what about the other prophecies? From Qarth, and Asshai. Quaithe… we are the knights of the nightingale, Lady Melisandre. Even if Azor Ahai does not stand among us, we are still his people. We will fight his battles for him, until he reveals himself to us.”

“Then we will be fighting for a very long time, Samwell,” she said tiredly. “Or rather, not long at all, once the Others swarm over us.”

“So your plan is to just stay here and let them kill you?”

Melisandre stared blankly past him. “I have no plan. My plan was R’hllor’s, and R’hllor is dead, if He ever lived at all.”

This is not working. “Maybe he is,” Sam said, changing tone. “Maybe the Lord of Light is dead. Maybe his miracles are all lies. I have no evidence for him, after all. But I do have evidence for Melisandre of Asshai. I have seen her with my own eyes. And I have seen the things she can do. I have seen—”

“Melisandre is dead too,” said the red woman. “She was never real either. My name is Melony, Samwell. And I am just an old woman, old and afraid, with a blind faith in a dead god.”

And Sam thought of Aemon, crying, his arms spread to the night. He thought of Quaithe too, and Kinvara, and then, more mundanely, and yet more real, of his mother, kneeling on her knees in the castle sept and praying to gods that were surely too ludicrous and celestial to exist, yet believing that they had to be, they must be. They were all blind, too. He thought of Gilly praying to gods with no names that she and her child would last one more night in darkness, and of Xhondo the Summer Islander and his gods of hope and love across a veil of obscure sea, and then back to Aemon.
Targaryen again, that old blind beautiful man, that learned man of science who could uncloud all mystical nonsense. Aemon, with his eyes in another world that surely could not be scientifically real and yet he so transfixed in the vivid belief of its certainty that it must have seemed more real than all the years that had come since, now relegated to a colourless dream as the old man raised his arms and felt world and time in the rain and said, *Egg, I dreamed that I was old.*

“My lady,” Sam said, and the words came without thinking. “I do not think there is anything more powerful in this world than the faith of the blind.”

Melisandre looked up at him. She had been about to say something, her carefully made reply, but now she stopped. Her fingers knitted nervously together. Then, in a very soft voice she said, “Well. I suppose trying is better than nothing.”

Sam did not think he would win any victories beyond that. He left Melisandre, and, quite on an impulse, he ascended the steps from the wormways, and made it out to Castle Black’s courtyard. There was almost no one out here, just a few soldiers milling about on the ramparts. *In a few nights, it will be all of us.*

He walked forward to the centre of the courtyard. This was the place where they had burned the bodies of Jon Snow and Ghost. The ashes were gone, all of it was gone, even the scorch-marks on the snow, buried by new drifts.

“Master Tarly?” he heard.

Sam turned and saw Val, standing behind him. “My lady. I did not think anyone else would be out here.”

“I needed some air. A respite from the mon– from Jon, I mean. Little Jon.”

“Gilly’s boy.”


He had no answer but the truth. “I do. But at the same time, it’s good that she’s not here. I… I mean…” *If she was here, she would die with the rest of us.*

“I understand,” she said. “Fight for her, Tarly. You fight for her.”

“As if the survival of the entire world wasn’t enough.”

Val laughed, and so did he, though it wasn’t particularly funny to him, and he reckoned she thought the same. And as they did, Sam thought, *the Others have a thousand advantages over us, and a thousand ways to beat us. But we have a thousand things worth dying for, and we would die a thousand times for each and every one of them.*

*And we will.*

Chapter End Notes

This is far from my favourite chapter (I might even go so far as to say it is my least favourite so far), but I did think we needed a reminder of what was going on at the Wall. It’s been ages since we’ve been there, but Euron’s army is now very, very close, and the
long-awaited battle is just over the horizon. It's not going to be as big as the Battle of KL in THE SUNSET KINGDOMS, but it won't be a small one either.

Re. future developments:

I have completed Chapter 27, so it should be ready to go up around Thursday, though I'd like to finish Chapter 28 first to get the pair up in quick succession (you'll see why).

Chapter 29 is about half-done. It's a Tyrion chapter, detailing the siege of the Gates of the Moon, and honestly one of my favourites for a few reasons.

Chapter 30 is looking likely to be quite long, but I reckon pretty big chunks can be cut out so that might not necessarily be the case.

Chapters 31 and 32 are an interesting pair, both as individual chapters and in the relationship they share.

Chapter 33 is a behemoth - this may be the longest chapter in KOTN so far, but there's a lot of good stuff going on in it.
SANSA

The day was black and wild and wet. Waves thundered towards the beach, throwing themselves like rabid dogs against the black sand bars, convulsing with foamy lips. Gulls scattered themselves to the air; bits of seaweed were shorn away by the tide. In other places the waves crashed into the rocks which surrounded the harbor, and exploded into black geysers two hundred feet high, spraying the faces of those on the cliff face above with stinging salt.

“This is not even the worst of it,” said Brynden Blackfish.

Sansa felt a little ill. “Surely you are jesting.”

“’Tis true, my lady,” said young Patrek Mallister, who had passed his father’s eagle banner onto a subordinate after one strong gust had nearly torn him from the saddle. “Maester Darreg has said that the winds will be twice as bad tonight. Or worse.”

The Blackfish’s face was dark. “More fun for all of us.” He had to lean close to Sansa to be heard over the wind. “We will be all right up in the castle, of course, but I pity them down below in the yard, or, gods forbid, on the beaches.”

Sansa was horrified. “On the beaches? But… they’ll die.”

“Aye,” said the Blackfish through gritted teeth. “Some of them will.” He turned and spat into the wind. Then he urged his horse on, and Sansa had no choice but to follow.

They continued along the steep cliffside path. The woods had fallen away behind them three hours ago, and the road had petered out into a bleak, lifeless greenscape, decorated with the occasional tree but nothing else. There was a thin white fog which meant they could see little ahead of them, but thankfully Patrek Mallister and a score of his father’s knights had turned up before Sansa and the vanguard managed to get lost in the anonymous moorland.

And now they were mere miles from Seagard, which she could see at the end of the curved headland, its stone walls rising above the town and the long black beach below. The vanguard,
consisting some hundred lords and ladies, knights commandant, and other such dignitaries – among
them Sansa, Arya and Rickon – rode two miles ahead of the rest of the army. There were around
nine thousand men in all, trickling in from all across the Riverlands. In two days they would all be
here at Seagard. And after that, they would set out again, this time not stopping till they reached
White Harbor, and then, they would take the kingsroad all the way to Winterfell.

If Winterfell still waits for us, that is.

Rickon rode to her side. He wore his dark leather jerkin, tunic, under a mantle of dark fur and
leather; in that, he looked like Father had when he went out to hunt or to execute a man. And too old
for his years. It was easy to forget that Rickon was not quite thirteen. When I was thirteen, I was still
innocent. How much had changed in six years.

Ser Patek Mallister met them at the castle gatehouse, ahorse with five men. The heir to Seagard
wore simple blue and grey: Stark colours. “My lady,” he greeted Sansa first. “Lords, ladies, friends
all. We welcome you to Seagard.”

His sunny greeting left Sansa strangely disquieted. No doubt the Freys said the same for Robb and
Mother, when they arrived at the Twins. She realised that it was her turn to speak. “I thank you, Ser
Patek. The day is wet and cold. If I may be somewhat bold, we would all benefit from getting inside
and out of this chill.”

“My lady speaks truly.” Ser Patek bowed his head. “If you will follow me.” He graciously escorted
them through the gatehouse.

Sansa sat back awhile with Ser Brynden. “Uncle,” she said, “will you—”

“Content myself to freeze to death on the beach, and see to it that our men are settled?” He grunted a
laugh. “Aye. I never did love Seagard, anyhow. The castle is too damp and too vinegary for my
taste.” He turned about, and rode back down the column. As he did so, Sansa did not fail to note
Sandor Clegane slipping into his place, replacing him as a solemn, silent protector. Then the
gatehouse arch was shadowed above them, and then they were through.

It was a short climb from the gatehouse to the upper bailey, and a short climb from there to Seagard’s
hall, a wide, dark room built into the cliff, with a hammer-beam ceiling and a hard stone floor. Ser
Patek led them up through the tables to where Seagard’s household had assembled to await their
pleasure. Lord Jason Mallister sat on a stout chair of dark wood upon the dais. He was an old man,
about sixty, but still strong and lean, still a fighter. “Lady Sansa, Lady Arya, Lord Rickon,” he
began, “be welcome to my hall. My meat and mead are use. If you will partake in bread and salt…”

They did. And yet all of them knew, somewhere down inside, that the ceremony meant nothing.
After partaking, Sansa said, “I thank you for your hospitality, Lord Mallister. And for your support.”

“My support is guaranteed for righteous causes,” said Lord Jason. “As for my hospitality… you are
too kind, my lady. Truthfully, my accomodations are rather bare. I hope you will forgive their
meanness. Seagard was built as a fortress against the ironborn, not as a true habitation.”

Does he think I still yearn for the comforts of the south? Sansa wondered. “I have stayed in many
castles, my lord,” she said. “Many lords and ladies have shared their opulent hospitality with me. Yet
I find that I value an open hearth and an honest host more than any of them, and in you, I am sure to
find one. I have heard House Mallister’s history, both old and new. I know that you fought loyally
for my brother Robb while he lived, and continued to fight against Lannister and Frey oppression
after the Red Wedding.”
“I did, my lady. Yet I still regret that I did not do enough. I was not there at the Red Wedding to save my king.”

The Rivermen had a habit of saying this, and it was one Sansa did not understand. Why would you want to be there? You could not have saved him, not you or a thousand others. “That is the past now,” she said. “Let us not forget the here, and the now.”

He looked down at her, suddenly very aloof and dignified, like the eagle on his banners. “That may be so, my lady,” he told her, “but still, The North Remembers. And always will.” The flint eyes softened somewhat. “Which reminds me – a letter arrived for you, about a week ago. Maester Darreg, the letter, please.”

The maester, a thin, pale-faced man, brought the paper forth and laid it very delicately in Sansa’s hands. She turned it over. The seal had been broken, but she accepted the letter nonetheless.

“I hope you will forgive me for having glanced it already,” said Lord Jason. “If the news was urgent, it might have served us to respond to it. As it stands, I will allow you to read it in your own time.”

Sansa nodded. “Thank you, my lord.”

Lord Jason sat forward in his throne. “Lady Sansa, you may not know this, but shortly before the Red Wedding your royal brother gave me instructions regarding a task. One of his final commands. I was to send longships to deliver Galbart Glover and Maege Mormont to Lord Howland Reed, who each had their own commands. I fear I do not know the exact nature of their commands even now, but when you reach White Harbor, you might do well to inquire of them.”

Before she could answer, Arya suddenly broke in: “Do you have any news from Winterfell? Or from the Wall?”

Lord Jason shook his head. “I fear there is nothing yet, my lady. The letter from Lord Wyman is the last we have had in some time. And even then, it might have been delayed in its arrival. The snows north of the Twins are thick; we have had little luck getting any birds through.”

“If anything comes, you will let us know,” said Arya firmly.

“I will, my lady.” There was a pause. “Is Ser Brynden with you anywhere? I had hoped to pass my greetings on to him.”

“He is at the beach,” Sansa explained. “Seeing that our men are well organised and accommodated.”

“Ah. I fear I cannot offer them good hospitality either, my lady. There are so many. The beach seems unkind, I understand, but it is better shelter than they would find up here on the cliff, in the natural caves.”

“Do not worry,” Sansa said. “They will find no fault with your hospitality, I am sure. And if they do, it is only for one night. We shall be gone this time come the morrow, Lord Jason.”

“I should like to march north with you,” admitted the lord. “But word of ironborn ships has only grown in recent weeks. You may have heard—”

“Invaders in the Westerlands, approaching Casterly Rock. We have heard.”

“Not that,” said Lord Jason. “On the Stony Shore, too. Torrhen’s Square and Flint’s Finger and the like, and the ironborn swarming up the coast. They will not pass White Harbor, or Moat Cailin if it is still manned, but they will make things mighty difficult for your progress north to Winterfell. If that is
still your intention."

“My – _our_ – intentions are unchanged. And they will remain unchanged.”

Lord Jason nodded. “As is your right, my lady.”

Sansa was not wholly comfortable. _He knows I am not Robb, and he sees no need to treat me the same. He would never have presumed to tell his king what his rights were, and what they were not._

“If I may interject, Lord Mallister,” she said, “I believe I might – _we_ might – all benefit from some time to rest. And to think.”

Whatever Lord Mallister thought of her, it was not a request he could refuse. “As you wish, my lady. I shall see you escorted to your rooms, and we shall perhaps talk later at supper. Ah… my steward will take—”

Patrek Mallister stepped in. “Ah. Father. If I might…” He turned to Sansa. “My lady, if I might have the honour?”

She was a little confounded, but what of it? “Lead the way, Ser Patrek,” she said.

They went from the hall. She did briefly wonder why he had begged the honour, but before she could ask the Blackfish intersected them in the hallway. “I have seen to the beach,” he told her. “The red priest, Thoros, seems to have it all in hand.”

“Good. Uncle, you might—”

Ser Patrek cut in. “Forgive me, my lady, ser, but while I am here I should carry my father’s greetings. Ser Brynden, he will be wanting to see you. If you are swift, you might catch him before he leaves the Great Hall.”

The Blackfish nodded. “I will do my best not to disappoint him. Niece, I shall return to you soon enough.” He continued past them down the hallway. Meanwhile, Sansa, Arya, Rickon and the Hound followed Ser Patrek up to the chambers that had been set out for them at the top of the stairs. Ser Patrek made a strange, awkward bow before departing.

“He likes you,” Rickon said, with a narrow smile.

“He likes the idea of me,” she replied. “He likes the princess of the North. He does not know _me_.”

“Who are you, then?” asked Arya.

“Not who he wants me to be.” She turned Wyman Manderly’s letter over in her hand. “Manderly was the fat one, wasn’t he?”

Arya nodded. “Father had to have a special chair made for the Great Hall, because he couldn’t fit otherwise. And he got stuck in an archway, once.”

“Yes,” said Rickon. “But he was loyal. Always loyal. When I was at White Harbor, Ser Davos mentioned that.”

“Ser Davos?”

“Davos Seaworth. He was Stannis’s Hand. Him and Shireen were my friends.” He looked away from them, hiding his face.

“Read the letter,” said Arya. “Is there anything about Bran or Jon?”
Sansa opened it and read. Lord Manderly’s handwriting was huge, so despite the size of the parchment not much was said. “No,” she said, “he only mentions that the ironmen are marching east and may reach Winterfell at some point. Nothing about Bran. But I’m sure if it gets too much, he’ll leave—”

“He shouldn’t,” said Rickon. “There must always be a Stark in Winterfell.”

She felt uneasy. “I would sooner have a living brother than a Stark in Winterfell.”

“What else does it say?” Arya asked.

“It says that he needs support. From the south. What we expected, really. He mentions the Tullys and the Arryns, but he says he has received no reply from them, and that he does not expect to. I fear on that matter I can give him little of comfort. Uncle Edmure and cousin Robert have not responded to my calls. Though… in truth… they have little reason to do so.”

“I would have thought their moral obligations were convincing enough reasons,” grumbled Arya. “Father would not have stood for Lord Edmure’s refusal to participate. Neither would Robb. And neither should we.”

“What’s this about my nephew, now?” said Brynden Blackfish, appearing in the doorway.

Sansa gave him the letter. The Blackfish read it through. “Dear gods,” he commented when he had finished. “Manderly has awful handwriting. But more to the point, I understand your frustration with Edmure. Yet at the same time, I understand his reasons, too. As I’m sure you do, Sansa.”

He was prompting her, she knew. “No doubt Uncle Edmure has seen thousands die already in this war. The Riverlands have burned from the Twins to the Gods’ Eye. The damage here is worse than in all the other kingdoms. And the scars run deep among its people, too.”

The Blackfish nodded sagely. “It may be that Lord Mallister is not quite so supportive of our cause as he makes himself out to be. I spoke to a captain who suggested quite inadvertently that his lordship is withholding some of his levies.”

“They can’t do that!” said Arya. “We – we are their liege lords.”

“No, we are not. The only time House Mallister has been sworn to Winterfell is under King Robb. And none of you are Robb.”

A glance passed between Arya and Sansa, and they were sure of it. Neither of them had managed to attain the authority that had once been Robb’s, and that was in part due to each other.

“I will write to him,” Sansa said abruptly. “To Edmure, I mean.”

“A letter will do little to convince him,” her sister replied.

“It will be better than nothing.” She seated herself behind the desk, and found to her surprise that parchment and ink had been left for her. *Maybe they wanted me to write to Edmure.* “Should I write ‘dear Lord Edmure’ or ‘dear Uncle Edmure’, do you think? On the one hand we are appealing to him as family, but on the other—”

“Write ‘lord’,” Arya decided. “This is no time to approach him carefully with a sentimental message.”

Sansa considered it a moment and then decided she was probably right.
Rickon said, “While you’re writing it, maybe me and Arya could go down to the square to practise. Maybe.”

Arya was about to reply in the contrary, no doubt, but then the rough tones of Sandor Clegane cut in. “I’ll take them,” he said from the doorway. “Keep them company while you finish your letter, little bird. Come on.” He growled it in such a way that not even Arya could defy him.

Sansa wondered how long he had been waiting in the doorway, and how much he had heard. Clegane could be unnervingly silent when he wanted to be, despite his size. Sometimes she wondered why he was still here. Sandor Clegane had never been particularly disposed towards loyalty, as Joffrey had learned, and she had no gold to offer him as the Lannisters did. The more she thought about it, the stranger it seemed. Brienne had told her the story about the Quiet Isle, of course, but even so she had trouble believing it.

The letter to Edmure was more important now, though. She started with Dear Lord Edmure, and wrote with the Blackfish leaning over her shoulder. When she had finished Ser Brynden looked at her approvingly. “You are not entirely without your mother’s fire,” he said. “And mentioning family, duty, honor will no doubt rile him up. Still, I fear that Edmure has already made up his mind. Would that I could take the letter to Riverrun in person, and give him a good clout round the ear if he dared disobey.”

“Well,” said Sansa, thinking seriously. “You would doubtless be valuable in the North, uncle, but if you clouting Edmure round the ear gets us another two thousand men, then it is worth it.”

“Alas, I doubt that I will succeed. Edmure is stubborn as a mule when he wants to be. He took that from his father… and perhaps from me, too. Not to mention that he is not too disposed to heed my advice after I left the Freys to hang him at the Riverrun siege.”

Maybe the Blackfish expected a reaction to that. But Sansa only nodded. “I heard. Leaving him on the scaffold was the right thing to do.”

“And harder to do than it is to say,” said Ser Brynden. “Not to mention that it was against family. And duty and honour too, I suppose. Though… there was a greater sense of family above that. Riverrun, you see, was the entirety of Tully history. Much more than just Edmure. But I had seen Edmure grow, I had loved him… he seemed much more real to me as ‘family’ than some empty castle stones did. Home, Sansa, is more than just a castle.” He laid a hand on her shoulder and said, “I hope you remember that.”

And she felt sure that she would.

That evening, after she had given the letter to Maester Darreg, who would send it to Riverrun, Lord Jason invited them down for supper in the Great Hall. They ate well; good hearty Riverlands fare, lots of fish. Lord Jason consciously seated his son Patrek next to Sansa. He kept pouring her wine and profusely apologising about one thing or another. She was not really listening. Let them court her if they liked. She had greater concerns. Tomorrow, their progress north would begin. And all across the hall, they knew the monumental nature of that task, and down on the stormy beach, where the Northmen and Rivermen sat around their feast tents, they surely knew that too.

After supper, she retired upstairs again. Though there was a full moon glowing in the cloudy dark, it was a cold night, so Sansa had no allusions that it would be best to close the windows, and fewer still that a fire in the hearth might be a wise idea. She called in Podrick, and had him stir the flames up till they were roaring. It was a still a little chilly, so she sent him out in search of better wood. But when the door next opened, it was not the stammering Payne boy who entered, but Rickon and Arya.
“We thought you could use some company,” said Arya.

Sansa could not hide her surprise, nor her shame at that surprise. “Well,” she said nervously, then nodded to the seats by the fire. “You may sit – I mean, sit down. If you want.”

They did. Rickon on the left, so his shadow filled the fireplace, and Arya on the right, nearer the door. The flames crackled feebly in the hearth. Sansa said, “I’ll have Podrick warm up some wine for us when he gets back.”

“Podrick?” Rickon laughed. “You know he likes Arya, don’t you?”


“How many other Podricks do we know?” her brother asked.

“But he’s – but he’s – well, I honestly thought he might be—”

“Simple?” suggested Rickon.

“That’s unkind. But – yes. A little. Though… are you sure you mean Podrick, Rickon?”

“I’m sure. I’ve seen him watching her in the yard. He always tries not to be seen. But when he’s watching, his eyes go so big they take up half his head.”

“Like yours and Jeyne Poole’s did when any lordlings came to Winterfell,” Arya broke in suddenly. “You were always so taken by them. The same with singers. There was that one—”

She thought of Marillion, singing in one of the Eyrie’s sky cells. This singer’s killed my lady wife, Littlefinger had said. And Marillion went away whimpering, and they took his fingers, and his eyes, but not his tongue, and he sung and sung till the blue called to him. A chill went through her. “Not singers,” she said, “not anymore.”

Arya seemed to understand. It was impossible that she did, of course, but she did a good job of seeming. “No. Not anymore. But sometimes…”

“It’s nice to look back,” Sansa finished for her. “Do you remember the feast we had at Winterfell? Just before we left. Forget the queen and King Robert and everything. It was still just us, then. All of us. Starks of Winterfell.”

“It was nice,” said Arya, flatly.

“You weren’t. You threw soup at my dress.”

“You probably deserved it. But… well, I’m sure the feast was nice, even if I wasn’t.”

I’m sure it was nice, she’d said. As if she hadn’t been there herself. But the thing was, Sansa wasn’t sure that she had been there either. But she laughed, all the same.

The long pause threatened again. Then Arya said, “I should apologise.”

“For what?”

“For how I was to you back then. Not just with your dress, of course. But with everything. I was selfish. Vindictive. Proud.” She sounded hollow, but it was coming from somewhere.
“So was I.” That seemed hollow, too. Then she thought of something to add: “The way I acted
towards Jon was despicable. When we see him, I’ll have to apologise to him, too.”

“But we’re here now,” said Arya.

“We’re here now.”

“And the pack survives.”

“The pack survives.”

And their echoes seemed to prove that it was so. Sansa found herself searching for wine cups, and
without waiting for Podrick to return, she began to fill them from the bottle of Arbor red she had
waiting. One cup each to Rickon, to Arya, to herself. And solemnly she raised her own. “To Father.”

“To Father.”

“To Mother.”

“To Mother.”

“And to Robb.”

“To Robb.”

Just as they were drinking their third toast, the doors opened, and both Podrick and Brynden
Blackfish came in. “M-my lady—” stammered Pod. “This—”

“I thought I sent you for firewood, Pod,” she said. “Oh, well, no matter. Come, take a cup, and you
too, uncle.”

But the Blackfish shook his head seriously. “Sansa,” he said, “listen to the boy.”

Podrick came closer, trembling a little, and pressed something into her hands. “It-it’s from Lord
Manderly, my lady. In White Harbor.”

Sansa turned it over. Another letter? It looked ordinary, so far as he could see. Perhaps his lordship
had something more to say about the Northern levies arranging themselves, she thought as she read
the greetings. Or perhaps—

And her heart stopped dead. Stopped at the words. At the word Jon. At the word Bran.

The paper fell from her fingers, fell down like a bird without feathers, fell down onto the flagstones
in a mess of crumpled paper. And Arya, wordlessly, took it up. She read. She stopped.

Her eyes met Sansa’s. And her eyes said, please. But there was nothing she could say.

Arya turned towards the door. She did not run. She walked right through them, but no one stopped
her. And Sansa watched her go, as though time had slowed, remembering every instant of it, first
her, and then her shadow.

Sansa went to the letter, once more discarded on the flags, and picked it up. She was faintly aware of
the commotion around her, voices calling “Arya! Arya!” and Rickon and the Blackfish were moving
away from her, and Podrick was standing by helplessly saying “I’m sorry, my lady, I’m so sorry.”
Then Sandor Clegane appeared from nowhere and grabbed her arm – but gently, or gentler than she
expected.
“Here, little bird,” she heard him say roughly. “Don’t you dare start going all Florian and Jonquil on me.”

“Bran,” she forced herself to say, “and Jon. And… where’s Arya?—”

“Don’t you go worrying your pretty little head,” said Clegane. “The Blackfish and your brother are after her. She’ll be back before long. Now, you just take a seat.”

She wanted to resist him. She so desperately wanted that. But then her legs were folding under her, and she had no choice. The letter was still crumpled in her hand, and its fatal ink left dark smudges on her fingers.

Chapter End Notes

I’m never averse to a good bit of juxtaposition.

So: give them happiness, give them laughter, give them home and family and reassurance. And take it all away, because I felt needlessly cruel with this one.

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Next chapter: Arya (following on directly from this one)
The Storm and the Light

Chapter Summary

\[ I \text{ came so close. Again.} \]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ARYA

Smoke from the campfires was thick in the air, making her dizzy. Men huddled together round the embers of their fires, swigging from skins of strongwine and malt, shoving down chunks of roast ham and hot bread. Music was coming from somewhere: a song, whose words she could not hear the words. And though the thunder was muted by the fog, Arya could see the brief flashes of lightning through it. If there were any ships out there tonight, they would have a hard time getting in.

There were drums, too. At least, she thought they were drums at first, and then she thought it was thunder, and then she realised the noise was in her own head, and the \textit{ba-dum ba-dum} that wouldn’t stop was her own heartbeat.

Everything hurt. She felt like someone had flayed off all her skin, then rubbed salt into the bleeding remains. At first she didn’t really understand why, though. Bran and Jon had been her brothers, but she didn’t really remember them.

Or so she’d thought. For she remembered them now. Bran running past her, kicking up mud and snow, chasing her round with his wooden sword. And Jon, mussing up her hair with one hand while admonishing her with the other, hugging her really tight and laughing all the while. The pain came more sharply now, a prod here and there, like she was being stabbed with a—

\textit{Needle}.

The pain resumed. \textit{I came so close. Again}. She had been at the Twins with the Hound, watching from outside while her mother was murdered and Robb and his army were betrayed. Here she was again, on the outside, looking in.

Somewhere the way she’d learned of their deaths made it worse. At the Red Wedding, she had been there all the way, watching it unfold; all the while she had been thinking \textit{maybe, somehow, I can save them}. There had been hope, even if it had been ebbing away with every second that passed. But here… one moment they were alive, the next, stone cold dead. That little piece of paper and those words from Sansa’s lips had torn away everything she was.

From somewhere further down the beach she heard her name being called. “Arya! Arya!” As it had when she’d run away with Lady after the fight with Joffrey, down by the ruby ford. Only now, it
was not her father or Jory Cassel calling, but her great-uncle Blackfish. She would have gone to her father or Jory. She did not want to go to him. Arya slipped through the campfires, past men who did not know her face and did not care, through the glare of flame and drifting smoke.

Someone grabbed hold of her arm.

Arya whirled round, going for Needle purely out of instinct – then looked up into the face of Gendry.

There was a long moment of silence. He seemed as surprised as she was. “Oh,” said Arya, rather stupidly.

“Mind where you’re going, m’lady,” Gendry said.

The Blackfish’s calling was getting louder. “I need somewhere to hide,” she said. “Now.” Gendry didn’t seem like he was going to help her, so she grabbed his arm and all but forced him back into the smoke and the tents. “Take me to the Brotherhood.”

“Fine,” he said, which surprised her a little. “Come on.” He did not wait for her.

The Brotherhood had made camp in the mouth of one of the caves that pocked Seagard’s coast. There were about two hundred of them in all, Arya reckoned, crowding around a great scarlet fire of piled wood. Hot Pie waved when he looked over and saw her, and Anguy beckoned her close to the fire, where Thoros was telling a story.

“…and she says to me,” Thoros was saying, “She says, ‘Well, I wonder how it got like that.’ ‘So do I,’ I said, ‘must be all that work you’re putting in.’”

A roar of laughter went up around the campfire. Then Thoros looked up and saw Arya and Gendry. “…and speaking of lovebirds.”

“Piss off, Thoros,” Gendry said.

“Oh, not lovebirds, then?” The red priest snorted. “Don’t lie to me. There’s no tricking Thoros of Myr, the wisest red priest this side of Volantis.”

“This side of the beach, you mean,” said Arya.

“My lady has a barbed tongue.” Thoros bowed his head in mock courtesy. “Sharp as a needle.”

_Needle._ There was something in his eyes; something that made her sure that his saying ‘needle’ was no accident. Thoros made his apologies and approached her, out of the hearing of the others. Gendry had gone to the fire, and now Anguy was telling a story. But Thoros’s eyes watched her, so intent and careful. _Come, child, _his eyes said, _there are no lies here._

“Thoros,” she breathed, so quietly she did not know how he could hear it. “You brought Lord Beric back from the dead. And… my mother, too. You brought a ghost back to our world. But… what if it’s not the body that’s the dead bit, after all?”

“What do you mean?” the red priest asked, though Arya was sure he knew.

“There are things,” she admitted. “Things from before that I still don’t remember.”

Thoros nodded. “You lost something, child. I understand that. But what I don’t understand is why you think I can find it. Only you can do that.”
He was, of course, right. And deep down, she’d known that before she’d even started talking to him. She’d run away from Sansa, but Sansa had done nothing wrong. There were others too. They were the way back, and yet she’d cast them aside. Well. It was not too late to start.

She turned, searching the crowd for Gendry, and chanced upon him suddenly. He was staring straight back at her, but when their eyes met he looked away, embarrassed.

“We need to talk,” Arya said, before she could become embarrassed, too.

“About what, m’lady?”

“About… about us.” Why did that sound so foolish now? “Our friendship, I mean.” Gendry only gave her a goggle-eyed look of confusion, so she had to all but drag him out of the crowd. Behind him, the flames from the firepit danced back and forth and spread shadows among them. “You were right,” she began haltingly. “I was lying to you. Earlier, when I said that I hadn’t forgotten you. I had. But not because I wanted to. When I was in the House of Black and White, I forgot almost everything. For what it’s worth, you were one of the last things to go. I forgot some of my family before you.”

And then her breath deserted her. Gendry just stared back, as though struck dumb. Arya wondered if she had said too much. And about my family, was that even true? Then Gendry said, “All right.”

“All right?” The brevity of his response caught her unawares. “That’s all you have to say?”

He shrugged. “Honesty doesn’t need to be long and complicated, does it? You highborn types never seem to get that. It’s easy.”

Arya swallowed and nodded. “Well, I suppose so.”

From somewhere behind him she heard a voice calling her name: “Arya! Arya!” It sounded like Rickon; he must have followed her down to the beach with the Blackfish. She had recovered some, but not enough to see him yet, so she turned to flee, but Gendry caught her arm. “Arry,” he said. “I mean, Lady Arya. You… you look much less like a boy than you used to.” And was it her imagination, or did he redden a little?

“Thank you, Gendry,” she said, very flat and low.

He nodded back. “No problem, m’lady.”

She knew her line now. “Don’t call me m’lady.” And she was about to break out into a smile when she realised that something was wrong. The cold. His breath, and hers, was coming out in great big blue clouds.

And then dogs began to howl. The sound was at once unnatural, sharp enough to make her hair stand up on end. Brooding bitches and fat hounds alike, all howling and yapping in unison. Next it reached the horses, and they started whinnying. The ones tied up beside the Brotherhood’s campfire began to pull at their moorings, kicking up mud and sand. Through it all she heard the Blackfish and Rickon calling her name.

The flames around the campfire began to dwindle, and so did the conversation. Very suddenly the beach fell into morbid silence, and all eyes turned to look in one direction; west, out to the sea.

A storm front was gathering in earnest. The dark grey clouds were rolling in at alarming speed, and the grey waves they carried accelerated angrily towards the coast, like some great beast spreading its arms higher and higher. Then the first bank of waves struck the beach, and exploded violently,
throwing out salt spray and mist. And as she watched, the second wave rose up behind that once, climbing higher still. She looked to Seagard, safe – or seeming safe – atop the rock at the northern end of the beach. But between here and there stretched half a mile or thereabouts of beach, packed with hundreds and thousands of tents, and hundreds and thousands of men. And as Arya watched, she saw those at the water turning, and fleeing up the beach, away from the gathering wave.

They did not run nearly fast enough. The wave hit, impossibly loud, like a giant’s foot crashing down on earth, and when the spray flew up this time, it flew all the way to the cliffs at the back of the beach. It flew over the Brotherhood’s campfire and doused it, and from the beachfront she could hear screaming, and faintly through the mist she saw boats floating adrift, dragged out to sea. And in the mist… who were those figures?

By now the third wave was rising up behind the second. It was a fair ways out, but gaining terrible speed. “Arya!” she heard Rickon again, close to her now, and then she turned and her brother was there, out of breath, and the Blackfish looking haggard behind him.

“Rickon.” Her voice came out hoarse. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“I came looking for you,” he said.

“You shouldn’t have.”

“I had to,” stressed the boy. “I’m your brother. I have to protect you and Sansa both.”

The notion seemed, and frankly, was absurd. “Sansa might,” she said. “I don’t.”

Rickon opened his mouth to intercede but the Blackfish cut over him: “Right now that doesn’t matter. We need to leave. Now. Before the worst of the storm—”

Then Thoros was at her side, too. “I’m afraid there isn’t much chance of that,” he said. “The worst is here.” And he pointed out to the sea.

And the wights came.

Slowly, out of the grey water. They had been floating like bodies on the tide, or walking on the seabed; they must have been. Now they rose, their flesh grey with rot and shiny with frost, eyes sharp and blue. At first she saw only a few, bobbing heads and shoulders, coming out of the water. Then more rose in the gaps between those that had already risen, and in the gaps between them, and in the gaps between them.

Thoros tapped her shoulder. “I think we had best be going, Lady Arya,” he said.

She did not need to be told a second time. Arya grabbed Rickon by the arm, turned, and ran. And as she did so, the fog rolled in on her left side, and screaming things thrashed in the mist. “It’s the other way!” she heard Rickon shouting over them, at last, “the other way!”

So it was: the castle of Seagard was back down the beach, the opposite direction. But there was no going back now. All they could do was keep running, running, running—

Something crashed into her, hard from the left side. Arya flew to the ground and it landed on top, a grey thrashing blur, screeching at her, spitting grey pus and then, abruptly, black blood. It jerked and fell still to the sand. “Up!” Gendry shouted, offering her a hand. His other hand held the sword that was dark with blood. “Up!”

No sooner had she regained her footing than she drew Needle. There was no question that she would
need it. Gendry shoved her forwards. “Come on!”

A few paces ahead, she found the Blackfish fighting off two of them. Arya broke away from Gendry and joined him at the front. The Blackfish hamstrung the wights, and she stabbed them through the mouth, which made them jerk and go still. Dead, she guessed, or deader than dead. Absurdly she thought, what would Jaqen H’ghar make of this?

Then the Blackfish grabbed her, and pulled her along. They backed along the beach, stumbling through the mist and sand, and the waves beating violent against the shoreline. Three times more they ran into wights, and she joined the Blackfish and Thoros in fending them off. Gendry stayed back, keeping them away from Rickon, who, despite his sword, was not skilled enough or calm enough to deal with them. She was grateful for that.

She did not feel too panicked. They had known that the dead would come sooner or later, hadn’t they? Her only worries were for Sansa, because if the wights attacked the beach, they would eventually reach the castle. But she could count on Sandor Clegane to get her sister away by then. Even if it means hitting her over the head, as he did to me. But if he saved me at the Twins, he will certainly save Sansa here.

Their own escape would not be so easy. The wailing on the beach was getting louder and louder, the dead men and the waves both growing in noise and ferocity. The mist was thickening too. Once or twice she lost sight of Thoros, but his sword was burning now, so mercifully she was able to find him again.

It was not just wights crowding the beach, but men too, all trying to force their way up the cliffs that led to safety by way of cliffside paths. Vast lines had formed, men pushing against one another frantically, crushing one another. Once, looking up, she saw two men fly backwards from a cliff, locked in a violent embrace, and come crashing down headfirst into the crowd.

“Come on!” shouted Thoros, passing them by. Arya understood what he was doing. They were trying to find the more deserted places to climb up, where they would be less likely to be thrown from the rocks or swarmed by wights.

And his plan nearly worked. If only, she would think later, if only we had run a little faster, a little farther, we might have made it to the steps before they made it to us.

As it was, they came together at the same time. The wights came howling in from the coast, smashing into their little pack like a portside wave. Arya spun and plunged Needle through one of them; it squirmed up her blade, she kicked it off, and it fell screaming to the ground, still scrabbling in the black sand.

“The steps!” The Blackfish shoved her back, towards the rocks. Rickon was already making his way up. The steps were steep and slick with rainwater and overgrown moss, cut into the cliff like the rungs of a ladder. She had to put her sword away to begin the climb. Rickon went up first, and she after him – she wanted to stay, but Gendry pushed her on. He turned back to join the fighting, but she heard his raised voice arguing with Thoros, and when she looked down, Gendry was coming up after her, and behind him her uncle Brynden.

But Thoros of Myr was not. As Arya watched, he slashed the bright edge of his blade across his palm, and the sword came alive with red-hot fire. Thoros swung it around his head, once, twice, and it became a lasso of flame, swirling through the wights as they tried to swarm the steps. The fog grew thin around him, and watching from above Arya could see the wights cringing back, hissing, and catching like kindling whenever they stepped too close. They caught, and burned, black flesh turning to red, blazing meat, and the smell of the smoke rising up the ladder as she fought for every foothold.
But it could not last forever. She was about halfway up when she noticed the smoke starting to thin again. When she looked down, the light of Thoros’s sword was growing weak. And the wights were ignoring him, and starting up the steps. They had none of the trouble she or the others had; they simply scrambled atop one another, and if they fell backwards from the rain-slick handholds and crashed to the beach below, so be it. They would endure.

She heard her voice being called. “Arya!” it came. “Arya!” At first she looked up, thinking it was Rickon, but it came from below her, and she realised it was the Blackfish. He looked up at her through the reign, Tully blue eyes glinting and his black cloak streaming behind him like a banner. “Arya, child,” he said, very softly this time, but she still heard him. And already she knew what was going to happen next, and likewise, with Gendry between him and her, she knew there was nothing she could do to stop it.

“Arya,” he said again. “Remember the Tully words. Don’t you dare forget them.” And with that, he turned, and started back down the steps, to join the fading light of Thoros. She watched him a long way, as he forced his way through the ascending wights, turning their heads to follow him, and then as he leapt from ten feet up, crashing down in the sand. The light of Thoros’s sword blared up again – she could not say who was wielding it, the red priest of her uncle – but by then Gendry was right behind her, forcing her up, “Go! Go!”

So she kept going. Family, duty, honor; she thought. I will remember those words. And then she was at the top of the steps, and Gendry was coming up behind her, and the others were not, and she knew they never would be.

Her brother Rickon looked at her, and in that brief moment before they starting running again, she saw in his eyes that he was thinking the same thing.

Chapter End Notes

Don't say anything, I know what you're all thinking... Did I just kill Hot Pie?

The answer is no. Hot Pie, along with Ser Pounce, is actually immortal. Somehow, he'll make his way back to Sansa, who, being up at the castle with the Hound and Pod the Rod, made it out of this one okay (probably).

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Seagard is something I've been building up to for a while. I intended for this to be like Hardhome in the show, in that it comes out of nowhere and hits you... well, hard. And I'm sorry to report that we lost both Thoros and the Blackfish to the wights here, though they definitely went out heroically, if that's worth anything to you.

Thoros has been a character I've had fun with (though I think both the books and - to a greater extent, the show - do much more with him than I have been able to here). Now that I think about it, Thoros comes up rather more often than I'd previously thought, being a perennially familiar face among the somewhat vague mass of the Brotherhood without Banners. And he has some good roles, usually as a dramatic foil to whatever POV characters are speaking with him: Jaime, Brienne, Sansa, and most recently Arya.

But it is the Blackfish I am really here to mourn. I think Ser Brynden epitomises the spirit of House Tully far more than his nephew does. And furthermore, I think the
Blackfish has saved me as a writer no less than four or five times. It was his involvement that resolved both the "Riverrun knot" of A COAT OF GOLD and the absolute mess that was the "Harrenhal knot" in THE SUNSET KINGDOMS. Perhaps it's a little flippant to call Ser Brynden a supporting character, but he is just that: a character who provides support to the main protagonists, but is silently invaluable in a way that they don't realise his impact until he is gone.

And they will.
Chapter Summary

“Do you know what legacy means? It’s what you pass on to your children, and your children’s children. It’s what remains of you when you’re gone.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

TYRION

Up here, they could see not only the Gates of the Moon in the middle distance, but the crags and the mountains beyond that, rising higher and higher through the bands of blueish-grey sky. Somewhere, too, was the Eyrie, and the Moon Door, and though he had seen it deserted he could feel its presence, looming down, and the Moon Door staring out from the stone like a great eye.

Penny’s fingers dug into the back of his jerkin; her voice registered a little nervous surprise. Tyrion willed the dragon to descend a little, whispering under his breath. The wind tore his command away but Viserion heard it nonetheless, and spread his wings wider, and they dropped through ten feet, through twenty, fifty, a hundred, and further still. When they were just skimming over the treetops the white-and-gold dragon levelled out of his dive.

“Look!” Penny called. Tyrion turned his head and looked down into the forest. He could see a few tents in a ring, around a campfire that was little more than a speck. And then he saw another campfire further on, and another. We are getting close, he thought, urging Viserion to slow his glide. He turned back to look at Shagga son of Dolf and Gunthor son of Gurn, both clinging to the dragon’s scaled neck with more worry than they’d ever admit to. The clansmen both wore thick, frost-bitten furs and leather cuirasses, and the axes in their belts were freshly honed in the moonlight. With them were five more Stone Crows, which was as many as Viserion could reasonably carry. Tyrion had chosen the Stone Crows for this part of the mission as he trusted them – or, at least, he trusted them more than the other clansmen, and he found Shagga to be stupider than most of the other clan leaders, which was a good thing. Shagga only cared about blood and wine, and once they got onto the castle walls Tyrion could give him once, and Bronze Yohn Royce surely did not keep an empty cellar.

He wondered if Royce had seen them yet, since the night was doing a rather good job of hiding their approach. I hope not, he thought, let the man shit himself where I can see him. Right now Bronze Yohn would be standing on the battlements – in the thick of battle, Tyrion expected no less – wearing his stupid runic armour with its unintelligible symbols that the old man thought would give him courage somehow. “My ancestors have defeated the mountain savages for thousands of years,
every time you come out from your nests,” his envoy had said. “I will do the same, only I will pursue you further.”

Bronze Yohn did not know about Viserion – more than that, Bronze Yohn did not know about Tyrion, who had been planning this from the start. He had told Shagga, Timett son of Timett and Chella daughter of Cheyk to set up camp beneath the Gates of the Moon, in full sight of Lord Royce but out of range of his bows and mangonels. Four thousand men in all: surely not such a fearsome sight. On the first day the clansmen had motioned for parley by waving a flag, but Lord Royce himself, not wanting to sully his honour by treating with savages, had sent instead a knight of his garrison, one Ser Harrold Hardyng, to deliver a message to the heathens. Ser Harrold had been seen off with jeers and catcalls, but no doubt he had returned to Bronze Yohn with a smile on his face: the savages numbered surprisingly few, and half of them were women and children, and their warriors were horribly disorganised, they had not even dug latrine pits. One good sortie would see them dispelled for the hills.

Of course, Shagga’s four thousand were not the only clansmen; there were some ten thousand more hidden in the forest behind them, so that if Bronze Yohn rallied his men, routed the savages and pursued – which he had done, on the second night of the siege, keeping his promise, ever an honourable man, Tyrion thought – he would find himself faced with rather more savages than he had reckoned. Or so Tyrion had told Shagga.

Tyrion, though, was not as stupid as to believe this would work. He had met Bronze Yohn briefly at one of King Robert’s tournaments, and the Vale’s second most important lord was an honourable man, but also shrewd, far more so than Ned Stark or any of his honourable peers. And he knew that Bronze Yohn would know about the clansmen hidden in the trees, whether because of his scouts, or because of experience. So he knew that Bronze Yohn had sent a contingent of men wide to either side, to envelop the retreating clansmen and catch them in a pincer movement in the trees. And nay, more than that, Bronze Yohn had proved his reputation by having his men feed their trebuchets with pitch-coated barrels, which could be hurled into the forest to smoke the clansmen out of hiding.

Tyrion almost smiled at that. Why, Father, I think if you were here, you would have done exactly the same. Which would lend a certain additional satisfaction when all of Bronze Yohn’s carefully laid plans and counter-plans were burned to cinders.

The forest was falling away beneath them. The thick pines and conifers retreated to shrubbery, and then it was all grass, mushrooms, and craggy rocks, all the way up the shallow incline towards the castle, stately on its rock. The clansmen would not take it alone, not in a thousand years of siege. But Tyrion Lannister would.

And Tyrion Lannister did.

The dragon’s descent and all that followed it did not require much recounting. Even then, he remembered it only in fragments; Viserion’s great white wings spreading, more bird than reptile for a moment, his scaled feet crashing down on the ramparts; the dragon blowing out great bursts of pale yellow flame, scorching the stones; arrows firing back and being turned turned into black dust even as they flew, never reaching their target. Then the Valemen were falling back, and surrendering, and in a matter of minutes the wallwalk was clear and he had men rallied to him. They went up to the gate, and they opened it, and below, the forces of the mountain clansmen streamed it.

All of this lasted a matter of minutes. Then he dismounted Viserion, and went to find Chella daughter of Cheyk and Timett. Their men were clearing out the castle proper, he was told, defeating whatever forces Bronze Yohn had managed to keep onside with a dragon bearing down on them. And then that was done too, and together they headed through to the heart of the castle.
The lord’s solar was well-furnished in some dark wood, and large windows looked out over the blue-lit forests. There were sky-blue Arryn banners hanging above the hearth. “Take these down,” Tyrion instructed the clansmen. He had no Lannister banners to replace them, but surely there were idle women among the clansfolk who were good with a needle and thread.

Once the banners were carried off he found a flagon of red wine in a cupboard, and warmed it in a cup over the hearth while he waited for the Valemen. Shagga and Timett sat at the table by the door, tucking into a supper of bloody beef and pease. Tyrion waited at the window, watching as the last of Royce’s men surrendered in the courtyard and as the mountain clansfolk rumbled steadily through the gate. He was beginning to wish he had left orders to close the gate after a time, since the Gates of the Moon could not have nearly enough in its larders to accommodate them all, but it was too late now.

Then there came a succession of rough grunting noises from the stairway and up came Bronze Yohn Royce, Lord Redfort of Redfort, and Robert Arryn, the Lord of the Eyrie and the Warden of the East, looking as snotty and brattish as ever. Tyrion went and took his seat behind the lord’s desk, wine cup affixed firmly in his hand.

Lord Royce began: “You will regret this, Imp. You may have taken this castle through treachery, but the Belmores and the Waynwoods are on their way, and your army of savages has no way of holding this castle.”

“Perhaps,” said Tyrion. “But my army of savages have a habit of fighting rather fiercely on open ground. And with a dragon behind them… no, you delude yourself, my lord. The Belmores, the Waynwoods, and all your other allies will surrender as quickly as you did. Unless, of course, they have some way of killing dragons that I do not know about.”

Lord Redfort said, “If you think you can steal the Vale—”

“I have stolen the Vale, my lord. Pathetic though you look, you three are the most powerful lords in this part of the world. True, you might have sons and heirs to follow you, but I can fly to Runestone on the morrow and to Redfort the day after, and I will do them as I have done here, only worse. I will do to your castles as Aegon the Conqueror did to Harrenhal, as my lord father did to the Reynes of Castamere. I will burn your smallfolk alive and reduce the ancient seats of your families to rubble. But I do not need to. Swear your fealty to me here and now, and I will spare you that fate.”

There was a long moment of silence. The Arryn boy’s jaw was wobbling, and Lord Redfort looked a little taken back. But it was Bronze Yohn who spoke out. “Here is for your offerings.” He spat on the ground at Tyrion’s feet.

“Shagga,” Tyrion called. “Come and teach his lordship what the Stone Crows do to those who defy them.”

Shagga rumbled to his feet and unslung his axe. “Gladly, Halfman.” He turned the flat of his weapon towards Lord Royce and raised it.

“Stop,” Tyrion said. “Not to him. To the Arryn boy.”

Shagga stopped. “To the boy?”

“I don’t like the way he looks at me. And if he is as I remember, the brat could do with a good sharp lesson. Wouldn’t you say so, Lord Royce? And you, Lord Redfort?”

Neither of the Vale lords moved a muscle. “Well,” said Tyrion. “Lessons must be taught.” Shagga
raised the axe.

“Stop!” shouted the Arryn boy. “Lord Royce, do something, do something, do something!” His arms flailed through the air.

Lord Royce let out a choked noise of disgust. “We cannot surrender to him, my lord.”

“He was going to hit me!” Robert wailed. Tyrion reckoned the brat was on the verge of a shaking fit. “You’re supposed to defend me! I’m the lord of the Vale! I’M THE LORD OF THE VALE!”

“Not anymore,” said Tyrion. “I am the lord of the Vale now. And unless you want Shagga to hit you, you had better get down on your knees and say it. Say ‘I relinquish control of the Vale of Arryn to Tyrion of House Lannister.’”

Robert stood there shivering. “I… I re… relinquish… re…” Suddenly he ran out of breath, shaking his head. “I won’t do it. I won’t, I won’t, I—”

“Very well. Shagga, hit him.”

For a moment he thought Shagga might object to hitting a child. But whatever the mountain clansmen understood of honour, it did not include objections to this. Shagga swung the flat of the axe, straight into Robert’s shoulder. The boy howled and toppled to the ground, and erupted into screams as though Shagga had hit him with the sharp end instead of the flat.

That may have been misjudged, Tyrion reflected. We will not get another word out of him for the rest of the night, and we will certainly not get anything out of Royce or—

“Imp,” said Lord Redfort, tersely. “If we surrender to you, will you have mercy on Lord Robert, at least? The boy is…”

—currently lying on the floor and screaming,” Tyrion said. “Well. He should be thankful that at least one of his lords bannermen has some sense. I will spare your family and your castle, Lord Redfort. And… yes, I think Lord Robert has been punished enough for one night. I cannot offer the same mercy to Lord Royce, though. I’m sure you understand.”

“I… yes, I do.”

“Yes? Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“Yes…” Redfort swallowed. “My lord.”

“You will have heard that a Lannister always pays his debts, Lord Redfort,” Tyrion said. He paused. Let them wallow in their fear a moment. “Well. ‘Tis true. Timett, see that Lord Redfort is given comfortable lodgings within the castle. As for the others, a cell will suit just fine.”

Lord Royce gave him a look like thunder. “I spit on you, Imp. You and all your twisted family. You think this will last forever, eh? Mark my words, you will lose the Vale soon enough, and you will end up dead in the ground same as your father and your nephews.”

“Oh, believe me,” said Tyrion. “My father and my nephew long for my comp—” Then everything went cold. “You said nephews? With an S. What did you mean?”

Lord Royce fell silent. But by then, of course, Tyrion already knew. I swear, uncle, I will not let them take you. “King Tommen is dead?”
“From what we have heard,” said Royce. “Your sister reigns in Casterly Rock now. Or that vile daughter of hers. Were you planning on delivering the Vale to them, Imp?”

Was I? “Not anymore.” His face became a mask of steel fury. “And here you sit gloating.”

“I bore the boy no ill will,” said Lord Royce. “As for his sister, and the plans she hatched with Littlefinger—”

“Littlefinger?”

Royce frowned. “You don’t know, do you?”

“Know what?”

He was about to speak, but his lunatic lord got there first. “I married Myrcella!” he shouted. “And she tried to kill me! She poisoned me!” His arms flapped, his face went pale. “She and Lord Petyr, they tried to kill me, they did, they did! We should have killed her, killed her, ki-i-i-illed her!” Abruptly his whole body started to shaking. “Ripped off her head and threw her the Moon Door!”

Royce, seeing Tyrion’s face change, put a stern hand on his ward’s shoulder. “My lord—”

“Should have cut her up and hanged her and killed her and b-b-burned her!” Froth coated his lips. “Killed that… that… that… b…” His face went bright red, and finally he blew out the last syllable. “Bitch!” There he stood awhile panting, his eyes bulging and rolling like great slimy eggs.

When Tyrion spoke his voice was ice-cold. “Lord Royce,” he said. “I know your sons have all been killed. But you have a daughter, do you not?”

Royce’s eyes were like brimstone. “I do.”

“And I assume you would want her to survive the coming winter?”

“I would.”

“Then you would do well to follow my instructions. Else I might take a leaf from my lord father’s book.”

Royce did not reply.

Tyrion said, “Hit Lord Arryn.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Hit Lord Arryn. Strike him. Do to him as his mother should have done, a long time ago.”

“Lord Arryn is my liege lord.” But even then, Royce did not sound so sure.

“Not anymore. You do not serve the Arryns, Royce. You serve the Lord of the Vale, and the Warden of the East. I am the lord of the Vale now. You will do as I command you.”

“I will not.”

“You will. Unless you want your daughter and the rest of your House to suffer the fate of the Reynes.” Or worse yet, the fate of Tysha. The cold anger in him was not a sensible one anymore: it never had been. But right now, it was all he had. “You say my nephew is dead. You say Tommen is
dead. And yet this vile wretch—” He pointed at Robert Arryn. “—still baffles the Seven Kingdoms by continuing to live. I despise him. I want him gone. For now I have decided to be merciful – maybe soon I will realise there has been no point to this – but for now… for now, I will be content to see him bruise.”

Royce stepped between Tyrion and the boy. “Lord Arryn is a child.”

“Young daughter is not.”

“I offer myself in his place—”

“My father always said you were an honourable man, Lord Royce. And a stupid one. No. It is the boy I want to see struck. And you will do it now. Else I will fetch your daughter right this moment, and – what was it the boy said? – I will rip off her head before your very eyes. So you will hit him.” He could see Royce’s thin, angry lips contorting into an expression of utmost anger. But it was not entirely directed at him. “And no games now. You will hit him hard. If he does not bleed, you will hit him again until he does.”

“My lord,” said Royce.

He says ‘lord’ now. Tyrion held up a hand. “Five.”

“Lord Tyrion—”

“Four.”

The boy Robert opened his mouth. “Hit him, Lord Royce, hit him!”

Shagga gripped his axe.

“Three.”

“My lord Tyrion—”

“KILL HIM, LORD ROYCE!”

“Two.”

“I ORDER YOU TO KILL HIM!”

“One.”

“KILL THE IMP!”

Lord Royce swung round. Robert Arryn crashed to the floor, hard. When he rolled over, blood was pouring from his nose in fits and starts. The boy made a thin, whining sound that reminded Tyrion of Joffrey, choking at his wedding. Lord Royce stood above him, eyes dull with horror. “You will burn in hell someday, Imp,” he said in a very calm voice.

“Says the man who just struck down his liege lord.” Tyrion felt no pity for the snivelling thing on the floor. Bitterness, perhaps – it did not have to be done – and yet resignation too – because it did. “If I am headed for hell, Lord Royce – and I don’t doubt that I am – I will not be there alone.”

He was done with Bronze Yohn now. He turned to Shagga. “Take them to their cells.”

Lord Redfort had stood by quite placidly watching it all. Now he turned to Tyrion. “Neither of them
will forget that, you know.”

“I do not intend for them to. I do not intend for Lord Arryn to forget what Lord Royce did to him. If you wish to kill a snake, chop off its head. If you wish to kill two snakes, save yourself the effort and watch them kill each other.

He motioned for Timett to lead Lord Redfort out. When that was done, Tyrion stood alone in the lord’s solar of the Gates of the Moon. From the walls the stone busts and tapestries of Arryn lords past stared down at him through eyes like bright blue sky. Judging him, he did not doubt. Everyone else had already judged him a hundred times over.

The Andals had landed here in the Vale thousands of years ago. They had brought those most stalwart of judges with them, the Seven Who Were One. He imagined the Father staring down at him, with his marble stare even colder than the eyes of Tywin Lannister. I wish I was the monster you seem to think I am, he thought. I wish I was as cruel and twisted as you all want me to be to prove yourselves correct.

The door of the solar opened then, and Penny crept in, closing the heavy iron door behind her as quietly as she could, which was not very quiet at all. Tyrion looked round at her and tried to smile. Doubtless that was even more horrifying than his already unsettled expression. Penny seemed to shrink back a little. Then she summoned her courage, and advanced. “Tyrion—”

“Don’t,” he said. “Don’t talk to me about anything you heard while you were waiting outside.”

“I wasn’t—”

“You were. Don’t lie to me.” But even so the fear on her face was enough to make him soften his tone. “It doesn’t matter, though. What you heard shouldn’t have been a surprise to you. And before you say anything, I know you’re right. I didn’t have to do it. But I did. Because I wanted to. How does that make you feel?”

Her eyes went wide. “Tyrion,” she said at last. “My lord… I wasn’t… I really wasn’t, I just got here, I swear. I saw Shagga taking the boy-lord down the steps, but nothing else.”

To believe, or not to believe? At last he relented. “Have a drink, Penny.”

“I... a drink, my lord.”

“No. A drink, my lord.”

“Tyrion. Not ‘my lord’. Call me by my name. I tend to seek deference from taller men. But we have a charity in height. You can hardly tower over me.” As he spoke he poured her a cup of wine, and set it down on the table. “Come and drink. If you do not, I will have to drink it myself. And I think we will both regret that.”

Penny did as he had asked, sort of. She held the cup in uncertain hands and sniffed the contents suspiciously. Then she took a cautious sip. “It’s good,” she said.

“I should hope so,” Tyrion replied. “I haven’t had Arbor red since the Sealord’s palace.”

“I haven’t had Arbor red in my life,” mumbled Penny. But she took another sip. Tyrion watched her drink.

“Tysha was fond of wine,” he said, out of nowhere. “In truth, that should have been the clue. She was innocent, truly. She had never known a wine-flush in her life. I thought as much, then, but later… after… I dismissed it as the trick of a mummer.” He looked at Penny. “You were a mummer. Tell me, Penny, is it not easy for a mummer to play a role of far greater power than they truly boast?”
“It… is. Not for me, because I was always too small to pretend to power, but for some. Groat could do it, even. He made voices. And he made Crunch look like a great stallion rather than just the dog that he was.”

“But it was easy, wasn’t it? Not like weakness. The great and the powerful have never known weakness, so they never know how to feign it. Weakness, nervousness, fear, insecurity, you cannot pretend them, unless you have truly known them. Just as kings and high lords can never know the perils and worries of their lowly subjects.” He considered that a moment. “Or, at least, it is very rare.”

Penny was listening intently. Her eyes were blue and big as speckled eggs. “I don’t think I have ever known it either. Weakness. Not properly. My name always kept me from the worst of it. My father mistrusted laughter. Whereas I… I despise it. If they had laughed at me, I would have struck them down. I would have proved to them that the monster inside me was real. I would sooner die than be laughed at, Penny. Do not forget that.”

Now it was Penny’s turn to heal him, to soothe him with her naïve balm. “You won’t, though,” she said. “You won’t die, not here, because you haven’t gotten back to Gerion yet.”

She was right, of course. Because if I am right about Gerion, I am right about Tysha, and I cannot die without knowing the truth about her. And when I learn that truth, it may be that I cannot live with it.

“We had best set about finding him, then.”

“Where?” she asked.

Where indeed? She meant Gerion, but he was thinking of Tysha. And he knew, at once, where to find her. “I have been travelling for years now, Penny,” he said. “I have gone as far as I can alone.” From the Rock to King’s Landing to the Wall to King’s Landing again, to Braavos and then to here, to end of this road. “And when you have come this far, there is only one place to go. Back.”

Chapter End Notes

Often, when I am writing Tyrion, I ask myself "can I see Peter Dinklage saying these words?" I do this with other characters, but I think Dinklage and Tyrion are so synonymous now for me that I can't see anything else.

I do think show Tyrion has fallen a long way in Seasons 6 and 7. I would be willing to defend Season 5 Tyrion - his journey to Meereen was largely an improvement over endless repetitions of "where do whores go?" (Yes, I am a Season 5 apologist). I also think Tyrion was at his best in Season 4, at his most tortured and vindictive. I think, sadly, that this is a point to which his character is always forced to return. We never got this in A COAT OF GOLD, since forces intervened to prevent Tyrion from making his fantastic trial speech, but I see this chapter as something of a substitution.

I hope you didn't mind me skipping over the early parts, such as the siege - for what it's worth, it's pretty much exactly what we saw with Daenerys and Brightwater Keep earlier. The focus of this chapter, though, is the scene in the Lord’s solar, which is uncomfortably, even agonisingly, long and torturous. And it is here that we see something that the show has forgotten, and indeed, I think, has never been brave enough
to recognise: that Tyrion Lannister is no saint. Tyrion is most definitely his father's son, as Genna Lannister wisely noted in A Feast for Crows. The ultimatum has aspects of The Rains of Castamere to it. It's up to you whether you believe Tyrion was genuine in his threat regarding Royce's daughter, but bear in mind that he threatened to have Tommen beaten in A Clash of Kings after Cersei took possession of Alayaya.

Towards the end of the chapter, Tyrion makes this speech to Penny:

“The great and the powerful have never known weakness, so they never know how to feign it. Weakness, nervousness, fear, insecurity, you cannot pretend them, unless you have truly known them. Just as kings and high lords can never know the perils and worries of their lowly subjects. Or, at least, it is very rare.”

The irony here is that Tyrion doesn't know what these things are truly like, either. Which, I think, is the purpose of Penny as a dramatic foil to Tyrion: she is proof that he has, in truth, not had it too bad after all.

We end this chapter with some musings on the great unresolved thread of Tysha. And the Tyrion's intentions are regarding her and Gerion is a matter of perception, too.

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More news: as a result of several busy things converging all at once, there will be no further updates on KNIGHTS OF THE NIGHTINGALE until at least June 20th, 2018.

That being said, you can probably expect a greater number of updates over the summer: I hope to get to Chapter 60 by September, which may seem like quite a big ask, but there's a lot of stuff planned out that can be, for want of a better phrase, "scrawled down".
The meeting place was a grey rise about half a mile from the city walls, where the ground had frozen hard beneath the onslaught of snow and frost. Lord Stannis had arrived first, for it was he who had called this parley. But even if he had not done so, Jaime would have expected to see him arrive first, both in tribute to his famous punctuality and the unfortunate desperation of his current cause.

The Baratheon banners - some stags trapped in their fiery hearts, others the plain banner of Robert at Storm’s End – had ringed themselves on one side of the rise, and beyond their wall sat the king and his commanders. As they drew close, Jaime recognised the knight Ser Godry Farring, whom he remembered from Pyke, and next to him Ser Davos Seaworth the Onion Knight, who had been at Casterly Rock not so long ago, though they had never spoken. They were to be expected, flanking their gaunt king on either side.

Others were more unlikely. Stannis had Tytos Blackwood with him: Lord Tytos of the hollow eyes and the bowed neck and the narrow-shouldered armour. But Blackwood himself was not so much a surprise: what was a surprise was seeing him beside Jonos Bracken. The lord of Stone Hedge had been sent out by Cersei to hunt down Blackwood and Stannis. Yet now he had returned, riding at this iron king’s side. And stranger still, Ser Lyle Crakehall and Ser Addam Marbrand, who had been given the same command and had, apparently, failed as Bracken had. Bracken appeared to have lost an arm.

Stranger yet was that Stannis was accompanied by women – girls, even. The greyscaled one was his daughter, Princess Shireen, who could not be more than sixteen. The other had black hair cut short and shining blue eyes, and a bright red bruise all the way across one cheek. Jaime knew at once that she must be a daughter of Robert. She is what Myrcella might have looked like, if she had been trueborn.

Despite the haggardness of their enemy, the Lannister complement seemed diminished by comparison. Jaime was their great leader, as strong and effective as old bones. And the rest – Captains Vylarr and Forley, Ser Steffon Swyft, Ser Damion Lannister – were Cersei’s sycophants and old men past their time. And no doubt half of them would ride back to Casterly Rock and report
It was Stannis who initiated the conversation. “Ser Jaime,” he began. “I was pleasantly surprised that you answered my call for parley.”

“Sieges are dull,” Jaime told him, repeating what Brynden Tully had told him at Riverrun. “I wanted to come out and see you myself, and get the measure of you.” It was not hard to sound more confident than he felt. He had been doing that his entire life.

“Well,” said Stannis. “Now you have.”

“Aye, now I have.”

There was quiet for a long moment.

“I see you wear a golden Hand’s pin on your breast,” Stannis said at last. “Are you compensating, perhaps?”

Jaime frowned. Was that a joke, from the lips of Stannis Baratheon?

“I fear no number of hands can make up for the one I lost.”

“Mmm.” That reply meant something else to Stannis, something Jaime could not decipher. “As is often the case.” There was another pause. “You may not have heard, so I am sorry to have to bring this blow. Your uncle Kevan is dead.”

Well. He had expected that, somehow, indescribably. “How did he die?”

“Fighting,” said Stannis. “Fighting alongside me and my men. Against the greater enemy, that is even now descending upon us. The army of the dead. Ser Kevan understood their threat, and the threat of the Long Night. But now he is dead, and his responsibility falls to you, Ser Jaime, as his nephew – and heir, I suppose.”

“The white walkers—”

“Are no stories,” said Stannis. “I understand you will not believe me. So I will leave it to comrades of yours who have recognised the truth of this threat.”

Ser Lyle Crakehall rode forwards, his big frame tired and weary. “He speaks truly, Jaime. The dead are coming. Hundreds of them, thousands. The ironborn – I know not if they ever lived at all, but they are not men now, not anymore. They will come down on us soon, and when they have finished, they will turn their eyes to Lannisport and the Rock.”

Jaime was about to reply, but Ser Steffon Swyft spoke for him. “You are just trying to scare us, Lord Stannis. It will not work. Westermen do not surrender so easily.”

Addam Marbrand rode forwards: “Look around you, Steffon, you fool. You think Ser Lyle and Ser Kevan and I surrendered? No, we chose to band together with Lord Stannis, because it was the only way we were going to survive another night in that hell. And while we stand here waiting and preparing to kill one another, they stand out there, in the fog, waiting. And when we have killed one another, when the battlefield is strewn with corpses, then they will come down like vultures and then they will feast.”

His words sent a chill through Jaime. He speaks the truth. Or, at the very least, he thinks he does. “And suppose,” he said, wary that Vylarr was listening, probably recording his every word so he could tell Cersei later, “suppose that what you say is true. What would you have us do?”
“Open the gates of the city,” said Stannis. “Let our armies in. Stand with us against the darkness, against the coming storm. Believe me, Kingslayer, I want this no more than you do. But if we do not join our forces, we will all surely die.”

Ser Davos Seaworth added his words to his king’s. “At Kayce,” he said, “when Ser Kevan was dying, he told me to carry his words on, and remember his example. I now pass his words on to you, Ser Jaime, and beg that you follow his lead.”

There was a long silence. “I want to believe you, my lord,” Jaime said to Stannis. “But I remember how my father took King’s Landing from Aerys. How Lord Tywin offered him a poisoned chalice, and how Aerys went willingly to it, and drank. And all that was between them was Rhaegar’s refusal to marry Cersei. The differences that divide us are far greater. You still desire the Iron Throne, do you not?”

Stannis’s breath misted in the air. Jaime could see that some of his advisors were looking at the king, interested to hear his response.

“Yes,” said Stannis. “The Iron Throne has always been my goal, and nothing less than death will stop me from reaching it. But I am willing to put aside my conquest until the war against the dead is won. It may be that when the war ends, we will be enemies again. But until such a time, I am willing to set aside my distaste for you and your house for the sake of mankind.”

The thing was, Jaime really believed him. Yet… “I am, as you correctly stated, Lord Stannis, only the Hand of the Queen. And so I must consult with my sweet sister before any action can be taken.”

“Yes, I am the Hand of the Queen,” said Stannis. “Now Vylarr and Ser Steffon will report only that to Cersei, and she will be entirely justified in her refusal of Stannis. “My sister may not have the Iron Throne,” he said flatly, “but she is Queen of the Westerlands, and has as much a claim to it as you do, Lord Stannis.”

“She is not the Queen of the Westerlands either,” said Stannis. “Not by any measure. Thrones pass to siblings before they return to the previous generation, do they not?”

He waved his hand, and two of the horses behind him parted, and through the gap rode Myrcella and, impossibly, Brienne of Tarth. Jaime could only stare at them agape. But Cersei said she was at Crakehall. And Brienne is supposed to be at Harrenhal, with Sansa Stark. And yet here they were: both looking worse for wear, yet somehow more permanent. Their eyes seemed frostier, their skins harder. And when Myrcella spoke her words were four knives. “Will you run again?”

“Myrcella.” He could not manage anything more than a whisper. “I—”

“Save your breath,” she said. “I do not want to hear anything from you. It would be lies anyhow.”

But he could not hold back what he had held back for so long. “I am sorry about—”

“Don’t speak his name. You don’t deserve to speak his name. You did not deserve him as a son, and he certainly did not deserve you as a father.” She put it out so bluntly that words failed him again. “Don’t bother denying it. I have already told Lord Stannis about your admission of guilt. Not that he needed it. All of Westeros knows of your falsehood.” She paused and said, “Kingslayer.” When she said it, it worse than the thousand times that had come before combined.

He looked to Brienne, hoping for a supporting look, for something, anything. She stared back at him with bland eyes.
“They are my captives,” said Stannis. “And they will be for the rest of their lives. Which will not be long, if you fail to open the city gates.” He paused to let that settle a moment. “I will give you three days, starting tomorrow. No more. If you have not opened the gates by dawn on the third day, I will take your daughter and this Tarth woman out before the walls of Lannisport and execute them both myself.”

“Ser Jaime.” That was Brienne, speaking in the brief silence. She did not plead. Not with her words. But her eyes did. “Do the right thing,” she said.

There was nothing more to be said after that. Stannis turned his horse about to go. The others did the same. All save for Princess Shireen, who instead, beyond her father’s gaze, rode out, closer to Jaime’s side, now in the ripe position to be captured in return. A daughter for a daughter, Jaime thought for an instant.

She looked up at him. Her eyes were wise beyond her years, and full of sorrow. “I was sorry to hear about Lord Tommen,” she said, quite simply. “He would have been… no, he was, a good man.” A long pause ensued. She looked round suspiciously at Vylarr and the others. “And if you are sorry too, then I think you know what “I am going to say.”

She was right. He did. Princess Shireen turned her horse around and rode back to her father. None of them took a second glance back. Jaime was left alone on his lonely side of the field.

“Ser,” said Captain Vylarr. “The Queen Regent—”

“Will want to harass me about this, yes. Thank you for reminding me, Vylarr. Do you think her spies have made it back to the Rock yet with the news?”

“Ser?”

Jaime wanted to hit him. Wanted to hit all of them, more for their pretense of righteousness than anything. Look at you all, eating out of her hand. She does not have you bound as she does me, and yet you allow yourselves to be ensnared by her, enslaved by her. “Nothing, captain,” he said. “Back to the Rock, then?” He set off without waiting for a reply.

The road from Lannisport to Casterly Rock was about a mile along the coast. They had to ride back through the city first, entering by the eastern gate which faced Stannis’s camp. The walls of the city were some thirty feet high and damaged in places by Stannis’s assaults last year, but they and their measly garrison were enough to keep the Baratheon army out.

Not just Baratheon, Jaime told himself. Baratheon and Lannister, and make no mistake of it. Myrcella was a captive, but Crakehall and Marbrand had been there of their own free will, and the same had been true for Ser Kevan, apparently. In which case, Lannister army outside the castle walls was nearly as large as the one inside it.

Not that it meant much for either side. The city garrison numbered maybe five thousand, fewer than had defended King’s Landing at the Blackwater. But Stannis’s attacking army was even smaller than that. Both sides knew that if the battle was fought, the defender would inevitably be victorious. Not only did the numbers favour them, but they had Qyburn’s engines, the result of the maester’s machinations these past two years. They had tested them on the fields ahead of Lannisport, a few days before Stannis arrived. The engines consisted of great hollow iron barrels, from which white-hot stones could be launched into the air when powder was lit; when the stones reached earth, they shattered in explosions of mud and stone.

They had a dozen of these engines or thereabouts; the soldiers had been given them the usual names:
Cersei’s Vengeance or The Laughing Lion or, most disturbingly, Mother’s Mercy. Jaime had no doubt that mercy would not be shown on the field anytime soon. The engines could do worse things against flesh and bone than any arrow or crossbow quarrel ever could. In a thousand years, Jaime thought, men will fight with swords no longer. Instead we will sit back and let these engines do our killing for us. Like Cersei and Qyburn, we will dissociate ourselves so far from the killing that we forget the meaning of it.

The city defenders watched him pass through. They had none of the smiles or cheers that might have greeted him once. Instead their eyes were cold and dull as rock. They were cold, tired, and entirely without passion. They cared no longer for the squabbles of kings and queens. The only inspired thing they could be relied upon to do was surrender if things went awry. But until then they would follow their orders, nothing more and nothing less, just as their queen wanted.

They left the city through the northern gate, and rode across the bridge that led up to the Lion’s Mouth of Casterly Rock. The gate, two hundred feet high, opened with creaking of portcullis chains and they rode through the vast wide cavern until they reached the Entrance Hall, where Lannisters departed stared down from plinths of great marble. A new statue was being built, half a step below Lord Tywin. So far they had finished the legs only, but Jaime could see how it would look when it was finished: thirty feet tall, wearing flowing royal robes such that he had never worn in life. And Cersei had ordered that Tommen have his crown too, unlike all the other statues, made from pure-veined gold, and green gemstones in his eyes. Jaime imagined himself back here in a year or two, entering through the Mouth and every time encountering the gaze of father and son looking down, each saying you murdered me in cold, drafty voices.

They took the winch lift up to Cersei’s chambers. In the main hall there she had ordered into being a massive tapestry, the artefact of artists she had somehow imported from across the Narrow Sea. On thick Myrish cloth they had produced Casterly Rock anew, shining in hues of gold and sunset red. And atop it stood the queen herself, crowned and radiant, eyes looking east towards greater Westeros. The queen as she saw herself; the queen as she wished to be seen.

He found her in the throne room, with Ser Robert Strong beside her. She was seated on the throne, in such a way that suggested she had been awaiting his arrival, and that she had full knowledge of what had happened outside the city walls.

“Lord Hand.”

Lord Hand. Had there ever been anything colder? ‘Lord Commander’, at least, had been his. With ‘Lord Hand’ she was placing him alongside his father and Ned Stark, demoting him to the level of Wisdom Rossart. Did she want him to be her Rossart? “Whose blood? Whose?”

“Your Grace.” He was addressing her as Dowager Queen, not as Queen Regnant. “I have parleyed with Stannis Baratheon.”

“And?”

“He wishes for your surrender.”

She scowled. You mean our surrender, Ser Jaime. We are in this together to the end.”

He did not answer.

“Very well, then,” she said. “Let me hear what he had to say for himself.”

“He says that he will attack in three days.”
“He has no choice. His men are no doubt woefully low on supplies. If anything, I am surprised he is not attacking earlier. Why the wait?”

Did she know already? Qyburn was not in the room, but there was nothing to say he had not been and gone – nothing to say that he was not hiding in an alcove. Still: “He has Myrcella.”

She reacted to that: though not with horror, as you might expect from an ailing mother: not Cersei. She did not seem especially surprised either. “So,” she said, “I presume she is part of some ultimatum of his?”

“He says, if we do not surrender, he will execute her three days hence, at dawn.”

Cersei paused, though not for long. “And is that all?”

“That is all.”

“You lie. He has the Tarth woman as well.”

As he suspected. “You know already. Why are you asking me these questions?”

“I wanted to determine the extent of your loyalty. I wanted to see how successful my persuasions had been.”

“Did Qyburn tell you?”

“Qyburn is doing important work for his queen, and he is doing it loyally. As you are not, ser.”

She wanted him to defy her, he knew; to say, you are not my queen. She wanted him to break, so she could break him down further. He would not break. “What are you – we – going to do about this?”

“Are you really such a fool to think we can sacrifice our kingdom so easily?”

“She is our daughter, Cersei.”

“Yes,” Cersei said coldly. “She is. And which one of us do you think she has more of in her?”

He did not answer, because he did not know. Tommen was always me, and Joffrey was always her, but Myrcella is less simple. She is the best and the worst of both us, amplified a dozen times over.

“She would understand,” said Cersei, “that we cannot sacrifice everything for her life.”

“Then what is the point of it?” Jaime asked. “What is the point of any of this? If we have no children to pass this legacy on to, then why bother?”

“Do you remember what I told you once?” She rose from the throne, and slowly walked down towards him. “You and I are the only ones in the world. The only ones that matter.”

“Let Myrcella die, and you lose me too. I’ll find a tower and I’ll jump. You can have my bones.”

She smirked. “Killing yourself for love? You never could. You love yourself too much, Jaime. Yes, you need to be loved. More than that, you need me to love you, because you know no one else will.”

“That’s not true.” But he could only say it hoarsely.

“Oh?” Cersei raised an eyebrow. “How old was the Stark boy?”
“That was different.”

“Was it, really? What else but love for me could drive a great hero like yourself to push a ten-year-old to his death? You are nothing without me and you know it.

“Perhaps you are even hoping, somehow, that Brienne of Tarth may save you from this. So I will tell you this: if that woman does make it to our side alive by some miracle, I will have Ser Robert crush her skull. Is that understood?”

“If you do—” But he knew that was a threat he could not finish.

“If I do, then what, ser? Will you betray me too?”

Too, she said. As you betrayed Aerys. As you betrayed Father. As you will betray Myrcella, if you do nothing about this. She told him to go, then, and turned her back as she climbed to her throne once more. But hours later her words would stay with him. And in the privacy of his solar in the Lannisport barracks – his cell – such that it was, she kept appearing in the mirrors, and, oddly, turning into Catelyn Stark: Lady Catelyn both living and dead.

Kingslayer, oathbreaker. You are a man without honor. What had he said then? Something clever, no doubt. But as so often in the face of truth, words deserted him and were entirely inadequate. What sort of honour is it to let your daughter die, and accept it without even a protest?

And Brienne too. He expected he would hear her insistence prattle any moment now. Instead, though, he heard Joffrey. That’s right, Kingslayer, his eldest son – his seed – said, you just sit here feeling sorry for yourself, while every one of your children dies around you. Keep telling yourself there’s still time for you: for a forty-year-old knight with one hand.

That was not even the worst, though.

A few days earlier he had been out in the city, inspecting the bastions and the walls as was his habitual, endless task. On their way back to the barracks they rode past two Lannister soldiers, holding down a squirming boy. There he had dismounted. “What’s this?”

“This one’s been caught stealing, ser,” the soldier said without looking up.

“And what are you doing to him?”

“Stealing costs you a hand. Queen’s orders.”

“Leave him alone,” said Jaime, hardening his tone. “Taking his hand won’t teach him anything. I should know.”

At that they looked up, and saw him: the Kingslayer, and more importantly, the Queen’s Hand. Jaime spoke to the boy then: “You come with us to the barracks,” he said. “We’ll feed you up.” And they had.

He told himself – deluded himself, rather – that in sparing the boy he was, in some way, continuing Tommen’s legacy of mercy towards the downtrodden. You will not be forgotten, Your Grace, he had thought. But now, here he was, looking at the sword Lawbringer, which Cersei had permitted him to take. Widow’s Wait, as it was before. The name seemed oddly prescient now. Jaime Lannister had died on that night at the Rock, too, and giving him the sword was just his widow sister’s way of mocking him.
Was this how Barristan the Bold felt after the Trident, knowing his true king – Rhaegar – was dead, and that he could never save him? Was this the way Selmy lived those seventeen years?

He looked over at Lawbringer – Widow’s Wail, rather – and reached out for the hilt. His fingers only brushed the steel. He knew, in his heart, that he was not even fit to touch it.

Chapter End Notes

Good news: I'm back. (If that is good news to you; maybe you were revelling in my continued silence.)

I did plan to have something of a prelude to this chapter, but I figured life's too short to spend ages providing exposition about everything, so I've left it to you to figure out exactly what's going on.

So... "Gules Or Sable" (aka. a really fancy way of saying Red or Black, or an even fancier way of saying red gold black - that's Lannister and Baratheon, in case you missed it) finally takes us back to the mind of TCOS's most internally tortured character. Personally, I do think Jaime veers into the territory of whining quite a bit here. His situation isn't quite as tragic as he'd have us believe, even if it is far from being comfortable.

Not much more to say on this chapter - I'll leave that to you - other than I enjoyed writing it.

I've got a few interesting ones coming up: a nice back-to-back double feature with POVs from ??? and ???, followed by a Sansa chapter which is: i) really long, ii) possibly my best chapter of KOTN so far, and iii) possibly not. Then after that we've got a POV from ----, and then a chapter from ------, which, to be honest, is looking pretty boring so I might cut this one out entirely. We'll have to wait and see.

Thank you all for being patient with the hiatus, and I hope you enjoyed the first of what I hope will be many chapters to come over the coming weeks.
No Man Is An Island

Chapter Summary

No man is an island, entire of itself.

- John Donne, *Meditation XVII, Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

MELONY

At nightfall she walked along the battlements of Castle Black, lighting torches and offering prayers. Most of the men who accepted them did not believe in the Red God, but they were glad for the warmth that a little belief, of any kind, brought to their hearts. And though there was nothing she could offer in the way of magic or true ceremony, she cast her powders into the braziers that lined the wallwalk, and the flames rose bright and red and heroic. She hoped it might be not just a divine motivation to their men, but a fearsome ward to their attackers, encamped to the south. But their attackers were not men, even if they once had been, and fear did not eat at them in that way.

With her part done, she retired to her own chambers a while, where she and Beren ate a plain repast, usually little more than bread and cheese washed down with beer. Melisandre did not need the food especially, but she spent half of most nights as Melony, and for that she did.

Samwell Tarly came to see her in her chambers just as the drummers were starting to play on the walls. “Any signs yet?” he asked. Some nights she knew instinctively which parts of the castle were most vulnerable to assault, or where the enemy would be concentrated thickest. But tonight there was nothing. She told the Lord Commander as much. “Well,” he said. “That’s a pity.” They talked some more, about nothing much in particular, and then he went, declaring that he had his own part to play on the walls. He was afraid, she could see, but he did not need to be. Melisandre did not think Samwell Tarly would fall tonight.

But others would.

The enemy was first sighted come the hour of the crow, appropriately. Three horn blasts sounded, a sound that had once been the thing of legend, but was now familiar. There were no white walkers with them, but wights merited the same heralding, three deep, echoing blasts that even now, after several nights of siege, still shook Castle Black to its ancient foundations.

And so the wights came. They ran up the kingsroad and from the flanks, at the three main gates of the castle bounded by the new curtain wall. In the tall gatehouse towers, wildling archers notched
their bows, and fired heavy bodkin points that smashed through solid grey bone as if it were cloth
and tore flesh to shreds. Some of the other arrows were wrapped in cloth, dipped in tar, and then lit
aflame, and when they struck in the night, the wights in question went up like small bright bonfires,
writhing and screaming as they fell into the melted snow. And when the wights got closer, the
archers would loose their flaming arrows into the traps of kindling and pitch that ran beneath the
towers, and great walls of smoky flame would rise up, and the leading wights would be caught in
them and would burn. Those that came behind would jump back in horror, standing idle while
arrows rained down on them. By now the wights were in the range of the wall catapults and
scorpions too, so heavy stones and blazing great bolts would slice through their ranks.

But inevitably the fire would burn down, and the wights would reach the wall. There, Northmen
poured boiling pitch down on their heads, which caught light when arrows met it, and after that
boiling water, and after that rocks, barrels, sandbags, anything they had to hand. The wights would
swarm the wall, climbing over one another, rising in a hellish human pyramid of grey flesh. When
they reached the top, the Northmen were ready with their pikes, sticking straight out, and they
plunged them through the chests of the dead men. Yet one of them would reach too far, and he too
would be pulled over the battlements, and almost before he hit the ground, they would be upon him,
tearing at flesh and bone. And that would be the first death of the night.

It was impossible to stop them from getting up onto the walls, even if they repulsed the first few
waves unopposed. And then the Northmen retreated, and the wildlings took charge, better skilled
with short swords, long knives, and their bare fists. Steel and dragonglass alike, punching in and out,
and the wights fighting back, red blood and black blood spraying everywhere.

Melisandre watched it all through the fire in her chambers. She had spent the first couple of nights
out on the Wall, multiplying the fires to double their sizes, but eventually they had decided that she
would serve them better as a scout of sorts, watching in her chambers to see if any covert attacks
were being carried out. And when she saw wights swarming over an undefended part of wall, or a
new wave setting out, she would tell Beren to go and run the message to Lord Commander Tarly or
Dolorous Edd or Tormund Giantsbane. The boy ran back and forth two dozen times each night; by
the end he was always red and sweaty. But he was less likely to die that way, and Melisandre did
have to admit she had a certain fondness for the squire.

She had other duties, too, though. Her chambers were behind the infirmary. Occasionally the women
would knock on her door, always seeming somewhat afraid, and tell her that a man had come in with
his arm torn off and bleeding at the shoulder, or his face horribly burned. “There is nothing we can
do,” they would say, “but you might, my lady.”

So she told them to bring these men in, and, with one eye on the fire all the time, she would work
with her potions and poultices. Sometimes there was nothing that could be done, and the only
remedy she could offer then was mercy. But sometimes she could reduce their suffering, or heal their
temporary ailments, or lend them the strength that was needed for an amputation or the like. It sapped
her power greatly, to give her life-force in that way. But it had to be done.

And then it would be over, as suddenly as that. The wights would cease their assault. For whatever
reason, they only ever came at night, though during the day they would have found the Night’s
Watch woefully unprepared. But it was so, a cycle, taking more and more away from them every
night until there would be nothing left.

Every morning the goodwives cooked a hearty meal, some broth with meat and beans, and grainy
bread. Melisandre did not partake, but she still knew how important it was. All across the world, they
claimed an army marched on its stomach. There must be some truth in that.
Every morning, the leaders held a council to assess the previous night’s losses, and to determine what must be done the next night. Melisandre attended such meetings, though she rarely spoke at them, for the Northmen took a dim view of her foreign interference.

This morning was more of the usual; damaged defences whose repair would be the day’s greatest priority; broken men who had fled in the night – though these were few and far between, for most understood that to leave Castle Black was to give yourself up to death; the loss of particular fighters or their brothers or their sons; today, it was one of the Greatjon’s nephews who was the noble loss, and also they lamented for one of the wildling heroes, a woman who had saved ten men from death two nights ago, and yet, it seemed, had not been spared the fate of all heroes. Melisandre made sure to take their names; she would say a prayer for them later; it was all she could do.

After the council was over she had a private audience with Lord Commander Tarly. There was, though, as ever, not enough to be said to sustain their time. They spent long minutes looking out of the windows, as men worked to clear the yard of the fresh snowfall. “There will be a night,” Master Tarly said, “when they all come at once. Won’t there?”

Was he asking her because he thought she knew, or because he wanted reassurance? “I do not know,” she said. “The Lord has His limitations. As we have both learned. All I can be sure of is that this is His will.” And even that claim was tenuous.

“If it is will that we all die here, then why doesn’t He just tell us about it?” He spoke with unusual sarcasm, and he realised it. “My apologies. I still have some of the Citadel’s bitter philosophies in me, it would seem.”

Melisandre shrugged. “It is a fair question, though. One I have myself often puzzled over. I think… if the gods were not mystified, then they would no longer be gods. All one has to do to defeat a thing is prove its mortality. That is half the battle.”

“Would that we could fight against the Others on those grounds,” said Master Tarly. Then Tormund Giantsbane came in to speak with him about the niter traps they were preparing for the enemy. Melisandre snuck out unnoticed.

Until dusk, she worked in her chambers, while the men worked out in the yard. She had Beren and a couple of apprentices in and out, bringing what alchemicals Castle Black possessed, so that she might mix powders and potions and other such things that would keep them in the night ahead. There were things here, too, that she was saving for the last night; for the Long Night. When the siege ended, and the storming of Castle Black began, she would be ready.

That was the strangest thing. For the first time in her life, Melisandre of Asshai felt ready to die. It might, too, have been the first time she was sure of something worth dying for. She thought, oddly, of Stannis’s Onion Knight. Davos Seaworth, with five sons lost to forces beyond his control, had a greater understanding of mortality than almost any man she had ever met. And having lived most of his life on the narrow line between law and lawlessness, she was certain that Davos Seaworth did not err when it came to causes worth dying for; if he had ever doubted Stannis, he could have smuggled himself and his family out of Dragonstone with ease, and they would never have heard from him again. Oh, she might have tracked him down eventually, but in this present state of hers, that was not the sort of thing she would do. If a man wants to run, let him run. But she trusted that most of them would not.

She realised, in a peculiar, somewhat undefinable way, that she wanted Ser Davos Seaworth here with her. And Princess Shireen, too. She had never been able to pinpoint why she had spared Shireen; yes, there had been the reminders of herself, of Melony, Lot Seven; coupled with the realisation of the sacrifice’s unnecessity; Stannis was not Azor Ahai. She had, early on, attributed it
to some sort of moral balance; so she told Thoros of Myr, at least. “I thought in saving her, I might be doing some good.” And yet that did not explain all of it.

Here it was: this strange realisation again. I have felt more at home here, in these months in Castle Black, than anywhere else in the world. Was this was ordinary people lived and died for? Had she ever felt like this before, in the time before the Temple, perhaps?

She supped with Beren – or rather, he ate while she watched. The boy was fifteen now, the same age Devan Seaworth had been before he rode to his death. I wish I had never brought you, she thought. You should have stayed with Lord Glover’s baggage train; you might have been home by now, instead of here with me. The boy was showing signs of promise, yes, but she knew that his inevitable sacrifice would not be worth it.

After supper she commenced the evening’s final task: she left Beren in her chambers, and walked through the wormways back to Castle Black’s meat larder. No one was following, good. She took a torch from the wall – she was sure she would not need it, but it was best to be certain, opened the door, bolted it shut behind her, and descended into the chilly shadows.

An hour later she emerged, neither surprised nor disappointed at the lack of a change. So be it. No use beating a dead horse, to use the Westerosi expression. And—

“What have you got down there?”

She turned to look into the shivering face of Theon Greyjoy. “Have you been waiting for me?”

A wordless nod. Again, the set, slightly shivering jaw: “What’s down there?”

Melisandre gestured. “Take a look, if you wish.” He would see nothing she did not want him to see. More than that, though, she doubted he would go.

She was right. Instead he stood there shivering for a few more moments until haltingly he broke out with, “I have a question for you.”

“What makes you think I will be able to answer it?”

“You’re a sorceress. They told me you were. They told me…” He broke off.

Melisandre gestured. “Then ask, Lord Greyjoy.”

“My uncle said… Euron said he had found a way to live forever. Is that… is that possible?”

“No,” she said simply.

“No?”

“Let me put it this way, Lord Greyjoy. Look at the Others. We think of them as immortal, undying… when I truth, I suspect their lives are as mortal as ours. They just happen to live much longer lifespans. And when death comes to them… why, I imagine that in all the annals of their history, there are those for whom death comes not as a foe. Rather they realise their time is up. Or, perhaps, they have loved as men do, and lost as men do, and they have nothing left to live for, and so death, even to the Others, may be mercy. There may be ways to live forever, but nothing ever will. Because no man is an island, and though a man may have infinity, he cannot live for it alone.”

Something about the encounter left her curious. Rather than return to the ramparts to start her cycle again, she climbed the stairs, back to her chambers. Beren was gone, doubtless out on the walls
already, perhaps to die. And—

The glass candle was lit.

Not the whole candle, of course; that had shattered over Lord Snow’s body, but the fragments of it that were left she had rearranged in a dish on the table. And now, unmistakably, the fragments were burning, red-hot, threatening to scorch through the pottery. Melisandre quickly gathered them up and waved her hand over them, blinking, trying to get a glimpse and see what was within it. The smoke eddied about her face; in it she saw malformed shapes, incomplete patterns, uncertain colours. Eyes – sometimes blue, green, brown – whose eyes? Wood, blue-veined, pale wood. And then: a voice. It seemed to come from a thousand places at once, places as far as Asshai and Oldtown, in a thousand dialects and language, all converging like rivers to form the word Melony.

One word alone, and yet it terrified her. One word, and yet she knew she was speaking to something of unimaginable power, something that would not just make a red priestess of R’hllor shake, but would shake her God Himself. She had never felt such violent cold in her life. Her hands shook; her mouth could barely form words; it was hard to think. “Who are you?” she whispered. Her breath misted in the air.

And all it once it stopped; the cold burned away, and the candle flame was hot again. But Melisandre was not. The voice was one she could never forget. She knew that voice.

Chapter End Notes

There are a few ideas about community in this chapter (see chapter title), but they are expressed somewhat strangely, because Melisandre, by nature of her uniqueness, is very much solitary. I think it is interesting to see the long-awaited struggle at Castle Black through the eyes of the character who experiences the blood, sweat and tears of it the least.

And yet we see that even with her aloofness, Melisandre is still drawn in. One of the most revealing aspects of this chapter, for me, are her reflections on her servant / intern Beren, whom she hired to serve her as a promising prospect for the Red Temple's Youth Outreach Program. I think she is fairly forthright in admitting that this was a mistake, and I think she does feel genuine guilt at having basically sentenced him (and previously Devan Seaworth) to death.

I think Melisandre's lines to Theon are a bit less real: they come across, as intended, as more rhetorical flourishes than genuinely heartfelt admissions. Though even these are based somewhat in her realisation.

Re. chapter ending: I could explain, but I won't.

More coming next week. Thanks for reading.
The wolfswood was quiet tonight. Pine needles and frostbitten leaves crackled beneath his bare feet as he crept along. Bran could feel the wolf’s heart beating fearful in her chest; she was less strong than Summer was, and despite her teeth and her claws she still feared men. She wanted to flee back to her nest, to her cubs, and cower inside herself, but he held her firm, his thoughts a tight vice on hers. He could feel her life-force fluttering, delicate as a moth inside her. Not only did it flutter as a moth did, but it had that singular incessant attraction to freedom. That freedom was freedom from him, and that freedom was denied her.

Quiet now, he told the she-wolf. You be quiet now. And she obeyed, her whimpers ebbing into silence, for he was the lord of all creatures, wolves included. She knew of the three-eyed crow and she feared him. And well she should.

She crept closer to the clearing. The air rustled. And then, from below the ridge, came the voices. “Oh, we will play with them a little while longer,” said the first, the man’s voice. Euron Greyjoy.
The voice of the man who, while he was sleeping, took out his eye. “They call you the three-eyed crow. No man should have more than two.”

It hurt. He did not feel the pain in his body, but he felt it nonetheless; it shocked him, it tore him apart, it made him scream, though he had no mouth to scream with. On the floor of the Winterfell cell the boy’s body jerked and convulsed, the reaction of whatever life force remained tethered within it. The blade dug deep; it tore through his eye and left him with darkness.

The she-wolf tried to break free again. No. He said it more firmly this time. Stay.

“Mother always told me not to toy with my food, it is true,” said Euron. “Though I do not think she ever meant it. She was harder than you might suppose, this wife of Quellon. I do not think my father reckoned on her strength. When she died he sought out softer, weaker women.”

Then the Night’s Queen spoke. The she-wolf went rigid, her bones freezing instantly in place. Her voice was shards of ice. “And you still seek a woman like her?”
“I thought the dragon queen might suit, truth be told. That was my plan for a time. But then I remembered you.”

The Queen laughed, and the sound cut through him, and burned cold. “Ever the romancer, Greyjoy. But I am married, you forget. And no woman.” She paused. “This the crow knows well.”

So: she could hear him. She always could. It meant nothing, only that it was time to lose the she-wolf. He let her free, and leapt from her skin into the branches above, and grabbed one of the nesting ravens in his noose. The bird struggled a moment, then allowed him to enter, spread its wings, and fled the grove. Below, he felt the she-wolf go limp, instantly dead of terror.

He rose above the army. He could not count the numbers of those not-life forces, but the raven had eyes same as he did, and he had the mind of hundreds of other beasts, of the trees, and he had enough of them to send the message on. So he whispered it across the world, for all who would hear. Ten thousand, a hundred thousand. North and south of the Wall. They are coming. They are coming. The time is now. And to a few in particular, he whispered, through dreams and secret ways, he whispered wake the dragon, he whispered this is your calling, he whispered you must save yourself.

Then he felt the Queen reaching out to him, and he leapt away violently, out of the raven’s skin, out of all of them. His head jerked back and he lay there on the cold stone ground of the cave, choking down great gulps of the man-air which he had not breathed for so long. It tasted bitter.

Summer sat on all fours in the mouth of the cave, staring out into the forbidding night. Somewhere beyond the treeline were the Night’s Queen and Euron Greyjoy. He did not doubt that the Queen knew he was here. But he did not think she had told Euron about him yet. They were not as strong an alliance as he thought they were.

The fire had burned down low. Bran did not feel the cold from it, though, and his eyes had adapted somehow so that seeing in the dark was natural, too. More than that, it was familiar. What was it Brynden Rivers had said, under the hill? Darkness will be your cloak and your shield. The wights would never find him here.

“Here, Summer,” he called. “Here, boy.” The wolf obeyed instantly, coming to nuzzle at his cheek. His fur was very warm. Bran brushed a hand over his snout and cast his mind back to when they had first met, in those long-ago snows. You will care for them yourselves, Father had said. And you will bury them yourselves. He had sounded so assured then. But he could never have foreseen this, a time when his children would not just walk beside their wolves, but within their wolves. Sansa had lost that ability when Lady was killed by the Trident, and Robb and Grey Wind had lost their communication within minutes of one another, at the Red Wedding. But him, Jon, Arya, and Rickon —

Best not to think about Rickon, he thought sorrowfully. And as for Jon and Ghost… well, that was not quite the same thing, was it?

His thoughts drifted back to Father. Maybe he should ask. He had asked Father for advice before, down by the pool, while Father was cleaning Ice after an execution and he came and he raised a question. It was not a verbal question, but it was a feeling that meant a questioning; to his father’s ears it sounded like Father… And Lord Eddard looked up, confused, because the boy’s voice was not Robb’s, nor Jon’s, and Bran was only a newborn babe, too young to talk. He spoke to his mother, too. She was in the weirwood grove, after the blooding of the Lannister lions. She looked up and saw him, or thought she saw him. He wondered if she would recognise him. His hair had grown lank and thick, down to his shoulders, and one of her boy Bran’s blue eyes had turned to the crow Brandon’s bright, endless green.
No more climbing, she said. But he had to climb. He had to climb so he could fall, so he could fly. Fly or die, the crow screeched, and the Kingslayer said “the things I do for love” and pushed him from the tower, and the wights tore into his body with their hands and their teeth beneath the weirwood tree. He woke up, and it was morning again.

He wondered how the Sworn Brothers of the Night’s Watch had fared last night against Euron’s forces. No worse than usual, he judged, rising to his feet.

Walking was still something that unsettled him. This was because he knew that his legs were still broken. His spine was still twisted and the vertebrae remained shattered. The muscles that you needed to walk or piss or do anything in the lower part of your body did not work in him. And yet he could walk, as he was walking now, out of the cave.

But he had a theory.

When you are alive, there are two parts to you: your soul, which is you, and who you are, and what you feel, and your skin. The skinchanger is able to move between skins while keeping his soul in one place, but he is always fated to return to his original skin eventually, and he will need to keep that skin alive if he is to stay truly alive. There is a tether.

But when the wights killed him beneath the heart tree, that tether broke. It was still broken now, and irreparable, as far as he knew. The soul that was Brandon Stark no longer had a body to return to. In that sense, he was free.

But old habits die hard. He had spent the first sixteen years of his existence in that body, and so it was only natural that he would seek it out, and return to it, if he found it. And he had. The body had been torn and broken beyond repair at first, but he got into it somehow, and repaired the shattered parts. He bound the wounds up in fibres of green glowing light and made an eye out of that same light, as a god would. And much as he repaired his eye with those divine bands, he repaired the legs as well. They were still broken, but for so long as they occupied the body, he could move them, as a puppeteer moves the strings of his creation and makes them dance. He was no longer a permanent resident in his body. He was now a mere tenant, keeping it from crumbling any further.

Strange and stranger.

The next morning he set out for the Great Barrow.

It was some fifty miles to Barrowton, where the barrow was housed, but he and Summer made that in a few hours. He climbed onto Summer’s back and held tight to the direwolf’s fur as they rode. At times he was inside Summer himself, feeling the power in his legs and feet as they ripped up the snow. Other times he fell back into himself, or drifted up, among the birds, and watched them from miles off, his wings lazily adrift. He was so quiet that the bird hardly noticed his presence there. This was, of course, of his own volition; if he wanted to take control he could flood the bird’s mind, as he had done to the wolf and the raven the night before. Faintly, he reached for the life-force of both, though they were hundreds of miles away. There was no response.

Next he drifted to the Wall, to Samwell Tarly and Melisandre and Jon. He watched, in a bird’s form, from a ledge as the men of the Night’s Watch brought in the bodies that had fallen in the yard the night before. The faces bringing them in were restless, but they should have settled themselves. Castle Black would not fall today.

And now Winterfell. Through the eyes of the heart tree in the godswood he looked upon drifting snow and broken walls. Euron had not burned it – his nephew Theon had not, and neither had Ramsay Bolton – but he had left it in a poor state, and the garrison he had left behind was a sorry one
too. It was Victarion Greyjoy – or rather, his revived corpse, who garrisoned the castle now. And Victarion, at his brother’s order, was amassing a host, though, of course, he did not know it. Bran could feel them coming – hundreds of wights, thousands of wights, the murdered remainder of the North’s people, all shambling towards Winterfell.

He opened his eyes. Summer slowed to a halt. At first Bran saw nothing but a tall, snow-drowned hill, with no way in. But as he approached he noticed that the snow had packed up in such a way as to conceal something – a cleft in the rock, he realised. Beyond that was the cave.

It took him and Summer the better part of an hour to shovel a way through, digging with fingers that were frozen at the start and frostbitten by the end. But he was not too worried. If a hundred knives could not kill him, what could frostbite do? Though the snow remained solidly packed, there was now a narrow path through. He went down on his hands and knees and crawled towards it, scrabbling ahead blindly as the tunnel grew darker and darker—

And emerged abruptly in a cavern filled with bright blue light. The first thing he saw was the ceiling, bright with icicles, reflecting the glimmer of some source in the chamber below. Then he looked down and saw where the light was emanating from. It was an altar of sorts, and on it lay a bright blue stone of sorts, casting out radiant pools of light which played across the ceiling. As Bran walked towards it, it began to hum, as if it had been expecting him. *Euron was here*, a part of him thought. *This could be a trap for you.* But that part of him was the fearful boy. The part that was the crow knew better. *Touch it. Touch the stone.*

Bran took a deep breath, then placed his hand on the smooth surface of the stone. Blue light flooded his eyelids, harsh and cold enough to leave him dizzy. He stumbled, caught his balance on a spur of — weirwood?

So it was: pale white weirwood bark, veiny with red. And it was not just that was familiar, but the whole setting; red fallen leaves, blue cloudless sky. Old Nan had said that they all lived inside the eye of a blue-eyed giant named Macumber, and this seemed proof. And then, from somewhere across the pool of water, he heard the hiss of Valyrian steel, and he knew it was Ice.

And, turning his head to look in the direction of the hissing, he knew exactly what — or rather, *who* — he would see.

“Father.”

Lord Eddard Stark stood silent, with the greatsword clasped in his hands, staring back at him across the stillness of the godswood. It was something he had seen a hundred times before, but here, now, Father’s eyes were *on* him, rather than seeing *through* him.

“Bran,” he said, a little hoarsely.

He was sure Father must be a mirage. But he did not look it. He seemed solid, and when Bran took a step forwards his shape did not flicker or waver, but remained fixed in place. A thin smile creased his lips. “You are walking.”

“I am.” His voice sounded different: somehow younger, as if it were the young boy who had fallen speaking again. “My legs were broken, but they were healed again. I can run now. I can climb… if I wanted to.”

“And do you want to?” Lord Eddard said. It was a simple enough question, but Bran knew that underneath there were much bigger ones: questions of who a man was, and what he valued.
“I would. Sometimes I wish I could turn it all back, and be ten again. But… I am a man grown now. And a man has his duty, and he cannot desert it even if that is what he wants.”

Father raises an eyebrow. “Which means…”

Now he understood. “Which means you are not what I came here for, Father.”

“I know.” His father turned Ice so the light spun through the blade. “Which means…”

_Which means you are not Father, only the image of him._ “Do you know what knowledge I seek?”

“I do,” said his father. “I trust you have worked out the secrets of Winterfell, Brandon?”

“The Night’s Queen.”

Lord Eddard nodded. “Indeed. It took me some time to realise them for myself. My father Lord Rickard only ever told the secret to Brandon – my brother, that is. They died within minutes of each other, so my father was never able to tell me the secrets that had been passed down through generations of Starks.

“Luckily, my father left precautions. And among them was Old Nan.”

“Old Nan?”

“She had been my nurse, and his nurse before me,” explained Lord Eddard. “Father proved to have good judgement in trusting Old Nan… better than mine, in any case. I neglected to tell Robb. I did not think things would happen so suddenly… I thought, foolishly, that if there was ever a danger of my death, it would come not from the Lannisters but from Robert turning on me his anger. I assume you understand why?”

“Jon,” said Bran.

“Jon,” said Father. “And the promise I made to my sister Lyanna. Alas, the decisions I made for Lyanna turned out to be…”

“Bad ones. Female Others can only migrate into female bodies. So when you put Aunt Lyanna into the crypt, the Queen began to migrate into her, to build her form up from bones—” He stopped, realising this memory might be painful for his father. If this was his father at all.

“Father,” he said, very suddenly. “Where you are… in this place… have you found Mother? And Robb? And Jon?”

Lord Eddard thought that over for a moment. “They never left me, Bran. As they, and I, never left you. That is not to say that we have met… but as a man wanders, as in life, it is inevitable that he comes across places where his path meets the paths of others. Imagine… imagine there is a blizzard, and the snow falls so thick you cannot see three feet in front of you. But then you see a campfire, burning inexplicably through all the snow. You approach, and around the fire you meet everyone you ever met in life, and for that one night… and afterwards you are never sure who you met, or what you said, but you know that you were happy… do you understand?”

“No really.”

“Ah,” said Father. “That may be for the best.” Lord Eddard sat for a moment longer, looking up to the sky. His eyes were strange, somehow brighter than they had ever been in life. “I suppose I should get to the point. You came to the Great Barrow because you wanted to be told where to go next.”
“Yes. I know Euron Greyjoy came here, and it told him—”

“You are not Euron Greyjoy, Bran. So why should it work for you as it did for him?”

That was true. Why hadn’t he thought of that? “I hoped—”

“Who do you think Euron saw when he put his hand on the altar?”

Bran did not answer.

“I would wager that it was not those he had loved and lost,” said his father. “Rather those he had murdered and whose deaths he had grown to regret.” A moment’s pause. “His time will come, have no fear.”

“I’m not afraid.”

“You are,” said Lord Eddard. “That is why you are running. That is why you are hiding.”

“I’m not hiding—”

“You are,” his father repeated. “If you were not, we would not be having this conversation. Because you would not be here in Barrowton; you would not be thinking about Winterfell, or the Nightfort, and you would certainly not be thinking about going north of it. You would have remembered the most important thing, what is always the most important thing. You say your duty is to follow the Others—”

“—to find a way to defeat them.”

“Yes,” said Lord Eddard. “And yet you do not need to follow them in person. You are the three-eyed crow, aren’t you? Every beast and every tree of this land is at your command. But there is only one of you, Brandon. And there is, really only one place for you to be. Your duty is not to go north, as mine as not to go south. Nor is your duty the most important thing. As I am sure your mother reminded you, with her house words.”

“Words are wind,” Bran said.

“Don’t interrupt me,” his father replied, stonily. “Your duty is your family, Bran. And they are your honour, too. You have a thousand eyes and one; you can do without two of them in the distant north. You are the lord of Winterfell, remember…”

“Winterfell is captured now. Euron—”

“Winterfell is not only a place. Winterfell is House Stark. And if House Stark is not in Winterfell, then its lord should not be there either.”

“I can’t go back—”

“Because you are afraid, yes. You are afraid they will see you walking, and they will not accept you. I think your fears are unfounded. But even if they are not, and you are afraid with good reason… well, Brandon, can a man be brave even if he is afraid?”

What else to say? “That is the only time a man can be brave.”

“Then you know where you have to go.” Lord Eddard looked down at Ice, then laid the blade down on the snow. He smiled at Bran, and it was a smile full of rueful sadness. “I used to think that love was the death of honour, and of duty. But…” And though he trailed off into silence there, Bran did
not need him to finish.

Chapter End Notes

I see this chapter, "Speaker to the Dead" (or "Speaker to the German 2018 World Cup Dreams", as I'm topically calling it) as something of a response to the previous one; the reply of the old gods to the new. I think the old gods are a lot more primal than the new ones, and somewhat by extension, their traditions are much more frightening.

Re: Ned. Well, I couldn't go through the whole series without having old papa Stark turn up at least once, could I? As to whether he's actually real, that's up to you.

Next up: Sansa.
The Kingdom of What Might Have Been

Chapter Summary

Since your refusal of help has left my brother and sister most likely dead, I am now the Lady of Winterfell, and the Warden of the North.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SANSA

Edmure Tully had never endeared himself to her while he was at Harrenhal, and her welcome at Riverrun had not changed Sansa’s opinion of him. “Your mother was always fond of blackberries,” he commented, after a long time staring across the table.

“The Northmen at White Harbor will be fonder of them,” Sansa said.

They supped in the high-ceilinged room she had taken for her solar. The fare was admittedly meagre, the centrepiece a tall rustic pie with pork and cranberries, set among dishes of greens and neeps. Riverrun’s larders were hardly full to bursting, but they were in a better state than most of those in the Seven Kingdoms, owing to Lord Edmure’s shrewd rationing of the grain harvests.

“The Northmen at White Harbor are beyond the scope of my help,” said her uncle.

“So you say. Have you tested that theory?”

“Sansa—”

“Lady Stark, if you please. Since your refusal of help has left my brother and sister most likely dead, I am now the Lady of Winterfell, and the Warden of the North.”

She did not really believe that Arya and Rickon were dead. They had the Blackfish with them, and Sansa knew Ser Brynden could find a way out of any problem. But in the case of Edmure, it was important to assert her authority. “The Lady of Winterfell, the Warden of the North, and the Lady of Harrenhal.” She could have mentioned that the Brackens and the Blackwoods and the Mallisters would all sooner follow her than Edmure, but it might be wise to let him keep some of his pride, at least.

Edmure bristled. “Harrenhal is part of my demesne.”

“That it may be, but Bronze Yohn Royce offered me the ladyship of Harrenhal after Myrcella’s trial. After your flight. If you wanted to have a say in who should receive it, you ought to have stayed.”
“I had responsibilities here in Riverrun. Stannis’s red witch burned his wife alive, which left us all in chaos. And my wife—”

“Is perfectly capable of looking after herself, I believe. She did not need vast armies to attend to her bedchamber, I am assured. Those armies, my lord, would have much better benefitted the Northern cause.”

“Must you continue to hold this against me?”

The tiredness with which he spoke made Sansa absurdly angry. “If your uncle was here—”

“He would tell me to ride into battle on the back of a flaming chariot, I am sure. He would be quite unaware of the fact that said chariot was burning.” He made a sour face. “I never thought the day would come when I would share sentiments with Jaime Lannister, but here it is: we Tullys, be it my uncle Blackfish, or your lady mother, or your brother, have a habit of rushing in first in the name of such grand ideals as family, duty, honour, and only learning our lessons much later, when the Riverlands have burned to the ground. It happened with my father in Robert’s Rebellion, it happened with King Robb too, during his war. I myself was guilty of it with the battles on the Red Fork and at the Camps. Many good men died for it. I look around Riverrun today and I do not recognise my own stewards, my own guardsmen, my own servants, for so many of them are buried in my fields.”

“That is no reason to give up on your vows entirely.”

“I never said I would. But we both know that if I had sent my men to Seagard they would have died alongside yours. Sansa, this may be difficult to understand, but—”

“Lady Stark,” she returned, with a withering look. “You may be content to sit there, nuncle, pretending that your morals are superior to mine, but you would do well to rid yourself of that delusion. When the Rivermen hear the full story of your refusal to help your own blood, they will turn on you.” She let her voice grow cold. “They may even turn away from you and your palace of Riverrun and look to Harrenhal instead for leadership.”

Pink spots appeared in Edmure’s cheeks. “Are you threatening me, Lady Stark?”

“No, ser. I am giving you the truth. A better question would be ‘am I calling you a coward?’ Well, I suppose that I am. More than that, I am not far from naming you a traitor, too. You clearly remember the Battle of the Camps, you said it yourself. So you surely could not have forgotten what came after. When you and your men stood round the tables of your own great hall with your swords drawn, and called my brother ‘The King in the North’, and swore your fealty to him – and to his heirs – and in perpetuity.”

“Robb’s rebellion—” Edmure cut himself short.

“Finish your thought, my lord.”

“It does not matter.”

“I will finish it for you. You were going to say ‘Robb’s rebellion died at the Twins’. But it did not. And if you doubt it, go up Queen Jeyne’s rooms tonight, and look upon my brother’s son in his crib. Roban Stark. Call in your guardsmen, for they will have heard the story of what happened to the Boltons at Winterfell and the Freys at the Crossing even if you have forgotten it. Walk up to your battlements, and proclaim that the North does not remember, that it has nothing to remember, and listen to the reply. I dare you, my lord.”

That won her his silence. But it did not last as long as she would have liked, for the door of the solar
abruptly opened and Maester Vyman walked in. “My lord,” he said, bending a little, “my lady. There has been an arrival at the castle gate. A noble party.” (Was it her imagination, or did he incline his head a little towards her rather than to his lord?)

“I told you we are letting no one in, Vyman,” said Lord Edmure.

“Who is it, Maester?” asked Lady Sansa.

Vyman chewed his lip, caught between two forces. Finally, he chose the latter. “They flew the banners of Houses Lannister and Tyrell, my lady. My lord. And—”

Edmure rose behind the table. “That is enough, Vyman, thank you. Give my orders to the gate guards. Niece—”

“You do not command me.” Sansa stepped around him, crossing to the maester. “Lead the way, Vyman.” When he did not she led the way herself, and the maester ran to catch up. Out on the battlements he turned to her. “I do not think Lord Edmure was best pleased by that, my lady.”

“I do not think he was either. But that makes us even.”

At the gatehouse the men were a little surprised to see her among them, but they adapted well enough. “What is your name?” Sansa asked the captain. She found it was useful to learn the names of her men; a man’s name was his pride.

“Silas, my lady.”

“Well, Master Silas, would you do me a favour and lower the drawbridge? If you please.”

He looked a little uncertain, but in the face of her smile his quandary over accepting orders from someone other than Lord Edmure dissipated. “Lower the drawbridge,” he told his men.

It took a long time creaking down; the portcullis, rusty from ill use, took even longer to rise up. Sansa peered out over the moat; she could make out the banners bobbing; though she could not see their devices clearly, Tyrell green and Lannister red were firm fixtures of her memory.

The party was all ahorse, about twenty of them. The bridge now lowered to them, they trickled across. She tried to see if she recognised any of them – was Brienne among them, perhaps, returning with Ser Jaime Lannister? That was a thought. Or even Princess Myrcella – or, god forbid, Queen Cersei? But that did not explain the Tyrells.

Patience, she told herself, you will see soon enough.

As she headed for the stairwell, she caught a glimpse of Edmure, striding down the wallwalk towards her. She could not see his expression, but she didn’t need to. Well. Let him fester. His anger might lead to action, if she and the people of the Riverlands were so lucky.

In the courtyard below the figures were all dismounting. And as they peeled back their hoods to gaze up at the safety of the castle keep, Sansa recognised one of them. She recalled shades of an earlier meeting, this time in the courtyard of Highgarden: only that time it had been she dismounting, and Margaery Tyrell watching from the gallery.

Ignoring the puddles beneath the hem of her gown, Sansa descended the steps to meet them. When Margaery looked up and saw her, her expression wavered somewhere between disbelief and relief. “Lady Sansa,” she said in a little voice. “We did not know you were here.”
“Then you have received a fortunate surprise, Lady Margaery. I do not think my uncle Edmure was so keen on receiving you here.”

“You will be wondering what has brought us to Riverrun,” said Margaery. Her voice was much more uncertain than Sansa had ever heard it before; soft and careful, as if it feared waking the dead.

“You may tell me in your own time. You must be famished and tired after your long ride, and—” She considered a moment. *Yes, that will do nicely.* “—and you will need rest, for tomorrow we will likely be on the road again.”

“My lady?”

“I will explain in due course. For now, you may follow me to the hall. And your companion also. Lady Eleyna, is it?”

The Westerling girl’s eyes widened. “It is, my lady. I… we have not met before, have we?”

“No. But I know your sister. Jeyne.”

Eleyna swallowed. “Is she… well?”

“You can see for yourself. She is here. I will take you to her chambers in the Blue Tower, if that is your wish.”

The girl seemed oddly afraid. “I… had heard that she was with child.”

“She birthed a boy. By the name of Roban. He is… healthy.” That was mostly the truth.

Eleyna nodded. “I… too am with child. Perhaps, in the light of that, we might hope for a reconciliation of sorts…” She trailed off unclearly.

*Westerling queens in the North and the West,* Sansa thought. “I was much distressed to hear of the death of your lord husband.” She addressed that to Margaery Tyrell, too. “Husbands.” *We all have danced to the tune of the Lannisters.*

“Of course you were,” said Margaery flatly. “Forgive my sceptical tone, Lady Sansa. I fear I have finally grown tired of empty platitudes. So be it. I think we all have.”

The words surprised her but she did agree with them. “So be it. If we are dispensing with the pleasantries, then let us move straight to the part where I ask you why you are here, and why I should not have you imprisoned or sent back to Cersei.”

She could see that her sternness caught Margaery unawares. Had she been so naïve as to expect a flower? Yet it only left Margaery off-balance for a moment; she recovered impressively. “If that was ever your intention, Lady Sansa, you would not have received us.”

“That is true. But it does not explain why you thought Riverrun might offer you sanctuary.”

“It was not our plan. We had planned to turn south, for Highgarden, but… on the road we heard a tale that Daenerys Targaryen has occupied the castle, so that plan was averted. We had hoped that House Tully might offer us sanctuary for a time, in mutuality against our common enemy.”

“Cersei?”

“Aye, and Daenerys too, possibly. If she comes this way and Lord Edmure were to resist—”
“Lord Edmure will not resist anything, or risk anything, so long as his own security is assured. House Tully will not offer either of you the hand of friendship, my ladies…” She let them wallow in brief despair. “…but House Stark will. As you say, we have a common enemy. Though it is not Cersei, or Daenerys, but—”

“The army of the dead.” Eleyna Westerling did not so much as blink. “We know that they are coming.”

“You have seen them?”

“No, but we have been made aware of them. At the Rock, we had…” She stopped abruptly, and gave Sansa a strange smile. “I hope there is no distrust between us, Lady Sansa. We are… sisters-by-law, I suppose. Through your brother King Robb. And speaking of him, I should like very much to see my sister.”

It was a deflection, she had no doubt of it. But she could hardly refuse the request, and so she called Podrick over. “Escort Lady Eleyna to her sister’s chambers, if you would be so kind.”

“Her sister, my lady?”

“Jeyne Westerling.”

“Oh.” Podrick flushed red again, incredibly self-conscious under the eyes of the ladies. Then he made a nervous little bow to Lady Eleyna, and the pair walked off.

Sansa turned back to Margaery. “Do you speak for Lady Eleyna, then?”

“She is harder than she might seem. But the long journey has been hard on her, on account of her condition.” Margaery glanced down at her feet. Sansa could not say why, but she felt a swell of pity for her, and quite unconsciously she laid a hand upon hers. “I do not know how genuine your affection for me was in King’s Landing, or in Highgarden, my lady. For all I know it might all have been an act. But it is true that you and Ser Loras and your lady grandmother were never anything less than courteous and kind towards me, which is more than I can say for the Lannisters. The same for your father, he was always kind.” This was not entirely true; she reckoned Lord Mace would gladly have sold her into whoredom for a few hides of arable land. “And with Ser Willas… there was a time, at our wedding, when I thought I might be happy as lady of Highgarden, even… but my brother called more desperately to me…” She felt a tremor; did not know why. “How… how is Ser Willas?”

“Father sent men after you when you ran,” Margaery said vaguely. “I do not think Willas really cared. I think he expected that you would not stay by him. It hurt him, for a time, but… he will recover, I hope – Or I hope he did – I do not know now. He and Garlan went east to King’s Landing with Aegon Targaryen and the Dornish. They may be dead now for all I know. I may be the last of my father’s children.”

“As might I. My brother Bran and my half-brother are dead. And my sister and younger brother…” She halted. Why am I telling this to Margaery Tyrell? “If our siblings are gone, then we must rely on our friends all the more. I would be glad, as lady of Harrenhal and perhaps Winterfell too, to extend the hand of friendship to you and your House. To you and Lady Eleyna both.” And if it puts the Houses Tyrell and Lannister in my debt, why, then the tables have surely turned. She became faintly aware that she was playing the same game Littlefinger had played all his life. Only she was winning, now.

“I mean to make for Harrenhal on the morrow,” Sansa said. It sounded much more assured now.
“You will come with me, as honoured guests. Once we reach the castle, we will consider how to better ally ourselves against our foes. Against Cersei and the forces of darkness both.”

Margaery considered this for a long time. Then, finally, she nodded. “And what of Lord Edmure?”

“Let me deal with Lord Edmure,” said Sansa.

They departed Riverrun the following morning, after a dawn breakfast. As Podrick was leading her horse out of the stables she heard her uncle’s boots coming fast down the steps. “What is this?”

“We are leaving,” Sansa told him.

“Leaving? To go where?”

“Harrenhal. I am its lady.”

“You cannot.”

“By what authority is that?”

Edmure coloured with embarrassment. “The lord of… the… I am your uncle!”

“Yes,” said Sansa. “Past time you remembered that.” Podrick held the reins while she climbed up onto her horse.

“You may go, but you cannot take the others with you.”

“Lady Margaery and Lady Eleyna? But I thought you wanted nothing to do with other people’s affairs, nuncle? Well, if you have changed your mind, then by all means—”

“It is not a matter of that.” His teeth were gritted hard. “They are under my protection. The protection of Riverrun.”

“And when did you give them that?” Sansa started past him, heading towards the two women of whom he spoke. “Give my love to Roslin,” she said. “I think you can be relied upon to do that, at least.”

There was nothing he could have done to stop her, even if he had wanted to. When Edmure realised that Jeyne Westerling and Roban both were to ride with them he grew incensed again, this time hiding his anger as concern for his great-nephew’s safety. But Lady Jeyne let her silence speak for her dissatisfaction. Edmure looked ripe to explode by the time they finally set out, but with her surrounded by not only the Hound and other defenders but a whole Riverman contingent of her own, there was nothing he could do to stop her.

At the inn of the kneeling man on the Red Fork they met Patrek Mallister and his escort. Old Lord Jason had stayed behind at Seagard as the wights swarmed up the rocks, and she learned now from his son that he had sacrificed himself so that his people might better escape. But Lady Jeyne let her silence speak for her dissatisfaction. Edmure looked ripe to explode by the time they finally set out, but with her surrounded by not only the Hound and other defenders but a whole Riverman contingent of her own, there was nothing he could do to stop her.

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He told her, too, about his ride south: to the Charltons, the Shawneys, the Vances of Atranta. They all had joined Ser Patrek, and by extension they had joined her. He had seen Lady Melissa too, at Raventree Hall; she said, according to Ser Patrek, “well, she has something, which is more than we can say for Lord Edmure.” So she had Raventree’s support as well, few though their numbers were.

She wondered if Lord Patrek still had half a mind to marry her as Ser Patrek had. He never said anything outright, of course, but sometimes she would look at the right time and see him redder than he had been. And afterwards the Hound said, “You be careful around that one.”

“Why?”

“There’s something in the way he looks at you.”

“There’s something in the way everyone looks at everybody,” she said. “Even you and me.”

They reached Stone Hedge where she saw Lady Bracken, who, eager not to be outmatched by the Blackwoods, gave her a small contingent of soldiers – not more than fifty – and a great feast to make up for the shortfall against their rivals. After Margaery and Jeyne Westerling went up to bed early, she found herself alone with Lady Eleyna over the gooseberry tarts.

“We would have come in the end, you know.” Her words had that air of sudden clarity, long-considered, emerging from a haze of meaningless platitudes. They meant something.

“What do you mean?”

“Your brother Brandon wrote to us for help. And by the end, we were getting reports from Kayce and Fair Isle of dead men with blue eyes on our shores. We had it all planned. After Cersei was dealt with, we were going to march.”

“We? King Tommen, you mean?”

“I mean we. I wouldn’t have stayed behind. I would have… well, the truth is, he didn’t have the plan himself. But I told him we should, and he would have done it once I made it clear. Maybe we wouldn’t have been enough to stop them, but…”

This was the world now. Would haves and could haves and should haves. The kingdom of what might have been.

“You don’t see it,” said Eleyna. “I don’t blame you. When I first met him, he seemed like the last person you would expect to lead an army.”

“He danced with me at my wedding. My first wedding, to Tyrion,” said Sansa. “He wanted to be a knight, he said.”

“I don’t think he ever really did,” said Lady Eleyna. “Not by the end. But it’s strange, isn’t it? How much we all change. If you’d ask me two years ago what sort of husband I would have wanted…” She subconsciously put a hand on her belly.

“Do you know if it will be a boy or a girl?”

“A girl, I hope.”

She did not ask why. She reckoned she knew.

“I sent Lady Brienne of Tarth to Casterly Rock to treat with Cersei and Myrcella,” said Sansa. “Do
you think she will be able to convince them?"

“She might convince one of them,” Eleyna replied. “It is no longer Cersei and Myrcella but rather Cersei or Myrcella. Let them choke the life from one another, I say. If the gods are good, Ser Jaime will somehow blindly grope his way to the lordship. Then Casterly Rock might not be entirely doomed.”

That night, for some reason, she dreamed she was back in the Red Keep, on her knees before Joffrey. “You are a stupid girl,” he said. He turned to Ser Meryn Trant, who gave him her father’s head. Joffrey waved it about, holding it by the hair, laughing. Suddenly she felt a rage rise in her, and the next she knew she was halfway up the steps, and then her fingers had pushed themselves through Joffrey’s throat and he was lying on the floor and choking, scratching at his own neck, trying to get her hands out, turning purple. When his whining fell silent at last, she stood up, looking at the horrified faces of the court all around. Staring at her, but none of them moving. She picked up Joffrey’s head – somehow it had become detached from his body – and on her way out of the hall she tossed it to Cersei. “He would have wanted you to have this,” she said.

How far she had come. How far they had all come. Sometimes she looked back, and she thought, who am I? But then she remembered Father’s face, and Mother’s voice, and she knew she was the same person she always had been, and neither Littlefinger nor the Lannisters nor time could change that.

The night before they were due to arrive at Harrenhal, a great mist descended, and by morning it was difficult to see more than a few hundred feet ahead. She could still see the towers of Harrenhal, huge as they were, darkly imposing through the haze. But she did not know whose banners flew there. She sent some men ahead to scout; shortly before noon they returned, bearing frowns. “The castle is occupied, my lady. I am afraid we did not see their banners.”

“We should wait here until the mist clears,” said Patrek Mallister.

Sansa was not for such waiting. Before Ser Patrek could reply she urged her horse away from camp, up to the eastwards facing rise that might give her a better view of the castle. She sent Podrick to bring her the Myrish far-eye.

She turned to Ser Patrek. “When we arrive—”

“Quiet,” said a voice, with sudden urgency. Sansa was surprised to see it was Sandor Clegane who had spoken.

Ser Patrek frowned. “I beg your pardon—”

“I said quiet,” Clegane repeated.

Then Sansa heard it too. From far off, a sound like a banner flapping in the wind, getting louder and louder. The source was invisible through the mist, and yet in her mind, an idea was blooming. “Clegane,” she said, “that is—”

Her words were drowned out beneath the sound of a colossal roar. And then the sky parted like the sea and something huge fell out of the sky and crashed to earth so loudly it nearly knocked her off her feet. It was only with the Hound’s help that she remained standing. When she blinked away her confusion, it was unmistakeable: the wings, the great snarling head, the scales. Dragon. Daenerys Targaryen had come for them. Sansa forced herself to stand up straight and stare unblinkingly into the cloud of dust the dragon had blown up on land. She is trying to intimidate us, that is all.
Several figures appeared through the dust cloud. Sansa could only make out their silhouettes, but she saw, among them the figure of a woman, dressed in what seemed to be warlike dress. Her apprehension grew and grew as they approached – and then the cloud thinned out and she saw that it was not Daenerys Targaryen at all. Instead, it was some sort of wildling women, dressed all in filthy furs, wearing a necklace of… dear gods, were those ears? Several thoughts went through Sansa’s mind in quick succession: These must be her retainers. But what use could Daenerys Targaryen possibly have for a woman with a necklace of ears? And whose children are th—

“Imp?” she heard Sandor Clegane growl. “Seven fucking hells.”

Sansa blinked at the children in the middle of the procession, and saw with horror that they were not children at all. And with even more horror, she saw that one of them was Tyrion Lannister, making his way ahead of the column now. “Always a pleasure to see you again, Dog,” the dwarf lord pronounced, waddling his way down the broad steps. “The same for you, Podrick, though I mean it more sincerely. But of course, the greatest pleasure is to be reserved for my beloved lady wife.” He gave her a hideous crooked smile.

Sansa could barely form words. “I… my… my lord Tyrion. I… how are you here?”

“I would have thought that was obvious,” said Tyrion. “We flew. On dragonback.”

“The queen… she is not with you?”

“Queen Daenerys? No. It was my dragon that brought us here.”

She must be imagining things. “Y-your dragon?”

“Aye. Viserion. Well, he was hers to begin with, I suppose, but he chose me to be his rider. Probably because he was least loved, you can tell by the names. And yet he lives. A survivor. Like me.”

“You flew here?” Sansa said again, more slowly. “On your dragon?”

“I am infamous for my surprises,” said Tyrion. “But enough of me. I think I should introduce you to my companions: fine friends all. This similarly tall companion of mine is named Penny, she is under my personal protection. This is Shagga son of Dolf, of the Stone Crows; you may have heard his name; his most famous act was shearing off Grand Maester Pycelle’s beard. This is Timett son of Timett, of the Burned Men; Clegane may find in him a kindred spirit of sorts. And this fair maid in the middle is Chella daughter of Cheyk, of the Black Ears.”

Sansa recovered her voice enough to say, “I am pleased to meet you.” It only mostly sounded like the lie it was.

One of the men – Shagga, she thought – spoke to her. “You are the Halfman’s lady?”

Mercifully Tyrion answered that question for her. “She was, once. Whether or not she still is remains to be answered.” And then she realised it was not mercy at all, for he turned his eyes on her, and that was even worse.

She had no weapon but the truth. “I remarried, my lord. To… to Willas Tyrell. And the marriage was – nay, is – consummated.”

“Oh,” said Tyrion. “And is Lord Willas here, perchance?”

“No. He is not. I left him in Highgarden.”
“I had heard that story,” he admitted. He clapped his hands. “I have also heard, from other sources, that you are the lady of Harrenhal now.”

That gave her some confidence. *This is your place.* “I am, my lord.”

“In which case I apologise for occupying your castle. But you understand, my companions and I needed some place to stay and weather the storm. I would, of course, be willing to relinquish it to you.”

“How on what conditions?”

Tyrion laughed. “My dear Lady Sansa, you have grown suspicious. I hope I was not the cause.”

“Spending time among Lannisters and Tyrells has made me naturally cautious,” said Sansa coolly.

“Naturally,” he replied. “I assume you are suspicious of me too, then. You are wondering what I want out of all of this.”

“Not particularly, but I think you are going to tell me anyway.”

He smiled, in that almost-frightening way he had. “I want what I have always wanted. Casterly Rock. I intend to get it with or without your help, Lady Sansa. Though I do not intend to set out for some time. I have learned, recently, that my family are spending their days squabbling over the Rock, and I think it would be in my best interests to allow them to continue to do just that. In the meantime, my allies and I will be staying here. You are, of course, welcome to return to Harrenhal and take up residence there, my lady.” Bitterness tinged his voice. “If it please you, this time we can sleep in different towers, not just in different beds.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is a lot shorter than I always envisioned it being, which I think speaks positively to the efficiency of pacing in *KNIGHTS OF THE NIGHTINGALE*. I remember the uber-long Myrcella and Tommen travelogue in *THE SUNSET KINGDOMS*, which, while it did wonderful character work, still dragged and dragged and dragged. This one is a lot more succinct, but there’s more going on - which is possibly unsurprising, given that characters like Sansa have "emerged from the chrysalis" as, uh, butterflies.

There is a lot of stuff to take in here. I’m just going to talk about Edmure and Sansa here, and leave the rest open to discussion.

Edmure makes his first appearance of KOTN in this chapter, and once again he raises the dilemma of whether Sansa’s berating of him is actually reasonable. I think we have to question whether or not he’d act in the same way towards Robb, or if he takes advantage of Sansa on account of her gender.

I think it’s easy to see Sansa as the outright winner here, on account of her speech:

“I will finish it for you. You were going to say ‘Robb’s rebellion died at the Twins’. But it did not...”

But at the same time, I can’t deny that on reflection, Edmure’s bitterness is certainly well-
reasoned:

“He would tell me to ride into battle on the back of a flaming chariot, I am sure. He would be quite unaware of the fact that said chariot was burning.” He made a sour face.

“I never thought the day would come when I would share sentiments with Jaime Lannister, but here it is: we Tullys, be it my uncle Blackfish, or your lady mother, or your brother, have a habit of rushing in first in the name of such grand ideals as family, duty, honour, and only learning our lessons much later, when the Riverlands have burned to the ground. It happened with my father in Robert’s Rebellion, it happened with King Robb too, during his war. I myself was guilty of it with the battles on the Red Fork and at the Camps. Many good men died for it. I look around Riverrun today and I do not recognise my own stewards, my own guardsmen, my own servants, for so many of them are buried in my fields.”

Edmure recognises that, even if the fight is more urgent than Robb's war was, it is likely to lead to the same consequences. And I think Sansa's line of thinking, branding Edmure a "coward", et cetera, is actually quite dangerous in the way it appeals - almost calling violence a necessity. Now, you might argue that Sansa’s callousness here is a result of the fact that she's lost all her siblings (so she thinks), and that she, here, is mirroring Catelyn from ACOK Catelyn VII, where she releases Jaime. But I think it's also possible to think that her callousness rises from the fact that she's never physically fought in battle. Or you may argue that this isn't callous at all, but a carefully balanced piece of rhetoric to emasculate Edmure and inspire him to action.

I think this is a really great chapter for discussion, so please feel free to leave your thoughts down below.

Thank for you reading, and I hope you enjoyed it. I hope to have the next one up by Friday at the latest.
All Men Are Made of Water

Chapter Summary

All men are made of water. Do you know this? If you pierce them, the water leaks out and they die.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ARYA

Rickon was getting worse and worse with every hour that passed. He never whined, and he certainly never wept. Indeed, he never gave any sign that he was in any pain at all, but she knew, sure as sunrise. She knew, too, that they could not continue to delude themselves forever. Sooner or later, something would happen. And though neither of them knew what it was, they both had a pretty good idea.

Maybe Gendry did too. He walked in front, using his sword as a scythe to chop apart the dense vegetation where it o’ersprawled the path through the marshland. Branches of thorn and bramble fell by the wayside in his wake. Only sparingly did he glance back to speak with them, and even then it was only guttural. There was nothing to be said.

They had walked for the better part of five days, through the muddy wilds of the Neck. Stringy weeds overgrew the path on both sides, and here and there were dead flowers with broken necks, and lilies swimming in scum. In places the path vanished completely, and they had to spend hours finding where it resurfaced from the darkness. They always walked in this formation, with Gendry in front, always guarded, swinging his sword to clear the way; Arya second, ironically the beating heart of the column, calling words of encouragement that sounded strange and foreign to her ears. And Rickon lagging behind, limping in places, his face screwed up with pain, but still going, always going.

They walked, and they walked, and they walked. Sometimes, in those long silent times when no one spoke, the trees spoke to her, in place of human voices. They never said much: their knowledge of man’s tongue was limited to Arya and north and a few other words, but it was the voice, not what it said, that intrigued her. The voice was not lonesome, but a choir of a thousand other voices, all merging together as one as they spoke. But there was one that spoke maybe a second before the other echoes, and she was sure she knew it. Sometimes she still thought it was Bran, only Bran was dead, so that was surely her imagination. But someone else… someone like Bran… someone from her past, who she had left behind somewhere and had forgotten. Yet whoever they were, they had not forgotten her.
Come nightfall, they would stop in some clearing, and settle down beside a mean campfire. Gendry would then leave to hunt, and Arya would stay with Rickon. Even alone as siblings, they did not talk much. Rickon was too weak. On the first night he had collapsed entirely, just fallen down slack and dead, his face pale and sweaty, his eyes rolled back into his head. At first she feared the worst, but then they brought him round. Eventually, between his weak coughing, she coaxed from him the fact that the wights had slashed him. The wound went across his belly, leaving deep scratches that were by then damp with blood. She had torn strips from her clothing and bound them up as best she could, but they had no ointments or poultices to keep the blood off. All they could do was wash the wound out with what little fresh water they were able to collect from the rain. But even then… hours had passed between their escape from the Seagard beach and their decision to rest. Long enough, Arya feared, for some sort of infection to set in, even if they could not see it.

At first, Rickon had seemed to recover, after a good night’s sleep with she and Gendry watching over him. But then on the second day he fell down again. It was not for long, but it was enough to worry her. And after that, he did not improve. Instead he continued sickly, weak, just barely hanging on.

She knew that if they did not reach Moat Cailin soon, he would only worsen.

From what she remembered of her journey south, with Father and King Robert, it had taken three weeks to go from Moat Cailin to Castle Darry. The distance between the Moat and Seagard was only half as far, and they were not travelling with the queen’s massive wheelhouse or the royal baggage train. Even with Rickon wounded and walking slow, she reckoned they were only a couple of days out. And they were going the right way: they could tell by the position of the eastern sun, and in places the treeline thinned and they could see the kingsroad snaking this way with them.

They dared not take the causeway itself, though. While it wound the most direct route north, Arya had scouted for herself on the second day, and there she found the tracks of wights. She did not think that taking the paths and not the road would necessarily save them, but she would sooner not be out in the open.

“We’ll camp here.”

Arya looked up, breaking out of her daydream. “What?”

“I said we’ll camp here,” said Gendry. He looked like he was waiting for her to challenge him. But the clearing was as good as any they would find. It was secluded and shady, and yet there were good lines of sight; no one, living or dead, would sneak up on them here so long as she kept a watch out.

They made their camp in the shadow of a great yew tree, which, though bare of branches, was enough to keep the worst of the rain off. Gendry lit a small fire: they might have been better to not have a fire at all, but with Rickon as he was, it was unreasonable to leave him wet through and cold.

Arya lay her brother down against the tree and peeled back his tunic to get a better look at the wounds. The marks were starting to crust, but that crust was fairly uniform crimson rather than black or pus-coloured, which was better than it might have been.

Rickon breathed out shakily. “Is it… better?”

“Yes,” she said, and there was no way for him to know if she was lying. “Though… we’ll have to do the thing again, I think.” She knew it hurt him, but it was for the best.

“The thing?” It was a moment before he understood, but when he did, his eyes suddenly widened. Raspingly he said “you don’t have to.”
“No. But it would best for you if I did.”

The ‘thing’ was to cauterize his wounds somehow, where the flesh was not entirely healing as she thought it should be. She wasn’t sure that this was the right thing to do, but it seemed wiser than just letting him bleed out onto endless strips of cloth ripped from her cloak.

He screamed, of course. Or he might have done, but instead he pressed his lips tight and there was no sound but a muted, low wailing. Then it turned to gasping, and afterwards some coughing, and then, mercifully, he rolled over onto his side and fell quietly asleep.

“How far is it now?”

She turned to Gendry, who was busy poking the fire with a stick. “I don’t know. A couple of days, maybe. And then a little while further to White Harbor.” Her eyes drifted back to Rickon. He may not last those days.

For a long time they sat in silence. Then, Gendry asked, “what are you doing?”

“Thinking.”

“About what?”

“About something you said when we were on the beach.” No sooner had she blurted it out than she made to cover herself; why did I say that, why did I tell him the truth. She swallowed. “…you said I... you said I looked less like a boy than I used to.” Silence from both sides. “It’s nothing. I don’t know why it’s bothering me.”

Gendry looked away, unable to meet her eyes. “I meant,” he said in a low voice that she was perhaps not meant to hear, “you looked…” He said something she couldn’t hear. Then: “I didn’t know how to phrase it.”

“You should have just been honest,” Arya said. “Honesty doesn’t need to be long and complicated. It’s easy. Just like that. Say what you mean.”

It was a moment before Gendry realised she was quoting him. Then he smiled. “You can be a right bitch, you know.”

“I know,” said Arya. “I suppose I’ve been like that for a while. I suppose I forgot what it was like to be… to be…”

“Normal?”

“Normal. To have friendships and... other things. Even before I went to the House, I wasn't really sure. I thought they were unimportant. Naive. That’s what I thought of Sansa. And no one would want me anyway. Arya Horseface.

But that’s just the thing, isn’t it? There are people out there that didn’t think that way. And there always were. It’s a normal thing, family. Good people deserve families. People like Sansa and Rickon, they deserve to have a family. And it’s not right to take that away from them. I thought killing the people on my list would bring something back. But I was wrong.

“I keep thinking about the stableboy. Back in King’s Landing. The first person I killed. I put my sword in him, and he just... died. And now I’m thinking... did he have a family? Did he have people, who I took him away from?”
“We all feel guilty sometimes,” Gendry said.

“It’s not guilt.” It never really had been. “It’s not for him. It’s for me.” She looked into his eyes, and he stared back into hers. Not saying anything, just staring. He’s stubborn and stupid, part of her thought, he can’t understood. And yet she knew that he did.

From somewhere behind her came a sound. It was barely a whisper, but the silence was such that even the tiniest noise was heard loud and clear. Gendry felt it too; instantly he threw a handful of dirt over the fire to extinguish it and unsheathed his sword. For her own part she readied Needle, then ran to wake Rickon from his fevered sleep, one hand over his mouth. “Quiet, now.”

Arya was not entirely sure if the wights made their way by sight, or by hearing, or by something else. But she knew that their best chance would be to never be seen by them. She dropped to one knee in the mud. Calm as still water, she thought. Fear cuts deeper than swords. Would Syrio Forel still be saying that, if he was here now? But of course he would, boy. All men are made of water. This is known. And all men must die. This is known, too.

Through the foliage she could see grey shapes moving. Slowly, randomly, breaking the brush at intervals then receding into it again. Their feet moved in strange shuffling patterns.

And then they stopped.

They stopped, and they turned, and they were turning towards them.

“Arya,” said Gendry, very quietly. “We can’t——”

He was right, of course. But here was Rickon, pale and sweaty and ill, and she could not leave him. Even as he protested. “Arya, you should——”

“I’m not going anywhere,” she told her brother, and she meant it. “I’m not running. Never again.”

The wights were all together now, all staring across the clearing at the three of them. Arya counted twenty, thirty, forty, fifty – too many. She gripped Needle tight in her left hand and held Rickon’s hand in her right. If I am quick, I can get ten of them, fifteen. “Gendry,” she said, “you can carry Rickon, can’t you?”

He looked at her, with his big dumb blue blacksmith’s eyes. “Arry… Arya, you can’t——”

“I have to.” Father would have done, she thought. “You carry Rickon, you take him to Moat Cailin, you——”

“No,” said Gendry.

“Yes,” said Arya. “You have to——”

“No,” said Rickon, and he pointed across the clearing. “Look.”

The wights were not coming any further. They stopped in their advance. For a moment their eyes were on the three of them, but then, slowly, they turned to face in the opposite direction. Watching something, waiting for something—

And then it came.

The wolves sprang from the trees with an unearthly chorus of howls. They came with claws outstretched and teeth slavering; their jaws tore rotted human flesh up like wet rags and spat out bits
of gristle and cartilage, their eyes gleamed and shone as they leapt, and blood matted their fur as they landed. Though the wights fought back they were disunited, far from a pack, and Arya saw only one wolf felled among the dozens that fought. She became aware of Rickon growing excited by her side; “look,” he said, “look, Arya, that’s Shaggy!” And maybe that black wolf was Shaggydog, but she knew who led the pack here.

When the fighting was over, the direwolves came to the children who had raised them, in a distant life. Nymeria came in front, and she did not bow her head. Neither did Shaggydog, and when Rickon reached out a pale hand to touch his fur the great black beast stiffened somewhat. “They’re wild, Rickon,” she told her brother. “They always have been, and they always will be.”

“Maybe,” said Rickon. “But that does not mean they have forgotten us.” He stretched a hand towards Shaggy again, and this time it was permitted to rest there in the dark fur.

Arya looked at Nymeria, and Nymeria looked back at her. She knew that her own wolf would not be so easily cowed. After all, Shaggy had only been away from Rickon since Seagard, whereas with Nymeria it had been years, not counting their brief encounter at Oldstones. They shared no words. But they did not need them.

Afterwards, she did not remember that night. It fell away in a haze, the way things sometimes did when you were in your cups, but she did not remember drinking either. She had, instead, snatches of it: of her climbing up onto Shaggydog’s back behind Gendry and Rickon – had that really happened? – and them riding up the causeway together, and everything in the world being bright and alive.

But it could only last so long.

They were on the causeway proper when it happened. Shaggydog had left them there, with a day’s walk to Moat Cailin through the fens. She had been on the left, Gendry on the right, and Rickon in the middle. And then, from nowhere, her brother slipped sideways and fell. Gendry caught him as he went down, hard on the planked bridge of the causeway, and sat him up. His arms and legs had gone rigid and ice-white, but his fingers were shaking, and there was blood from his mouth. For a moment Arya was lost in shock. Then she was down on the road beside them. “His tongue,” she realised, “he’s bitten his tongue.” She opened Rickon’s mouth for him, his eyes were lolling, they saw nothing at all, his skin was all pallid and white now turning greyish. “Hold him so he can breathe.”

The bandages, she thought. She unwound the strips they had wrapped across his belly, laid a hand on him, felt each ragged breath in her hand and each smaller than the last. “You’ll be alright,” she said, but his eyes were rolling and the whole of him shaking and she was sure he could not hear her. And the wound—

It had split again, though not just with blood this time, but with pus too, every colour from yellow to black, none of them healthy and all of them strange and stark against the death-tone of his flesh. There was something on his lips, bubbles of blood; she let them spill down through his mouth, the eyes blinked, they stopped.

Then they opened. “Arya,” he said.

“Quiet, now,” she said. “You need to save your strength.”

He made a coughing noise that was nearly a laugh. Mocking her?

“We’re almost at Moat Cailin,” she said. “The crannogmen will be here soon.”
Rickon smiled at her, deliriously. “They… eat frogs,” he said at last, “don’t they?”

“They do,” she said. “And they ride on the backs of lizards. And their fortress, Greywater Watch, moves on an island, so it’s impossible to find. We’ll be there soon. Safe and warm.”

Rickon shook his head, though it seemed to pain him and it made more sweat break out on his forehead. “You don’t believe that.”

He was right. She had never been good at playing Mother. “I do,” she said, “and I know you do. You’ll make it to the Moat. And to White Harbor. We’ll get you fixed up.” There she knelt on the causeway, and pointed towards the north. The sky had been foggy, but now it was clearing, and on a hillock in the distance she thought she made out the towers of some castle. “That’s Moat Cailin there, look,” she said, without knowing if it was real or mirage. “We’re nearly there.” She squeezed his thin hand, as Mother or Sansa would have done. “We’re almost home.”

Chapter End Notes

Vaguely Cryptic Message:

Rickon is not gone, not just yet. But I wouldn't be hopeful - or maybe I would, but I wouldn't be expectant.

I am, of course, telling you, the way this particular plotline is inevitably bound to go, only not in so many words. Which may seem an odd way for me to go about it - I'm practically dropping spoilers here - but I think it fits well. What we see in this chapter is not death, but the slow progress towards inevitability. "All men," Syrio Forel tells us, "are made of water." It is inevitable that some of them must be pierced, sooner or later.

But maybe that's not the point.
Trust In Me

Chapter Summary

There are battles and there are battles. There are the monsters in the real world, and then there are the monsters in our heads. They’re always there, under our beds, and in our hearts. But the monsters don’t matter, so long as we don’t give in to them. So long as we find things to believe in.

- from The Sunset Kingdoms, Chapter 107

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

MYRCELLA

Ser Godry Farring raised the cup of wine to his mouth with gloved hands and took a sip. “I regret that I must report no change, Your Grace.”

“Nothing?” asked King Stannis, sounding not altogether surprised.

“Nothing,” the knight confirmed. “Their archers are in the same positions they were in the day before. And the day before that. And, if you asked me to make a wager now, I would say that they are unlikely to move anytime soon.”

Myrcella saw Stannis’s eyes briefly shift to her. See, they said wordlessly. I told you so. You should have known better than to trust in the Kingslayer, and I should have known better than to trust in his daughter. Then he went back to Ser Godry: “And of the wights?”

“Nothing either,” said the knight. “Thank the gods.”

“I am quite sure the gods had nothing to do with it,” said the king. “Nonetheless, I share your thankfulness. With the wights, at least. As for the Lannisters, it would seem the likelihood of battle is growing by the day. You will forgive my scepticism when I say it is unlikely that the Kingslayer will change his mind. Unless anyone would care to disagree?” And this time when his eyes fell upon Myrcella, it was very much deliberate.

She did not speak.

“Your ploy,” Stannis told her, “has failed dismally, it would seem.”

“I made you no promises,” said Myrcella. “I only said Ser Jaime’s conscience might be driven to
action. Not that it would.”

“Perhaps,” said Ser Addam Marbrand. “We should consider what will be, not that which will not. As it is, we have little in the way of a proper plan against the city’s defences. Ser Lyle and I might be able to inspire some support among certain factions. If we could be smuggled into the city—”

“—where you might betray us all over again,” said Ser Godry.

“Do you have a better plan?” Lyle Crakehall said harshly.

“Any plan which does not involve allowing you to betray us is a better plan.”

“Even a plan which consists of nothing more than sending waves of our men to die beneath the city walls? I have seen those engines they have mounted on the ramparts, ser. They will tear our forces to pieces.”

“And you hope that you might get on the other side of them early, is that it? I will not have it.”

“I will not have this.” Stannis did not shout, but they all heard him. “We attack together, or not at all. The Lannisters have tomorrow, and then until dawn on the day after that. By tomorrow night we will have a plan of attack drawn up.”

“We might delay,” suggested Marbrand. “The soldiers inside the walls are not fond of Cersei, and the city’s rations are not as large as you might think.”

“They are certainly larger than ours, though,” said Ser Davos Seaworth, Stannis’s right-hand man. “We are beyond half rations already. Give it three days, and it will be our men deserting, not theirs. Besides, the king has already given his ultimatum. To go back on it would be to break his vow.”

“If a vow was never made in truth, it is no vow,” Marbrand said. “Princess Myrcella is no prisoner. Therefore Lord Stannis has, in a way, already lied, and is thus not bound—”

“Be quiet, ser,” said Myrcella. She knew no good could come of Marbrand’s continued disagreement. “Much as both of us dislike admitting it, unity with Lord Stannis is the only chance we have.” *For now.* “Furthermore, treating further with Ser Jaime, or expecting any sort of reaction from him, is pointless. The man is a spineless coward. He will be as much help to our cause as my mother herself.

Marbrand nodded, but still looked unsure. “This battle will not be like the others,” she said. “It is important not to forget that. Those battles were far from Lannisport, and far from endangering the populace. But now the war is coming home.”

“It is coming home,” agreed Ser Lyle Crakehall. “Home to the city many of Cersei’s men have known all their lives. All we need to do is make one decisive breach, and then their fear will overwhelm them. They will come to our side, for certain.”

“First we have to make that breach,” said Stannis. He gave Myrcella a dark look. “Well. Since your ploy failed, I do not think this plan is any worse. Ser Lyle, Ser Addam, remain. I wish to consult with you.”

She was not about to argue. Myrcella went out, back to her tent. She did not go alone, of course. The gods never gave that sort of mercy. The lummox Brienne of Tarth pursued her all the way to her bed. “My lady,” she said, strictly. “We must talk.”

“We are talking.”
“About your uncle. About Ser Jaime.”

“How about my father, you mean? There’s no need for you to delude yourself about his morals anymore. He is undeniably guilty of sin, and sins far worse than any of the rest of us.”

“You are too harsh on him, my lady.”

The anger that had been boiling within her every since the parley simmered forth. “Too harsh? You call me too harsh, you in your righteousness! Whereas Ser Jaime’s shit is solid gold, I’m certain, as surely as his hand is. Well, let me inform you that his shit is just that, and its as soft as his spine! You saw him at the parley field, bleating her words, doing her unquestioning bidding! When Stannis told of Uncle Kevan’s death, he barely moved a muscle.

“And here you sit, calling me harsh in my condemnation! I am sorry if I do not forgive every wrong that is done to me, Lady Brienne! I am sorry that I do not meet your high standards of chastity, charity and righteousness! I am sorry that I allow myself to express a man’s opinion, without donning the garb and style of a man as you do!”

Brienne did not flinch once throughout her speech, nor did she falter in her reply. “You are too harsh, my lady. And forgive my presumption, but I do not think you view him as unkindly as you would have us all believe.”

“What would you have me do, then?”

The lady knight took a moment to prepare a measured response. Then she said, “I would not have you do anything, my lady. The actions I am about to suggest are ones I will undertake myself. Grant me leave to confront Ser Jaime in person.”

“Ser Jaime is cowering behind the walls of Lannisport, and he will certainly not come out – nay, he will not be permitted to come out – to talk with you.”

“Which is why I will go to him.”

“I do not think you understand – he is behind the walls of Lannisport. As we are not. Or do you intend to somehow infiltrate the defenses put there specifically to keep us out?”

“Siege defenses, my lady, are meant to defend against sieges. Not against lone riders. Our whole army could march up to those gates and we would be repelled. But I alone might stand a chance.”

Myrcella laughed mirthlessly at her naivety. “And suppose, by some miracle, you did manage to gain an audience with Ser Jaime. What would you do then?”

“I would reason with him, my lady. First I would make our situation clear, that neither you nor I are prisoners.”

“Well. It does not appear that he will be saving us on account of that perception. Continue.”

“I would remind him of his duty, my lady. To you, and to his people… and, if I may, to the memory of your late brother, who fought against your mother’s tyranny.”

“By which you mean, against the ‘loving kindness’ with which Jaime has slavishly aligned himself.” A bitter laugh issued from somewhere deep within her. “Your plan is sound, Lady Brienne, in a world where all men are fools with hearts as innocent as yours. But alas, we do not live in that world. And so I declare your plan to be nothing more than a folly.”
“A folly, perhaps, my lady, but what else do we have?”

Myrcella had a suspicion that Brienne of Tarth would not be stopped by her. If she is right about the possibility of her entering the city, then she may be right about other things, if I am willing to surrender sense in the face of hope. And if she is not…

If she is not, what does it matter?

“I will permit it,” she said.

The shock on Brienne’s face was plain. “You will, my lady?”

“Do not make me feel like even more of a fool by saying it again. But yes, you may go. I will not stop you. Neither will I help you, but I will not stop you.”

The lady knight stepped back. “I should prepare, then. We only have two nights left.” She hesitated a moment. “If I may be so bold, my lady, perhaps you might write to Ser Jaime, with your own thoughts. I would deliver this letter, and it might be enough to convince—”

“I will not,” said Myrcella curtly. “And you should leave now, before I change my mind.”

Brienne went. But for some reason, the matter of writing to her uncle remained sore in her mind long thereafter, as the night wore on. What would I write in such a letter? ‘I am sorry that I did not surrender as meekly as you did. I am sorry that I was stupid enough to believe you, when you made your promises. I am sorry that you let my brother die.’

He had never spoken a word to her, after he had walked her to her Arryn husband. Not a word of farewell. King Robert was never a father to me, she had said the last time they properly spoke, in her solar at Harrenhal, she half in her wedding gown. That was always you. She knew she did not know. King Robert was never a father to me, Ser Jaime, she would write, and neither were you, even if I wished you were.

She heard a rustling behind her and one of her guards entered the tent. With him he brought Prince Quentyn Martell. “He would not be sent away, Your Grace,” the man said apologetically.

“No matter.” Myrcella was more curious than anything else. “What can I do for you, Prince?”

“I wish to talk.”

“We are talking,” she said, as she had to Brienne. “Perchance you have some ridiculous plan you would like to share with me. Perhaps we should tunnel under Lannisport? Perhaps we should try and build siege engines of our own? Or perhaps you’d like to try and seduce my mother? Or perhaps—?”

She stopped herself. “That last one was unkind, Prince Quentyn. I apologise.”

“It is… no matter.” He was too polite to say anything else. “The reason I have come, princess, is that I do not… well, I do not intend to stay, that is the simplest way of saying it. Come the morrow, my men and I intend to leave for the Riverlands. I know that your mother has barricaded the goldroad and the river road both, but I intend to find ways of getting around them.”

Should she have been surprised? It had been obvious from the first that Prince Quentyn was not made for war. He sat in some of Stannis’s war councils, but he did not speak. And the more she thought about it, the more she realised the truly conspiratorial air of all his secret meetings with his own men, chief among them the giant Yronwood and pretty-faced Drinkwater. And yet there was something that did not make sense: “Why are you telling me this?”
From the quiet way he spoke, it seemed Prince Quentyn was already beginning to regret his decision. “I have been told that you helped Margaery to escape from your mother, in Casterly Rock.”

“I did what I could.” What I had to, or felt I had to. “You… hope to repay the favour, is that it?”

Prince Quentyn nodded. “I thought you would be more angry. I thought you might tell Stannis, even.”

Strange, wasn’t it? He was here in his chainmail and leather and she only in woman’s wool, but she acted so much more the man. She remembered something her mother had once while said in her cups: I should have worn the armour, and your father the dress. She had meant King Robert then, but it applied to Ser Jaime too, she thought.

“If you thought I would tell Stannis, then why are you telling me?”

Prince Quentyn looked lost, like he had blundered into her tent by mistake. “I thought… it was the right thing to do. To ask you if you wanted to go. To…” He dithered a bit. “…we cannot win, Princess. I am sure you know that. They have more men than we do, and they have the walls. When it comes to battle, they will crush us. And I thought… since you and are… blood…”

“Trystane.” It hit her like a punch, sent her thoughts reeling. Dear gods, she thought, did I really forget Trystane? Have I been seeing Quentyn all this time, and always forgetting—

It seemed inconceivable. But merely saying his name, saying “Trystane”, sounded strange to her ears. He was from a world ago. From a time when I was content to be only a princess, and desiring nothing more. Before the Rock, before Harrenhal, before King’s Landing, in those later days...

Prince Quentyn did not look much like his brother, neither in appearance nor in his person. Trystane’s hair had been curlier; he had been darker, having spent his hours in the hot sun of the Water Gardens whereas Quentyn was locked away at Yronwood. We played in the fountains, and we played cyvasse. Trystane had been more confident, more companionable, more like his uncle Oberyn. Always with a smile at some secret joke, whereas Quentyn seemed always nervous of his own thoughts.

“You are asking me because we are… well – siblings.” She did not know Quentyn enough to think of him in that way.

“Yes. Siblings-by-law.”

“And?”

“And so…” He shrugged. “I thought, if you wanted to leave, I would take you with me. With us, I mean. Back to the Riverlands. Where you sent Margaery. We’d go back, and we’d…” He made an incomprehensible sign.

Myrcella narrowed her eyes. “And that’s what you want?”

Slowly: “It is.”

“You’re lying.”

“I’m – what? – I’m not lying.”

“Yes. You are. Look me in the eyes and tell me that you want me to come with you. I don’t think you even want to go yourself. Else you would have done so already, instead of staying here.”
thread unravelled before her eyes; now she understood. “Yes, you want to return to Margaery. But I think you want something else more, don’t you?”

Prince Quentyn did not answer. But his silence spoke louder than a thousand words.

“You want revenge. My mother killed Ser Loras – your brother-by-law. She killed my brother too. She killed our hopes for peace between Lannister, Tyrell and Martell. But more importantly, she hurt your wife. Margaery told me. She can’t have children, can she? Not anymore. And the child you did have… if you went back to your wife without having avenged your loss – if you turned, here and ran – you would feel that you had failed not only yourself, but her, too.”

Quentyn had gone very still. Something moved, some flush under that pale, sunless skin. Behind his eyepatch, she thought she saw something twitch. “Do you want me to stay?”

Myrcella breathed out. “It is not a matter of what I want, prince.”

“Do you think Margaery would want me to stay?”

“Margaery would want you home at all costs.” That much was true. But she needed Quentyn. He only had about twenty men, but she needed every man they had. “But I think she would do what you want to do now, if only she had your strength.”

She watched him fiddle with a link of his chainmail. After an age he looked up at her again. “I have… I have never been much good at revenge, princess.”

“You don’t have to be,” said Myrcella. “You just have to want it.” And that was true, too.

She had no more visitors after that. They left her alone to her silence. Only it was not a true silence. It never was. Sitting on her bed, wine cup in hand, she became half-aware of a presence in the room. Something – someone – standing behind her. And at the same time, she knew she could never turn around and look, for then he would no longer be there.

Did you love Trystane?

“Don’t—”

Did you love him?

“Of course I did.”

She could sense the eyebrows rising. Not the sort of thing he would have done in life, but he was more cynical nowadays. Then why don’t you believe yourself? Have you gotten so used to wanting revenge that even the good things are only a means to your destructive end? Trystane wouldn’t have wanted—

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t tell me what Trystane would have wanted.”

Then don’t go thinking of me as sanctimonious. You know I’m right, Cella. I’m always right.

“You’re not even real,” she said.

Sometimes I don’t think you are, not anymore. You’re not Myrcella. You aren’t like you used to be. She… He had one of those nervous, nail-biting pauses of his. She was devoted to Trystane, you know. She loved him so much that after he died she ran away and didn’t talk to anyone for a week. She wanted to see a debt repaid, yes, as all Lannisters must, but she wanted him back more than she
wanted her revenge.

“Love and devotion. Yes. Well, of course you would think that.”

Tommen laughed; something she hadn’t heard in a long time. “I’m not real, Cella. So if you don’t believe in love and devotion anymore, then why am I telling you about them?”

Chapter End Notes

Myrcella is not a character known for her strong belief. She is the sceptic of this storyline, and compared to Tommen, she is certainly less likely to believe in grand ideals like faith and hope. And personally I think she suffers for that, and for her contempt of such ideas.

In this chapter, she is ultimately left with more questions than answers. She is placed under the light (the sunlight of the Martells and the divine light of her own dead brother), and asked to define what she believes in. At the end of Ch. 36, I don't think she really knows, but she is well placed to start questioning it.

And there is one character in the Casterly Rock camp, more than even Quentyn, who is especially well-placed to make her question herself further...

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On a less serious note:

“Those battles were far from Lannisport, and far from endangering the populace. But now the war is coming home.”

“It is coming home,” agreed Ser Lyle Crakehall.

*laughs Englishly*
Chapter Summary

Then out spake brave Horatius,
The Captain of the Gate:
To every man upon this earth
Death cometh soon or late.
And how can man die better
Than facing fearful odds,
For the ashes of his fathers,
And the temples of his gods?

- Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Lays of Ancient Rome*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

THEON

The warhorns blew just after midnight, as he had known they would. No one had told him that, and yet, in his gut, he knew it was true. And that same indescribable feeling told him that this was the last night. This was the end of the battle: or rather, the end of their lives.

Even now he was not quite sure why Euron had let him go back to Castle Black. At first he thought there must be some reason, that there was a devious plan, that Euron was making him tell the Watch false information and trying to trick them. But now, as the nights wore on, he was becoming more and more convinced that the only reason was so that he could know the despair of dying with men. And, more importantly, the despair of knowing all along that they could not win, and indeed that they had no chance of winning whatsoever.

He wondered if anyone up here on the ramparts believed anything else, in their hearts. The Northmen had prayed to their old gods, a few had prayed to the southern Seven, a few to the Drowned God, a few, even, to the Lord of Light. But he did not see how they could be sane men, and believe that their gods had any way to save them. There would be no mercy tonight. The wights did not know mercy. To Euron Greyjoy and the Night’s Queen both, it was just a word, an idea dreamed up by mortal men who were full of fear and had nothing else to believe in.

No, there would be no mercy tonight.

The mist was thick, and it came within a hundred yards of Castle Black. Theon knew the legions of the dead and Euron’s thralls were waiting just beyond it, grey figures in the pale clouds. But before they advanced, it was their master’s turn. When he saw Euron walking out ahead of his men, he
knew that his earlier thoughts about this being the final night had been proven true. Euron had never been seen until tonight. He had been toying with them until now. Tonight was the real fight: tonight, as he had at Winterfell, he was here to accomplish something.

Euron stopped, and waited. Though the thousand defenders all had their bows trained on him, they all knew that he must surely be impervious to their arrows to be playing to the gallery like this. They all stood and watched. Theon saw among them the pale nervous face of Samwell Tarly, the Lord Commander, plainly as afraid as any of the men he commanded. Beside him were Tormund Giantsbane and the Greatjon Umber, commanding the wildlings and the Northmen respectively. Previously the vanguard had fought disunited battles, across the castle. But here, tonight, the attack would come from only one direction: there were no tactics here, just pure, unrelenting force, and for Euron, a near-endless supply of dead men willing to die again for him. And so they would all fight together. And die together.

Theon watched as his uncle raised his hand from his side. In it he held the Horn of Winter, and though it was pitch-dark, the moon seemed to shine on its curved black surface, and the instrument of chaos was aglow. Very slowly, very deliberately, he raised it to his lips. And blew. It was not loud, as they might have expected. Instead a single soft note issued forth, as soft as the voice with which a mother might sing to her crying baby.

But pitch and texture meant nothing to the dead. They heard it, and they stepped out of their chilly rows, and they came forwards.

Euron smiled up at the battlements, then turned away, and retreated back into his advancing army.

There was a long moment where the entire defensive line held its breath. Then, realising that they were not quite dead yet, the Greatjon parted his lips and bellowed “ARCHERS!”

Theon had no bow; the northmen did not trust him with weapons, and he was missing too many fingers anyhow. So there was nothing he could do but stand and watch as the men pulled their strings back ready to fire. He watched their shaking hands – cold and fear mingled as the host of the dead charged onwards – and the gaunt expressions of their faces – and then the release.

The arrows fell upon the enemy. The wights did not scream; they had no voices to do so. Instead the noise was a wet, boneless thudding, one arrow after another; thud thud thud, to various effects. Some of the wights took an arrow straight through the skull; they froze grotesquely and tumbled to the snow; others received an arrow to the limbs, another to the chest, a third to the neck and they fell down, impaled and immobile but still twitching. But the vast majority kept coming. They weathered that first volley, and the second, and the third, and as the fourth was readying to be loosed they were scrambling up the palisade, and as the fifth volley went out they were climbing up onto one another’s shoulders and trying to reach the rampart. Then – and all the while Theon watched immobile – one of the wights reached over the wall, grabbed some unlucky archer by the scruff of his coat, and pulled him bodily over the edge into the hell below. He disappeared with a gory scream. He was not alone in that. A moment later the next man followed, and the next, and the screaming became a chorus—

And now they were on top of the wall, and the defenders were fighting them hand-to-hand – with the wights, that term was quite literal. They attacked with scrabbling fingers and inhuman claws, and the men fought back with steel, and everywhere was a mess of limp and flopping limbs and torn entrails and the white snow atop the black battlements was turning red and as Theon watched it close in he knew the red would soon drown everything out. Here it was, seeping through the snow towards him; a hundred feet, eighty feet, sixty—

It was not until the blood tide was a dozen feet away that he realised he had to move. At once it was
as if his ears became attuned to a different set of sounds; the dull noise of violence separated itself into individual screams and one of them was shouting “BACK! BACK! BACK INTO THE CASTLE!”

A moment of stupefied stillness, and then he turned and ran. Even as his first fleeting foot came down he felt hands grabbing at his ankle – living or dead, he could not tell. He shook free and sprinted to join the men trying to force their way through the wood-and-iron door at the end of the rampart. With every second that passed he could hear the wailing behind getting louder and louder; Theon kept scrambling, kept pushing, squeezing through every and any gap – and then hot air flooded him and he fell through into the tight enclosed space of the stairway. Someone was shouting for the men to form up to defend the stairs, but he kept going, down the sloped steps of the tunnel, into the darkness of the wormways.

Over the next minutes the men fought, Night’s Watch and free folk and Northmen side by side, desperately trying to keep every inch of ground and retreating only when absolutely necessary. And all the while Theon huddled in the alcoves and the unseen places, filled with fear. Somehow in his frenzied retreat he made his way to Samwell Tarly, and his fellow commanders. He overheard Toregg Giantsbane telling them that his father was still on the stairs, but could not hold forever. And that others were dead; one of the Ryswells, Lord Wull, and they had not heard from Lady Mormont. It was around then that Theon felt something break inside him, and he knew he could resist no longer. He pushed back through the lines, breaking from the claustrophobic circles, into the back tunnels which the Night’s Watch had left locked and guarded. He shambled the length of the tunnel, still armed with his sword but with nothing to do with it. There were storerooms down here, like the one Melisandre had been guarding – where was Melisandre, come to think of it? She must have fallen too, he realised.

He turned the corner, and the blood froze solid inside him. For there he was: Ramsay. Not merely idling or waiting by circumstance, but deliberately waiting for him.

He did not speak, and he did not have to. For Ramsay Bolton had mastered that way of looking, and of turning you to ice just as you met his gaze. The pale eyes glimmered, oh so faintly, as he watched Theon down the hundred feet of hallway. He was surrounded by his men, the Bastard’s Boys, but none of them mattered. All that mattered now were his eyes, and their cold mockery, and the hand he had on the bolt of the door.

“No,” Theon said.

Ramsay did not hear him. But he did not have to. “Yes,” he replied. It was a whisper, and yet it was so loud in the echoing space. Theon looked past him. He could not see what was beyond the iron door, but he could see what lay in the sawdust at Ramsay’s feet. The bodies of the sentries who had guarded the doors. And beyond the doors…

“No,” he said again.

“Yes, Reek,” said Ramsay Bolton. He unslung his sword, crusty with blood. “Oh, yes.” And he turned the key in the door, and then leapt aside. The Bastard’s Boys went scurrying after him.

Theon, alone in the hallway, watched the unlocked door for a long side. For half a second he dared to think nothing would happen. And then the door opened, and it did. They came. Came rushing through the middle and down the flanks, screeching, a shapeless mass of flesh and cloth rolling as a great tidal wave; they came clambering along the walls and crawling upside down along the ceiling beams. Theon stood there with his torch in one missing-fingered hand and the sword in the other, and watched them swarm. He breathed out and the air was pure ice, as cold as any of their unblinking eyes.
Move, you fool! Move! A voice in his head was screaming. It sounded quite like Asha.

But that could not be. Asha was dead, Euron had said so.

I may be dead, Theon, but you are not! She had a quality in her words that made him feel like he had just been struck around the head with a wet fish. He stumbled backwards – blood in his mouth, where had that come from? – and took up a run. It was a strange, shambling run, the run of Reek, and for a moment that name preyed on him; but only for a moment. This was Theon’s run now. He half-sprinted, half-hopped down the tunnel; at one point he tossed his torch behind him, hoping feebly that it might start a fire and that might become an inferno. He ran half-blindly, guessing at each corner, but by some miracle there were now black cloaks around him. Theon unhinged his tired throat and began to scream at them. “WIGHTS!” he screamed, “Wights, behind, BEHIND US!” He waved the sword like a loon around his head; no matter if it took off someone’s head; if they did not turn, they would not be around long enough for it to matter. “BEHIND US!” he screamed as they charged through the press. “Behind you!” When they did not turn at once he grabbed men by the shoulders and wrenched them round and waved his hands in their faces: “Look, damn you, look!”

And then, mercifully, someone sent up the call. “BEHIND US! BOTH SIDES!” From that bellow he was sure it was the Greatjon Umber. The Greatjon Umber, who on any ordinary day would have him strung up and hanged on sight. And now the Greatjon was following his lead. You see, Robb, he thought, because you had bizarre thoughts in the midst of battle. This was what I wanted. I wanted them to follow me. I am sorry I put that above following you. I am sorry I—

Something leapt at him, tearing at his cheek with fierce claws. Theon threw it off with his better hand, and trampled it into the ground with a bout of frenzied kicking. He backed away from the dead or dying thing, swallowed up in more black cloaks, now turning to fight the enemy from both sides. “HOLD FAST!” the Greatjon bellowed at everyone and no one, but it did not matter what he shouted, for what else were they to do? Theon scrambled his way along the front line, pushing through the tighter and tighter rings of dark cloaks, back towards the Shieldhall. He had to tell Lord Commander Tarly what he had seen, about how Ramsay was on Euron’s side now. He went through, bellowing incoherent nothings until he was hoarse. Once a wight leapt over the line of shields and reached him, but together he and four indiscriminate Northmen knocked it senseless. They forged on towards the frontlines while Theon crawled against the press on hands and knees, shaking off the glancing kicks in the head and side. Somehow he made it through the ring and back to his feet. There, with equal miraculous incredulity, he found himself not ten feet from Samwell Tarly, who held the line in front of the womenfolk and children who could not fight, and was busy ordering the tables. Even so, he had to scream to stand a chance of being heard: “LORD TARLY! MY LORD TARLY!” He drew closer, intending to smack his shoulder, when the man Tollett grabbed him and spun him round. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Ramsay,” Theon told him, entirely hoarse. “Tell the Lord Commander; Ramsay Bolton has betrayed us—”

By now Tollett was dragging his commander over, before he was carried away in the seething mass of bodies. He bellowed something in Tarly’s ear. The fat red face paled an instant, then turned to Theon. “Where do you think he’s gone? Out to join Euron?”

“That would make sense,” said Dolorous Edd Tollett. “Gather their forces and—”

“No,” said Theon. His voice was much louder than he’d expected. “He won’t be with Euron. They’re both against us, but they won’t be together. They’ll… Ramsay... he tortures people. In the worst way. He lets them hope, and—” He suppressed a shiver. “He likes to take their last hope away from them.”
Dolorous Edd and Samwell Tarly looked at one another. “The Grey Keep tunnel,” said the Lord Commander. “It’s bricked up, but it opens out in the kitchens. He’ll have gone – the last way out. And he knows it – dear god, he knows it. If he’s still underground, then he’ll be trying to open that.” He glanced at Theon. “Does that sound like something he’d do?”

_Last hope. Our last hope. Man’s last hope._ Theon had no idea if it was true. But it had to be.

“Which way is that?” someone asked. Theon realised, afterwards, that it had been he who asked. But why? _Because I will not let Ramsay Bolton take any more from me_, he thought. _Not Ramsay. The Bastard. Call him the Bastard._ And as strangely and suddenly as that, he was no longer afraid.

Tarly took a deep breath. “The Grey Keep. We… well, someone must plug the breach. And if Tormund is still busy here – or fallen, then—”

“It must be us,” said the wildling woman Val, who had appeared at his side. “Tormund is dead, Master Tarly. He fell on the stairs, not long ago. So I am told. Which means…”

“Which means the wildlings are without a leader,” said Samwell Tarly. “And we are without… well, I suppose this is it, then.”

“That it is,” said Val. “I will retrieve the women and children from the Sheldhall. You go ahead to the Grey Keep.”

Tarly nodded. “If we can stop Ramsay, then maybe we can get out into the yard. Or into the wolfswood, even. Or—” He stopped himself there. _He knows, _Theon thought. _He knows that it is possible. He knows that we die tonight, with our swords in hand._

They started down towards the Grey Keep. Theon was not sure who had organised it, or when they had started, or how long it took to get there. When they reached the Grey Keep, the wights climbed in through the now-opened breach and they came together, and the dead and the living danced. Time had become meaningless, and as for the individual – you were no longer alone, you were a part of something. Here, it did not matter who you had betrayed. You were the living, and they were the dead. And you fought because you must.

Then Theon saw him. There was something pale and strange in his irises, and the blood on his sword was frozen, but other than that it was unmistakably him, same as he had been at the battle of Winterfell: Ramsay. And through the fog of fighting men, those pale evil eyes met his own.

Should he have felt fear, then? Perhaps. But he could only die. All he had to lose was his life, and whatever feeble legacy the male living line of House Greyjoy could lay claim to.

Theon spat blood. He did not know how it had gotten there, but it made an effective challenge. Ramsay stepped forwards through his men, and Theon saw that he had, indeed, taken some form of Other magic into his veins; his skin seemed to glow blue, ever-so-faintly. “I killed your Lord Snow,” the Bastard said, brandishing his bright sword. “Just as my father killed your Robb Stark. You grew up together, I am told. The three of you. The King in the North, the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, and the heir to the Iron Islands. What a partnership that might have been, if you had not betrayed it.”

For his own part, Theon had only one thing to say. “Be quiet, and fight. Bastard,” he added. If he must die, let him prove he was no longer submissive, and never would be.

“As you wish,” said Ramsay, and advanced.

He fought two-handed, and though Theon blocked the first overhead cut it jarred his bony arms,
made him drop the sword almost a whole foot. He got it back up just in time, more by accident than anything else. Ramsay’s smile grew. “You are slipping, Reek.”

“My name is Theon.”

Ramsay pressed him. “Your name is Reek. Remember. Reek, Reek, it rhymes with—”

“Theon.” He beat away the next blow.

“Reek!”

“Theon!”

“YOUR NAME IS REEK!” Four hard blows now, each word punctuated, forcing him back. Theon could feel the sword dropping from his nerveless right hand, so he switched to his left. It was mutilated only a little worse, so it did not really matter.

“MY NAME IS THEON!”

Ramsay beat him back; this time he hit the wall and had to move aside. The sword slashed again; once more he spun sideways; slash, spin, slash, spin, until he could spin no more, breathless. For a moment he thought that would be it, but then a door opened suddenly behind him and as Ramsay’s sword came down he fell backwards, hard onto the floor of some new room. His bones were dozen-times-broken, he was more bruise than skin, the room was spinning, the bright candle on the table was spinning… his sword was gone…

Ramsay stood in the doorway. He knew, much as Theon did, that he was trapped, there was no way out of here. For a long time he waited, smiling, teeth glinting much as his sword did. “Oh, Reek,” he said, “oh, my Reek.”

Theon rose from his hunchback position behind the table as Ramsay came closer. Five steps. Four. Three—

He flung out a hand. “My lord.”

Ramsay stopped. “My lord?” The smile grew. The swordpoint dropped a few inches.

“Yes,” murmured Theon. “My lord should…” He coughed, great bloody breaths.

“My lord should what?”

“My lord should turn around,” Theon said.

Ramsay did not turn. But the unexpected absurdity of the request, coupled with the sudden change in his former servant, caught him off guard, left him uncertain for one half second. And in that half second Theon grabbed the glass candle from the table, and leapt at him. Ramsay got his sword up in time to catch him in the side, but not quick enough to stop him leaping. And somehow, miraculously, gods be with him, Drowned God, old gods, Lord of Light, all, the shard of obsidian buried itself entirely in Ramsay’s right eye.

The Bastard screamed, as he had never screamed before. Though his sword was in Theon’s side, there was no doubt as to who had done the worse damage. Together they fell, crashing to the floor. The glass candle was slippery in his fingers, cutting his nails and flesh to raw ribbons, but he did not care. He lifted it up again, and brought it down in the eye, and down again, and again, and again, and all the while he screamed “Theon! Theon! My name is Theon!” as the glass blade plunged deeper and
deeper and splintered skullbone and brain and brought black and blue blood gushing in ungodly amounts from the eye-socket. The body was twitching and writhing in its death throes long before he was done. Eventually he stumbled backwards to his feet, and forced the sword out of him. It had gone in, but not deep, so he plugged it with a fistful torn from Ramsay’s shirt. If that helped anything, good. If not, so be it. He was done here.

It was some time before he realised Ramsay was on fire. The candle had been lit when he plunged it in, and though the blood had tempered it somewhere, it had no found a place to catch light, and within a few seconds the whole corpse was afire, burning with that same bright fire that the glass candle aboard the Silence had burned with. Theon backed out into the hallway, into the tide of dark-cloaked men trying to make their way out through the Grey Keep, and closed the door behind him. Let it burn, he hoped, Ramsay, the room, Castle Black, all of it, burn it all.

Chapter End Notes

I am rather conflicted about this chapter. It is not what I initially thought it would be.

I had initially envisioned the Battle of Castle Black as something epic, on the scale of "The Dance of Dragons" from THE SUNSET KINGDOMS. But the size of "Dance" is something allowed by its significance along lines of conflict - that is to say, the Dance has several elements of nuance that come together as the culmination of ten or twenty different storylines - we have Tyrion and Varys's conversation about the Blackfyre conspiracy, Barristan's reflection on what true knighthood really is, and most importantly, I think, Dany's decision to be merciful at the very last moment. And these things are shown through the action, rather than just added on - so I hope.

With this battle, however, it is much simpler - the living against the dead. There are no conflicted loyalties, because there are no romantic subplots between a man and a wight, for example.

I've always gone by the advice that it is pointless having a battle scene just for the sake of it, to "liven up the plot" a bit. And I saw this here. Parts of this chapter were originally written from Sam's perspective, and it was just a matter of: "Sam slashed at the wight. The wight fell back. Then another wight attacked. But Sam was quicker than the wight." Battles like these are incredibly dreary to read, not to mention mind-numbingly boring to write.

So I set this from Theon's perspective. And as such, things that the reader will find significant - the mention of Tormund's and Maege Mormont's deaths, and Sam's feelings - are skipped over. We will have a Sam POV immediately following this (expect it tomorrow), but for Theon the most important matter is him and Ramsay.

I think the Theon-Ramsay conflict comes out of nowhere, but at the same time it doesn't need to be seeded. We know Theon's feelings towards Ramsay; we don't need them exposited. So I went with this. And I think it worked out well.

There are lots of "missing parts" in this chapter that aren't described because of the POV. But the rest will be explained soon. Or maybe not.

Next chapter: Samwell
The Last Garrison

Chapter Summary

_I may not have been “First In Battle”, Father, but you can damn well be certain I will be here to the very last._

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SAMWELL

Was it strange that here, at the end of the world, he found his thoughts drifting back to Horn Hill? And not to his mother, or his sisters, or to Gilly, or even to Dickon, but to his lord father: to Lord Randyll, who had said he would never be a man, who had called him a woman and a craven and every other like insult under the sun. Well, he thought. _Here I am, Father. I may not have been “First In Battle”, but you can damn well be certain I will be here to the very last._

He only thought that for a moment, though. There were a thousand things he deemed more important, all contending for space in his head in these precious moments. He decided, in the end, to fixate on one: Gilly. She was all that was good in the world: sweet Gilly and her babe. _I should have told you, Gilly. I should have sent another letter, even if it was going to be brought down by the storm. It would only have had three words. I would only have needed three._ That was strange, too. All the words and all the books in the world, all the poems men had written and the promises they had made and the heroic deeds they had done. And you only needed three words.

Then Val was at his side. “Lord Commander,” she said. “Shall we?”

The fog was fading, and dawn light was streaming in among the fires of the burning Grey Keep. The fire had come from some interior room; he knew not which, and was spreading through the wormways, ungodly fast and hot. Very soon it would consume all of Castle Black. By the time the flames died down, though, it would be over. The Night’s Watch would all be long dead, to the last man.

Sam did not turn back to talk to the others. He knew, for the first time since they had made him Lord Commander, that they would follow him: Dolorous Edd, Mully, Val, little Lyanna Mormont, all of them. And so they climbed over the rubble of the wall, and went out into the yard.

The wights were there waiting for them. Hundreds had been burned to ash in the tunnels, and others were staggering round ablaze or missing limbs. But Euron Greyjoy had brought tens of thousands to the battlefield, hundreds of thousands, and now, as he walked through the gate, they came with him. And with Euron came another figure. Sam knew at first glance that she was the Night’s Queen that
Theon Greyjoy had mentioned. Her flesh was pearly-blue; her armour was made of links of black ice, and around her head rested a bright circlet of blue ice. He knew, rather than saw, that she was beautiful.

But he had seen a thousand things more beautiful. One of them was this sunrise. Another of them was Val, with blood on her face and smoke in her hair, and her eyes still intent and powerful. A third was the sacrifice of Tormund, of the Greatjon, of Maege Mormont, of everyone who had fought with them in the tunnels. A fourth was the immortality of this moment, as he, Val, and three hundred others marched out of the Grey Keep entrance, bent but not broken, and stared down the entirety of the army of the dead.

“Brave Sworn Brothers of the Night’s Watch,” said Euron. “Brave, mortal Sworn Brothers of the Night’s Watch. And your leader, Ser Piggy. I’ve got a new hand now, Piggy!” He waved the appendage. “Better than the one you cut off, I must say. The Horn sits much more nicely in it. Yet another thing I have to thank you for.”

Sam did not respond. Euron seemed to recognise his silence; he even respected it. In a calm, measured voice, he said, “When this is over, and the world is founded anew, you can count on me to honour your last wish. I will remember you.”

Eternity seemed to pass between his last word and Sam’s next. He spoke quietly, but the words were not just his, and all the others who spoke them spoke with him, united. “Night gathers,” they said, “and now my watch begins.” They stepped out into the snow; it was crisp under their feet, and bright as light. “It shall not end until my death. Night gathers, and now my watch begins. It shall not end until my death. I shall take no wife, hold no lands, father no children. I shall wear no crowns and win no glory. I shall live and die at my post.” They walked through the oncoming wights, and their swords walked before them. “I am the sword in the darkness. I am the watcher on the walls. I am the fire that burns against the cold, the light that brings the dawn, the horn that wakes the sleepers, the shield that guards the realms of men. I pledge my life and honor to the Night’s Watch, for this night and all the nights to come.”

And then he was approaching Euron, and he knew that this was the last minute of his life. The wights parted around him, recognising, at their master’s order, that this was a battle for the two of them. Sam brought his sword back to his shoulder and put all his force into the swing, a heavy, two-handed slash. Euron’s blade danced up lazily to block it. When it met Sam’s sword it shattered it into a thousand shards of glass, and he was left with nothing but the hilt.

Sorcery, he faintly recalled Aemon saying, is like a sword without a hilt. He wondered what the maester would say about a hilt without a sword.

It took an age as Euron swung the sword for the kill. When it came down there was a long silent moment before he realised that his soul had not, after all, left his body. He was still here, still hurting, still living. But how?

He turned back, towards where Euron had been, and he saw her. Melisandre of Asshai, the Red Woman, Shadowbinder of Asshai, Priestess of the Lord of Light, in all her splendour. She came down wreathed in fire, and in her hands were ten thousand whips of pure red flame, and each whip split and became another ten thousand whips, and she gathered them all around her, and the whips threw his men out of the way of the enemy swords, and turned the enemy wights to burning corpses, to flesh and ash and dust. Their blades melted from the sheer sight of it, and piles of ash built up in the snow, and everywhere the red woman walked caught fire, and a blazing ring rose in the courtyard, and became a serpent, and burned. The timbers of Castle Black were ablaze hotter than ever before, not so much wood burning now as fire burning. Fire seemed to come from the air itself,
birthing itself out of atoms, burning everything that could be burned.

As Melisandre turned to look to her right, Sam saw Euron swing at her. He shouted a warning, but the blade was already coming down. And then there was a rush of flame and somehow the Red Woman had held of Euron’s magic sword, and it was – by the Lord above – it was melting. The black glass blade became sand in his hands. Then Melisandre grabbed Euron by the neck. And the impossible happened. Euron Greyjoy, who had haunted them for so long, who had seemed undefeatable, offered up a confused glance, and then disintegrated. Just like that. His dust rose in a wide halo, and abruptly, burned out into nothing.

Sam somehow made it back to his feet, and staggered through the flames; they retreated in his path, and then he was at Melisandre. She had fallen on her knees in the snow, entirely drained. And the hair that fell around her temples was no longer its brilliant scarlet, but white. When she rose, ponderously slow, he saw that her eyes were the same, but nothing else was. She looked a hundred years old – older than Aemon, far older. Her ancient lips moved. “Well, Master Samwell,” she said, very quietly, “I believe your prayers are answered.”

Sam gaped at her, dizzy. “Was that – did you—?”

“Not me,” she said. “I merely harnessed the fire. I did not make it.”

Only then did Sam realise she was not looking at him. Instead her eyes were across the yard, looking into the mist. When it cleared, Sam saw that the Night’s Queen and her men had disappeared entirely. Instead, a massive figure loomed, a strange, unnatural shape. With wings. And scales.

“It is fortunate, really, that she and I had the same idea at the same time,” Melisandre said. “Unless, of course, it was more than mere coincidence.” When he looked at the red woman again, her usual appearance was returning; the colour was coming back to her hair, her wrinkles were fading again. “Though I would ask you to keep the fact that I cannot birth fire out of air a secret.”


Wordlessly, Sam pointed into the mist and the smoke. “A dragon,” he said. “A real, living dragon.” And beside it, a young woman. A queen, he knew at once. The queen. Daenerys. She has come. She has come. Dear gods—

“I am looking for Lord Commander Snow,” said Daenerys Targaryen, stepping towards them. She wore a tunic of bright wool, patterned with snow-bright flames. “He and I have urgent business.” Through the mist around her came other figures: a red priest, a knight in plate armour, and – was that Marwyn the Mage? What in seven hells was he doing here?

“Lord Snow is dead,” said Sam. It felt strange – speaking to her. He had been sure that he would never speak to anyone again, after leaving the Grey Keep, much less Daenerys Targaryen. “He died some weeks ago, actually. He asked you to help him.”

Queen Daenerys nodded. “And here we are, Lord…”

“Tarly. Samwell Tarly. Lord Commander Samwell Tarly.”

Marwyn the Mage frowned at him. “Dear gods, Tarly. You were supposed to remain in Oldtown—”

“My Unsullied are on their way from Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, Lord Commander,” said the queen. “Along with soldiers of the Golden Company and the Second Sons and Windblown mercenary companies. My fleet, two hundred ships or thereabouts, is moored at Eastwatch also. My Dothraki following are ill-suited to such a weather, though. I have left them on the Sisters, in the Bite.” She
spoke, Sam thought, as a blind woman would. As if she could not see the destruction around her, as if she had noticed that Castle Black was currently burning to ashes, or that the Wall was in ruins and barely standing. “Together,” she said, “we will defeat this enemy.”

“You came too late,” Sam said.

“I beg your pardon?”


“Our friends,” said Dolorous Edd, who had appeared at Sam’s elbow, bringing with him Theon Greyjoy. “All dead. We asked you. We asked you so many times but you never came.”

“I am here now,” said the queen.

“And they are not,” said Sam. “Ask yourself: how many have died because you would not save them? How many will die in the future, because they do not have the men you let die to guard their backs?” The Night’s Queen was not dead, he had no doubt of that. And even if she was, the Night’s King, this terrible husband of hers, this Great Other, still lived. “And here you come down among us, with your dragon, claiming to be our bloody saviour, claiming to be Azor Ahai—”

“—reborn,” said Melisandre, very loudly.

Sam turned, impossibly slow, to look where she was looking. And it hit him, hard, in the stomach, and it was all he could do to stay standing. For there, in the blazing, smoking doorway of the Shieldhall, entirely naked yet unburnt, a bright silhouette against the fire around him and the ice ahead of him, stood Jon Snow. His dark eyes stared back at them, and they were afraid, and angry, and very much alive.

Chapter End Notes

Surprise.

Well, the short version...

Not dead.

Though I suppose un-dead would be more accurate.

I can see I have a lot of explaining to do.

But first, I'll start with the easy stuff.

Melisandre is not capable of reducing thousands of wights to ash, but she can manipulate fire to some degree, as we've seen here. And here, as shown by her abrupt aging, she has expended the majority of her strength in this act. Maybe she thought it was a sort of glorious suicide, but we can reasonably assume that ever since the Lord
contacted her, Melisandre has managed some sort of contact with Benerro and Moqorro. As for why she didn't bother telling Sam any / all of this, I'll explain later.

But SGH, you say, Melisandre doesn't have the power to dissolve Euron into dust. He's got superpowers and things.

But, of course, Euron, like all slightly-hackneyed villains, is flawed in his arrogance. Specifically, he has forgotten where he gets his superpowers from. So basically the Night's King and the Night's Queen have been using him as little more than an expensive taxi service to bring them back together at the Wall.

But this isn't what you came here for.

Yesterday, I had this comment from commenter Trentrouls:

> I check in this story from time to time, see the progress and I'm fairly sure your one of the only major story's that outright killed Jon, most story's do it at the end or near enough, not you he's dead and burned, gone... His story's over, which is odd considering what got has shown us, which honestly makes your story unique...

Ordinarily, I would bring out my old "Jon Snow is dead" lie, but I felt a little guilty doing this so close to my "grand reveal". At the risk of killing the uniqueness of the story, I will explain:

**Why kill Jon and bring him back?**

> And here you come down among us, with your dragon, claiming to be our bloody saviour, claiming to be Azor Ahai—"

> “—**reborn**,” said Melisandre, very loudly.

**Why bother with all this?**

Unfortunately, there is an issue with killing Jon and bringing him back, which is that everyone has done it. The show did it, and a lot of other fics have done it - so much so that killing Jon Snow and bringing him back is almost a rite of passage for any longfic. So you could say I was being subversive by leaving him dead for so long, but subversion for subversion's sake alone is inevitably a bad idea.

The problem stems from the fact that we as an audience for these stories always know that Jon is coming back. So my big, dramatic "the world is hopeless" thing falls pretty flat for as long as the reader can assume that Jon is coming back. So I had to not just kill Jon, but bury him, for 37 chapters. This actually led to some interesting character dynamics in my opinion; it was quite enjoyable to see Sam, Tormund and Val working together without their immediate common ally.

**How did Jon survive?**

I'm actually quite surprised no one figured this out (or at least commented to that effect),
so I'd be interested to hear your theories. You have to read the Melisandre chapters quite carefully to piece it together. My only clue for now is "smoke and salt".

This is, in my view, the end of the first of three parts of KNIGHTS OF THE NIGHTINGALE. As such, if you’re looking to review only a few times, this would be a very good place to put one. Let me know how you found the Battle of Castle Black, its resolution, and everything else. Once again, thank you all very much for reading, commenting and supporting this story. I hope you are enjoying it.

**Next chapter:** Probably Brienne, up sometime next week. We will get back to the Wall soon, through the eyes of Daenerys, who will relate some more of the details leading up to her slightly ex machina arrival.
You Swore An Oath

Chapter Summary

So died Ser Jaime Lannister, knight of the Kingsguard, Goldenhand the Just, if he ever lived at all.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

BRIENNE

She cleared her throat. “My name is Brienne of Tarth. Until earlier tonight, I was a captive of Stannis Baratheon, among his prized prisoners. I have information to share with Ser Jaime Lannister, regarding his – niece, Princess Myrcella. But I will only give it to him in person.”

In truth, she expected them to refuse, to tell her to bugger off and seek shelter elsewhere. Or worse, that they might capture her and take her not to Ser Jaime, but to his sister, the queen. Only now did it occur to her that Queen Cersei might have heard of her, and think ill of her name. Well. If the worst came about, she would have time to draw Oathkeeper before they took her, and if her luck was in, she might be able to wheel her horse about.

Her mount was well-lathered and sweaty. It had been no kind thing to ride him as hard as she had from Stannis’s camp, but she had to make her escape seem genuine, for the sake of the guards.

Stop worrying, fool. There was nothing she could do now except hope. She thought about sending a prayer up to the Father but it seemed disingenuous. Besides, the Seven did not look favourably upon sneak-thieves, which was really all she was right now. Her armour gone, sword disguised as plain steel by its scabbard and wrappings, trying her best to look afraid, though that was less difficult to pull off.

She need not have worried so much. They did not open the big gate for her, but the sally port a little ways further down the wall creaked open just wide enough for her to ride through. Brienne came down from her horse, feigning exhaustion. “Ser Jaime,” she said hoarsely. “Take me to Ser Jaime.”

It seemed too good to be true. Even now, as she limped through the streets behind a stocky Lannister captain, she wondered if they were instead escorting her to some cell. But, to look at them, the Lannister soldiers were exhausted too. She could see dark shadows under their eyes in the faint torchlight, and many of them were simultaneously shivering and sweating through their wools. Half of them were boys who barely seemed to know how to grip a spear properly. And all this on the day before a battle. It seemed absurd, but Stannis’s freezing soldiers looked better equipped for the coming fight.
They led her through the gatehouse of a high-walled stone fortress, up a drafty staircase, along the wallwalk again. Here the other soldiers fell away and Brienne began to relax. This seemed an unlikely location for a cell.

Sure enough, when they finally stopped outside a door, it was in a part of the castle that seemed appropriate as the seat of a knight of the Kingsguard. A squire opened the door, and stared goggle-eyed at Brienne for a long moment, bobbing his head in agreement as the captain talked. Then he led them inside.

Jaime was seated by the hearth, in quiet conversation with a fat, florid man in a bright yellow doublet. When he looked up and saw Brienne, he visibly blanched: in horror, she thought, and was confused by it. He stopped speaking at once, and that caused his companion to look round. “Ah,” the fat man said convivially, “this must be our entertainment for the evening. Are you a dancer, woman?”

“She’s not a dancer,” Jaime snapped.

“Oh.” The fat man looked disappointed.

Brienne felt it was her turn to speak. “Ser Jaime,” she said. “I have information from Stannis’s camp. We must talk.” She eyed the fat man. “Privately.”

Jaime was about to reply, but the fat man sat up, alarmed. “Why, woman, you cannot just prance in here demanding a private audience. Ser Jaime and I were just about to sit down to a well-earned supper. A well-earned supper, I say!”

“You’ll have your supper,” said Jaime dryly. “Though I fear it will not be with me, Ser Harys. Not tonight. The lady is right.” He spoke to the captain. “Gared, see Ser Harys safely to his horse. And send some men to guard the door. We are not to be disturbed.”

The captain nodded, and ushered the fat man out. When the door was closed Brienne said, “Who was he?”

“Who was who?”

“That man.”

Jaime’s mouth curled in distaste. “That imbecile was Ser Harys Swyft. My uncle Kevan’s goodfather. My late uncle Kevan. Though he may not be the last imbecile to sit before me tonight, at any rate. What in seven hells are you doing here?”

“I came to talk with you.”

“Obviously. You escaped?”

“No, I—” Brienne took a deep breath. “I am not Stannis’s captive. And neither is Myrcella. We only played it that way in the hope that it would—”

“—that it would convince me to surrender.” Jaime finished her sentence and sighed heavily. “And it might have done. But Cersei… there was no way I could convince her. Or her men.”

The words flowed out of her thick and hot. “Your sister is no true queen. You know that.”

“Speaking of my sister, we had best hurry. Ser Harys may be an idiot, but he may soon work out who you are. Or more likely someone else will tell, someone who saw you coming up. If Cersei’s
men find you here, you will spend the rest of your life in a cell.”

“I know the risks,” said Brienne. “I knew them when I came here. But the very fact that I am here at all proves that not all of the city’s defenders are your sister’s men.”

“They are not mine, either.” Jaime looked away from her. “Definitely not mine. Unlike you, Brienne, I am a prisoner. Her prisoner.”

That sounded ridiculous to her ears. “If you are her prisoner, then why has she left you an army?”

“The army is not mine, I told you. It’s full of men who’ll fight, but they’ll do so for their city and to protect their loved ones, or because their queen tells them too, but not for me. They won’t fight for the Kingslayer.”

“Have you asked them?”

Jaime gave her a distasteful look. “Sometimes I wonder if you are just stupid. You might follow a man blindly into battle, as you did with Renly, but no one else is as principled and stubborn as you are, wench. If I stand up there and tell them to fight and die for me, they’ll kill me themselves.”

“They might not have to die, if you rally enough of them.”

“Cersei has the Rock,” he said. “All she has to do is close those gates, as she has closed the gates of Lannisport to Stannis, and leave us to starve or freeze or go mad. I know that, they know that. And when you put a man in conditions as harsh as these, whatever morals he might once have held suddenly become meaningless. No, don’t.” He sighed again. “Sometimes I forget you are still young.”

“I’m not a child.”

“No, you’re not. But you are young, and I am old.”

There were only ten or twelve years between them. But you would not have known it to look at them now; she standing tall between the pillars of the hall; he sitting by the fire, hunched like an old crone before her knitting, threatening to turn grey. There was no life in him.

So make him come alive, she told herself. Suddenly she knew what to do. She unwrapped the hilt of her sword, and drew it with a single, swift flourish. Jaime was startled by the speed of her movement; his head swung round and saw her. “What are you—?”

“I trust you have not forgotten the name you gave this sword,” said Brienne. “Oathkeeper. That oath in question was fulfilled when we brought Lady Sansa home to her brother. But we have made other oaths too, and this sword counts for those in equal part. When you joined the Kingsguard—”

“Spare me your bloody diatribe, wench, and I’ll spare you the embarrassment of a prolonged speech in return. Nothing duller than a speech.” With slow, creaking movements he rose from his chair, and walked to a chest by the window. He threw it open, and took out a sword. “Actually, allow me to tell you a story of my own.” He unsheathed the blade, a little, but Brienne knew from just that brief glimpse that it was Valyrian steel. “This sword is twin to Oathkeeper. My father gave it to Joffrey on his wedding day. He named it Widow’s Wail. An apt choice, you might say. After he died my father repossessed the sword, and gifted it to Tommen. He named it Lawbringer.

“You’ve probably heard conflicting reports of how he died. Shall I tell you how it really happened?” Without waiting for an answer he pressed on. “He was carrying out justice. Bringing law. To his own mother, no less. True to his sword, and true to his word. Always true.” He sucked in a deep
breath. “They cut his fucking face in two, Brienne. That gold giant stepped in and swung his sword and it went right across the middle, top left to bottom right, and sheared off his left ear as well. For a moment I didn’t even notice. The blood was not a flood, just a thin red trickle through that seam in his head. He swayed on his feet. I will never forget that moment. Then he fell down, shaking and convulsing. He apologised to Cersei, and he called me Father, because he knew this was it, that those moments were all he had left. He didn’t want to die, but he did, and when he went, he was afraid. I know it. He bled to death in our arms. I was cradling his head, trying to hold it all together as Maekar must have tried for Baelor Breakspear, and it just fucking fell apart in my hands.

“That boy was my soul, Brienne. I know that now, even if I never knew it then. He was everything that was good in me, and when he died, so did I. So died Ser Jaime Lannister, knight of the Kingsguard, Goldenhand the Just, if he ever lived at all. What you see now, standing before you, is a husk. Yes, I swore some oaths, but when he died I failed them all. All my vows. So many vows. They make you swear and swear. Obey the king. Keep his secrets. Do his bidding. Your life for his. Obey your father. Love your sister. Protect the innocent. Defend the weak. And keep your children safe. All oaths I’ve sworn, and all oaths I’ve failed to keep.

“Believe me, Brienne. There are things I wish I could do. Sometimes I imagine doing them. I’ll call in this army of mine, no matter meagre it may be. I’ll take back Casterly Rock and kill every last one of the people who have wronged me.

“But I will die when I come up against Cersei’s thousands, without a doubt. No law, and no sword named for the law, will aid me. ‘Cause you know what law is, Brienne? You know what honour, and chivalry, and duty, and oaths are? They’re just words. Some man with a voice to name things made them up and stupid fools like you and I devoted our lives in service to them. But in the end we are all just dust, we all end up like Tommen, bleeding to death in the arms of people who should have and would have bled to death for us, and they bleeding to death in the arms of people who would have bled to death for them. And your oath? All oaths are things of blood, Brienne. As are all laws.”

Then Jaime sheathed Lawbringer, and fell back into his chair, entirely silent again. Eventually she became aware of time creeping on – and, as he had said, time was short. “Ser Jaime,” she said at last. “Have you – will you help me?”

He was a long time in answering. “Cersei will crush you come the morrow. Stannis will send his men at our walls in their thousands and we will repel you every time. Your men are hungry, frightened, cold. And so are ours, but we have the walls.”

“What if they weren’t on the walls?” said Brienne.

Jaime scowled. “That’s your grand plan. That I should send my men to chase after you? And then retreat when Stannis’s forces – hidden forces, I presume – flank them? Leaving the gates open?”

Was he mocking her, still? “That might work,” she said.

“It might,” said Jaime. “But more likely my own men would cut me down. Especially if they are under Cersei’s command.”

“Your sister will not be in the walls. You will.”

“Ah, yes.” There was definite mocking now. “And I’ll inspire them with tales of bravery and honour and duty, will I? It still surprises me, Brienne – you have fought during a war, but never in a war.”

He looked down at his feet. “No one walks away from war with their ideals intact. No one.”
Brienne shook her head. “I don’t believe you.”

But she could see already that nothing would amount from this. Jaime told her that she must go, now, for Cersei’s men would be on her way. Abruptly he hurried her down the stairs, out of the gatehouse, and to a stables near the gate she had entered by. They did not speak as they walked. When Brienne had mounted up, she turned away, full expecting that to be all, but he caught her horse’s bridle. For a moment it seemed he might say something lengthy, but in the end, all she had from him was “safe travels, Brienne of Tarth.”

“Safe travels, Ser Jaime Lannister,” she replied. Then she turned her horse away, and Jaime called for the guards to open the sally port once more, and she was out into the night.

It was starting to snow, heavily; by the time she had gone half a mile, the snow was already piling up. She followed the ocean road south for some distance before circling back round to approach Stannis’s camp from behind. The guards took her in without ceremony, recognising her horse. Ser Godry Farring was the first of Stannis’s commanders she found. “I would beg an audience with the king, ser,” she told him straight. Stannis would not be sleeping.

Indeed, it was said that the king never slept, that he drank the blood of infants to keep him awake at night. But when Brienne entered the tent the only drink there was wine – an unusual sight in Stannis Baratheon’s tent, but hardly a sinister one. The king was not alone. His Hand, Ser Davos, was seated beside him at the wooden table, staring listlessly at wooden figurines and rather more interestingly at his wine.

Ser Godry announced her. “Brienne of Tarth, Your Grace.”

“An unexpected sight,” said King Stannis. “Though I would be lying if I claimed you were a welcome one, woman.”

“That feeling is mutual, my lord.”

He gestured for her to sit, at the other end of the table. “Did you win anything from the Kingslayer?”

“His name is Jaime, my lord.”

“Fine. From Ser Jaime, then?”

“Nothing explicit, my lord.”


“I said it was nothing explicit, my lord,” said Brienne. “I think when the fight is at the walls, he may reconsider. Ser Jaime is not without a heart. He saved thousands from wildfire when he killed the Mad King.”

Stannis frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Sometimes she forgot that Jaime’s heroics were not widely known. But maybe if they were, he might be more easily believed. And so she told Lord Stannis and Ser Davos what Jaime had told her in the bathhouse at Harrenhal, years ago. She surely bungled some parts of the story, but they heard her out nonetheless.

They did not immediately go out and proclaim Ser Jaime’s heroism, of course. Indeed, Lord Stannis did not even seem pleased. “That may be true,” he said, “but that does not help us here. We cannot fight this battle in the hope that the Kingslayer might have a change of heart.” Abruptly he reached
for the wine flagon, poured his cup, and then walked down the table to fill hers.

“I thought you did not drink, my lord,” Brienne said.

Stannis looked at her as if she were stupid. “All men drink.”

“Not copiously.”

“Well,” he said, with his usual sternness, “we have to make exceptions every now and again. And it seems to me this is one such exception. The likelihood is that we will all be dead come this time tomorrow. So sit, woman. And drink.”

She dared not refuse. Was it strange, she wondered, that the concept of her death seemed so foreign to her? It was never something she had really thought about; she had always assumed that she would live to a good age: not ripe and old, but good. There was no chance, for example, that she might perish in childbirth.

Stannis said, “It is strange how the fear of death makes drinking companions of us all.”

Brienne looked up. “What?”

“You heard me,” said the king. “And I know you are probably thinking the same thing. If these wights were no threat, you and I would be on different sides of this battlefield. And I imagine you would quite like to kill me.”

Brienne only stared at him.

“Go on,” he said. “Say it. For the love of the Seven, say it.”

“You killed Renly.”

He did not reply.

“It was a shadow that slew him in his tent, but it was a shadow with your face. Do you deny it?”

“I do not deny it,” Stannis said. “More than that, I admit it wholeheartedly. And I admit, likewise, that the shadow acted with my intentions.”

There was a long silence. He was, Brienne realised, waiting for her next question. So she obliged him: “Why did you do it?”

“Because I wanted to be king. And I wanted that more than anything. Because it was my right.”

“His was your brother.”

“He was my younger brother, and a traitor.” A pause. “And yet my brother nonetheless. No doubt you think that I think nothing of it, that I have forgotten my own crime. You would be wrong. No man is so accursed as the kinslayer. But the worst part of my curse, perhaps, is the part I thought would be the mercy. I told myself, then, that it would be fine, because I did not see him die. But now, when I think of Renly, my vision of him is not the all-consuming horror of his moment of dying, but the other things, the innocent memories. Him playing with his blocks in the nursery of Storm’s End, knowing nothing of our parents’ death. Him, wastrel-thin, clinging to my leg as I patrolled the castle battlements during Mace Tyrell’s siege. And his peach. Always his damned peach. I can repeat his words, as if he were before us here and now. “A man should never refuse to taste a peach. He may never get the chance again. Life is short, Stannis. Remember what the Starks
Brienne chose her next question carefully. “If he were standing before you now, on that same parley field, in that same situation, and you had full knowledge of what was to come, would you have done as you did?”

Stannis Baratheon considered that question for a long time. “I would do as I did, and suffer the same consequences again.” But she did not think he was telling the truth.

Outside, the snow kept coming.

Chapter End Notes

First of all, I would like to thank everyone for their support on the last chapter; in particular, it was great to hear from some of you who haven’t been seen around for a while. If nothing else, the resurrection of Jon succeeded in that.

I did promise that this chapter would be out sometime earlier this week, but circumstances delayed it: firstly, the UK has been having stupid-hot, AC-less, not particularly writing-friendly weather, and secondly every bit of writing I have done this week for KOTN has been a series of random obscure vignettes. I’ve written for Sansa, Tyrion, Bran and Dany in depth, but it was only yesterday that I got round to editing this Brienne chapter - which had to be rewritten more substantially than I had hoped.
“Ser, you must wake up. Ser!”

Garrett Paege, calling his name, as if from far off. Jaime’s eyes blinked suddenly open. The chamber, his bedclothes, the squire: all smelled faintly of sweat and snow. He glanced through the window. It was still dark: not full dark, but certainly not morning – not yet dawn.

“What is it, Paege?”

“Ser, they are attacking, ser!”

Stannis. Jaime rolled sideways, sitting up in bed. Paege was carrying a cup of wine in one hand and a bundle of clothes in the other. His face was red, half from running, half from the frost. “Where is the attack?” he asked the squire.

“The eastern gate, ser.”

Naturally. It had not been the best question: the question of a mind still addled from sleep, or lack of sleep. Jaime stumbled to his feet and pulled his shirt on, then stood by the window and allowed the squire to button his jerkin while he managed with the trousers himself. There was no time for full armament, but Paege had been sensible enough to bring him his arming coat, which had enough padding to weather a few blows. He took Widow’s Wail from its space beside the bed, more out of sleepy impulse than anything, and affixed his golden hand to his stump. We must not forget the most important part. As he rose to his feet and headed through the solar he caught a familiar, indescribable smell: Brienne, he thought, dizzily. It had only been hours since she was here in this very room.

Out on the ramparts, the first thing that hit him was just how cold it was. He expected a certain chill from the freezing temperatures, but this was a cold that hit you all at once; merely passing through the door was like walking out into a Northern winter. Jaime recoiled, feebly trying to bat the freezing flakes away from his face. “Dear gods,” he forced himself to say; good, his lips could still move.

“Come on, my lord!” Paege pulled him on with one hand, while trying to suppress his violent shivering with the other. Jaime weathered a shiver of his own, then stumbled on in his wake along the walkway. Out here on the ramparts they found brave foolish men with frozen fingers trying to pluck their bowstrings and failing. A squadron of helmeted men-at-arms rushed the other way, their armour a-jangling.

In contrast to everywhere else, the armoury was a furnace, full as it was with far too many men in far too small a space. Jaime pushed through them, as anonymous as any of the soldiers, looking for someone of import. It transpired that they, too, were looking for him. Ser Benedict Broom and Captain Forley of the City Guard, each looking entirely ragged, rallied to him. “Ser Jaime,” said
Broom. “Forgive our slowness in calling for you. The queen’s men told us—”

Jaime waved a hand. Despite his position as Hand of the Queen, Cersei had no intention of letting him wield his power unrestricted. Captain Vylarr in particular would accept her orders before he accepted Jaime’s – Seven alone knew why.

“What are we doing now, sers?” he asked them.

Ser Benedict shrugged. “Frankly, it’s a mess, ser. We told them to go out to the walls and ready their longbows, but – I am sure you have felt the cold.”

Jaime was acutely aware of Paege’s fevered shivering beside him. “I have.”

“Unnatural,” muttered Ser Benedict, with a shake of his head. “This cold…”

“While we chatter about the cold, Stannis’s men could be halfway to our walls,” said Captain Forley. “If we are to continue talking, I should prefer to do it from an ideal vantage. That is where we were headed when you interrupted us, ser.” He strode past Jaime, back the way he had entered.

Jaime made to follow him, but then he remembered Garrett Paege. He rounded on the boy. “How long have you been out here, lad? You look like an icicle.” Paege’s face was red – truly red, especially his nose. His eyes seemed somehow unfocused.

He peeled back his lips to speak, haltingly. “I – it’s all right, ser. I’m fine. I’ll be fine. The cold gets more bearable as you go on.”

“It’s not.” Jaime clapped him on the shoulder. “Listen to me, Garrett. You stay here. You go and sit down by a fire and if anyone bothers you, tell them they can deal with me.” He pushed Paege back, almost roughly.

What was that? he wondered, as he approached the doors of the armoury. Yes, the boy has served me well, but hardly well enough to be worthy of such a… paternal response. Or maybe he was. Maybe you couldn’t save your own sons, but you could always save someone else’s.

This done, he and Ser Benedict headed back out to the wallwalk. Captain Forley had made his way to a tower. Now Jaime climbed up to join him in staring out over the wall.

He faintly remembered Brienne’s words from earlier – something about a plan. What if they weren’t on the walls? Ah. That was right; she had wanted him to send his men out to chase hers. But… if that was the case, then why were Stannis’s men running towards them, not away? Unless they were going to reach the wall first—

“Where is the camp?” asked Ser Benedict Broom.

Jaime looked up sharply, and looked closer this time. Sure enough, Broom had a point. Stannis Baratheon’s camp, once sitting a mile away and well within sight, had disappeared entirely into the fog. A mist which, now that he thought about it, had not been there hours before. And the mist was rising… pale blue mist…

“Why are there so many of them?” Jaime said. His voice seemed to ebb and echo, as if from far off.

Captain Forley squinted down a moment. “I count… hundreds. Maybe thousands. Is that so unreasonable? Stannis has thousands of soldiers.”

“Yes,” said Jaime, “but he is not such a fool to charge with all of them at once.”
“Lord Commander.” A voice came in from his right. Some captain he did not recognise. “Should we nock our bows?”

Jaime scowled. *Something is not right here.* But still he said “yes. Tell your men… tell your men to listen for my command, captain. Fire only when I tell you to.”

The captain nodded and ran back down the wallwalk. Jaime squinted over the wall. *Something is wrong,* he thought again, *but what is it? What…?*

The first of the enemy ranks were drawing close. Their war-cries drifted up to him – only these did not sound like war-cries. Jaime knew the sound of fear when he heard it. With a war-cry you screamed it because you could. When you were afraid, you screamed because you had to.

But no matter.

“Nock!” he shouted.

He could feel Captain Forley and Ser Benedict beside him, shivering same as he would, though all three of them tried to hide it. He could see the spasmodic dances of the archers, trying in vain to stay warm.

“Draw!” he shouted.

He could see the tension in those bow strings, taut; he knew that some of them would not be able to let go if they tried. The enemy was coming closer; they had their weapons, if the glint of steel was anything to judge by. But that glint only lasted a moment longer before the mist covered their back ranks, and headed towards the middle.

“Hold!”

There were men on horseback, too. That made no sense. You couldn’t send your cavalry out like this before you sent your—

Now he saw it. It was so obvious he wanted to hit himself. *They have no ladders. They have no siege engines. No trebuchets, no catapults, no scorpions.*

And then:

*They have no armour.*

It was not true for all of them, but he could see the glint of steel swords from up here by torchlight, whereas he could not see the more noticeable glimmer of armoured plates. Not even the horsemen wore armour. And come to think of it, why were the horsemen carrying torches?

“Bows down!” Jaime shouted.

Some of them took that as “loose”: some of them had no choice but to loose, so frozen in place were their fingers. But those arrows were only a handful of hailstones in a storm. The rest looked relieved; they put their bows down and set to rubbing their palms together frantically.

Captain Forley turned to him. “Why did you do that?”

Jaime pointed over the wall. “They are not attacking. They are running. They are being attacked.”

Ser Benedict Broom frowned. “But we did not send men out, ser.”
“Not our men.”

“Then whose?”

*Whose indeed?* And Jaime reckoned they both knew, but neither one of them wanted to be ridiculed for saying it. So he said it himself. “The army of the dead.”

*The army of the dead.* Those words were the very essence of insanity. Yet when the situation was like this, it was even more insane to pretend it could be anything else. Strange how sanity worked like that. What was sane was merely a matter of perception. The madness of Aerys, and of Aerion Brightflame before him, could be justified by the same logic. *Maybe,* Jaime thought for half a second, *they saw something that we thought was mad, and yet to them it must have seemed mad to think anything else.*

*It was not so with Aerys,* he reminded himself. *Let Robert be king over charred bones and cooked meat,* he’d said. That had been done purely out of spite. And yet…

*A madman sees what he sees.*

And now Jaime Lannister, mad or no, was seeing the army of the dead in pursuit. There was only one thing for it. “The gate,” he said, first to himself, and then more loudly, “we need to get to the gate.”

Ser Benedict frowned. “Ser?”

“We need to get to the gate,” Jaime told him, more firmly this time. “And open it.”

“And…” Ser Benedict frowned. “And let them in?”

“Yes.” He had to explain himself, of course. To Ser Benedict, and to Captain Forley, who looked like he might kill Jaime any moment. “You know what’s out there, don’t you, ser?”

Ser Benedict’s breath caught. “I-I do, my lord.”

“Then tell me how it is acceptable in your eyes to leave those men out there to face it alone.”

He had no answer to that, as Jaime had hoped. But as he was moving past, Captain Forley stepped out into his path. “And what if they get in after you’ve let all of Stannis’s men through, Lord Commander? What if they swarm Lannisport, and kill us all? What then?”

“Then we die,” said Jaime. There was nothing else to say.

Captain Forley considered for a long moment, then let him pass.

Taking the archers in hand, they set off along the wallwalk, back towards the main city gate on the eastern side. The mist drifted in further and further. Very soon it was threatening to overtop the wall.

“The queen will not like this,” Ser Benedict Broom said, when they reached the gatehouse stairs.

“No,” said Jaime. “I imagine she will not.”

He sent Ser Benedict up to secure the gatehouse towers, while he and Captain Forley went through into the main room. And there, inevitably, he found Captain Vylarr and twoscore Lannister guardsmen. “Ser Jaime,” said Vylarr. “I thought you would be elsewhere.”

“I am sorry to have taken you by surprise,” Jaime said. “Captain, would you do me the honour of
opening the gate?"

The captain did not move. “I cannot, ser.”

“Forgive me, Vylarr. It would seem that I did not make myself clear. Open the gate. That is an order.”

“I have orders of my own, ser,” said Captain Vylarr. “Queen Cersei has said—”

“—all manner of things, I do not doubt. Well. Now I am saying something. I am saying ‘open the gate’. And you will.”

He became vaguely aware that the men following him might not really be his men at all. Captain Forley seemed too gruff and angry to ever be suppressed by Cersei, but it was not impossible. His doubts were alleviated, however, when Forley barked out an order of his own. “Do as the Lord Commander says, Vylarr. Before I decide it will be much easier to gut you.”

A long silence passed. Then Vylarr frowned, turned to his men, and said, “stand down. Open the gates.”

Jaime turned to Captain Forley. “Get Ser Benedict. Tell him to open the other gate, on my authority. Watch over it, and close it if the dead start coming through.” That done, he went to watch as the winch chain was lifted, inch by painful inch. Through the narrow slit windows of the gatehouse he could see men rushing ahead of the mist. Myrcella is somewhere out there, he thought, and Brienne, and the rest of them. “I am going downstairs,” he told Vylarr. “If you touch the gate before I tell you to, I will kill you myself.”

He half-expected Vylarr to look mutinous, but the man looked more relieved than anything. Jaime realised that he did not believe in Cersei’s way either.

As he was going down the stairs, Jaime encountered Ser Benedict Broom, ascending. “I hope you know what you are doing, Lord Commander,” Ser Benedict said as their paths crossed. And as the first of Stannis's men came running through the gate, Jaime hoped he was right.

Chapter End Notes

Ugh...

This is the first chapter I've written for KOTN where I can't say I'm too pleased with how it turned out. There was meant to be a big dramatic confrontation with Robert Strong, but it was, in a word, quite boring, and it was taking AGES to write. So I've cut this chapter short on a weird sort-of-cliffhanger/anticlimax, and we'll pick up again with Jaime very soon.

Fortunately, things are probably going to pick up after this. Chapter 44 is a bitch, but 41 and 42 are almost complete, and 43 is nice and manageable.

Anyway, apologies if this seems a little unsatisfying. Hopefully by the time the story is finished, its more awkward moments will have been buried in the midst of everything.
Nearly all of Castle Black’s towers and ramparts had been destroyed in the battle, but the main gate impossibly still remained, stranded by itself on the outskirts of the burnt-out castle. And so here she stood, with Lord Commander Tarly to her left, watching as the army trudged westwards for as far as the eye could see. They were Dothraki and Golden Company men for the most part, but you would not have known it; the Dothraki, for the first and only time, had donned long sleeves over their arms, and hoods over their braids, for it was better to hide your pride for a while than to die of frostbite. The men of the Golden Company had lost their golden mail and cloaks in favour of fur and leather, procured from King’s Landing and Gulltown tradesmen and the Pentoshi treasure ships they had marooned off Sweetsister. For her own part Dany wore a mantle and cloak of dark wool, edged in white fur. The cold was intense and the only living thing that did not feel it was Drogon, who had made his nest some miles to the south and occasionally blasted heat around himself every now and again like a volcano on the horizon.

“How many are there again?” Samwell Tarly asked her.

“Three thousand,” said Dany. “With another ten thousand at Eastwatch, and around twenty-five thousand more ranged from the Sisters down to Dragonstone.” The Dothraki she had left in Volantis had finally made their crossing, though many of their ships had sunk in crossing in the Narrow Sea and those that arrived numbered less than half of what had set out. “Enough, I should think.”

“We are outnumbered against the Others, still.”

“They do not have dragons.”

Tarly was not the sort of man to scowl, but he smiled without any pleasure in it. “No, but they have other things.”

“We have defeated them once,” said Dany. “We can defeat them again.”

“We defeated Euron Greyjoy. He was not the Others.” His smile grew even less friendly. There is something else he wants to say, Dany thought, and she reckoned she knew what it was. Though the girl Gilly had made it plain to her that Master Samwell Tarly was a kind, good man, she had seen none of that man here. He was still bitter at her late arrival at Castle Black, no matter how many times she told him she had done all she could.

Sometimes, when she was having trouble sleeping in her cold chamber, she doubted her own words. If only the wind had favoured them a little more as they sailed up the coast… if only the ice floes around Sweetsister had been easier to break through… if only she had not flown to Highgarden to
have her fruitless encounter with the Tyrells. But, of course, the Tyrell treachery was not her fault. If Harry Strickland and Varys had not colluded in defiance of her will, she would not have needed to fly to the Reach. And, she thought, Master Tarly may come to thank me in the long run, when he recognises that it is due to my actions that we no longer have to deal with a southern insurrection. She had dispatched letters to the Lords Hightower and Redwyne at Highgarden, instructing them to continue north once their fleets rounded the Sea of Dorne and came up Cape Wrath, to meet Selwyn Tarth and the remainder of her fleet at Eastwatch.

She would have liked to have flown Drogon from the Bite, but the mist made it impossible to fly high and she did not want to drift into the Lands of Always Winter. So instead she had waited till they reached Eastwatch, and then she had flown Drogon low and slow over the width of the wrecked Wall till they reached Castle Black. At first she had feared she had come too late, for to her eyes the castle seemed as dark and abandoned as the others along the Wall, but then there was a great explosion of fire, and fire meant men, and so she and Drogon descended towards it. They had found Castle Black in a strange inferno that grew exponentially with every breath of Drogon’s fire. And then, on the ground:

The Night’s Watch, in ashes. Euron Greyjoy dead, and the wight army broken and burning. And the young man, Jon Snow, stepping forth naked from the red-hot blaze.

Dany looked down over the rampart. “Lysono Maar and Lord Celtigar will be up to see me soon, Lord Commander. I hope I can tell them that they will find hospitality here—”

“They may eat in the Shieldhall,” said Samwell. “There should be more than enough room, since most of those who ate their before are dead.” Of the three thousand who had started the Battle of Castle Black, only around six hundred had survived. She had watched, a week ago, as they piled all the bodies onto the great pyre in the centre of Castle Black. There were so many to burn that they had relied on Drogon to light the flame. Dany stood opposite Master Samwell Tarly on one side of the firepit. As they burned, Jon Snow had emerged on the balcony above her, and watched the blaze. His skin was pale as his name, and his eyes were seeing death.

She had listened to the stories, as was expected of a queen. She heard the names of the fallen: Tormund Giantsbane, mighty warrior and shared father of the wildlings; Morna o’the White Mask, a brave leader of her tribe; Maege Mormont, who was Ser Jorah’s aunt; the Greatjon Umber and his uncle Hother Whoresbane; many others. And the remainder were haunted; Rickard Ryswell had lost a brother; Alys Karstark had lost a husband and many of her soldiers; Larence Hornwood had lost an eye, an arm, and most of his men, and had seemed horrified at his own survival. Worst of all for her, though, was a Northern woman named Jetta, who had miscarried in the aftermatch of the battle.

She had, unavoidably, felt her hand going to her own belly at that. The pregnancy was over. Marwyn was not sure there had been a true pregnancy at all. Benerro contended that there had been, but somewhere along the way the babe had been poisoned. And Ser Jorah sat over her, and shook his head, and said “Oh, Daenerys,” like she was a little girl all over again.

“I hope,” said Dany, wanting to distract herself from the memory, “that the arrival of this army goes some of the way towards reconciling our viewpoints, Lord Commander.”

Samwell looked at her blandly. “It is not for me to decide whether reconciliation is possible. That is a matter for the Lord Commander.”

It was some time before she realised that he meant Lord Commander Snow. “Might I be allowed to see Lord Commander Snow and offer my respects in person?” she asked. As she had before.

“No,” he said. As he had before. “Jon needs to rest. I will not have you disturbing him.” He looked
away. A moment of silence past. Master Tarly nodded to her. “Your Grace,” he said. Then he set off along the wallwalk, and left her there alone.

A moment later she realised the reason for his desertion of her. As he departed, Archmaester Marwyn and Ser Jorah Mormont came into sight. They bowed. “Your Grace.”

Jorah had set out to meet Lysono Maar and Lord Celtigar earlier that morning. “They were unhappy,” he told her, when she asked him how he found them. “But I think that is more due to the weather than anything else.”

“Can you blame them?” asked Marwyn the Mage. “A man takes a walk in Oldtown, the worst that can happen is he loses his purse. A man takes a walk up here, he’s likely to lose his balls to frostbite.”

Dany was grateful that he had kept his good humour this far north. “As far as I am aware, Ser Jorah has kept his balls,” she said.

Jorah laughed, which was a rare and welcome occurrence. “Did I tell you about my cousin Lyanna, Your Grace? When I marched into her chambers to offer my condolences, she reprimanded me so sternly it was like being before my father again. And this from a girl of fourteen.”

The mood grew a little more solemn. She knew it must be awkward for Ser Jorah to be so close to Bear Island again, and to meet men he had known before he was banished, and their sons.

Marwyn said, “I saw Lord Snow.”

“You did?” Dany was taken aback. “I thought Tarly had set up guards—”

“Ah, but maesters have their ways. We spoke only briefly, but I assured him that Your Grace had the best interests of him and his countrymen at heart. I said little more, though. I did not wish to presume Your Grace’s intentions.”

Still, it was briefly fascinating. “How did he seem? How did he look?”

“I – I do not know, Your Grace.” Marwyn hesitated. “It sounds strange, but he betrayed nothing. One would think… well… that his blood scarcely flowed…”

“You speak of Lord Snow?” said a voice behind her. Dany turned, and there she saw the woman. Her name was Lady Melisandre of Asshai, and she was a red priest of R’hillor, like Benerro. She spent most of her days in consultation with Benerro, too, but right now he was not to be seen; she was alone.

“Forgive me for eavesdropping,” the red woman said. “It is a habit I picked up by accident in Volantis, as a girl. The masters of the Temple there often said things they did not want you to hear, but which you needed to hear.”

“Have you brought a message from Lord Snow?” Marwyn asked.

“Not a message, no. But I can make you a gift. Of a meeting with Lord Snow.”

Dany frowned. “I thought Master Tarly—”

“I do not serve Samwell Tarly. I only serve the Lord of Light, and it is the Lord’s wish that the pair of you meet. If that is his will, I am bound to ensure it, even if it means going behind Master Samwell’s back. And it is his well. Both you and Lord Snow have a part to play in the prophecy,
Your Grace. As allies, not as contenders.”

“You would take me to him?”

“I would.”

“Why should we believe you?” asked Ser Jorah.

“It is not a matter of we, ser,” said Melisandre. “This offer is for your queen alone.”

“Your Grace—” Mormont began.

“I will take your offer, Lady Melisandre,” Dany said. She gave Jorah an apologetic look. “The alternative is to continue as we are. That will not do.”

“Very well,” said Melisandre. “Meet me after today’s council, and I will take you to him.” And so the offer was made. But that council had to come first.

They met in the Shieldhall, a blasted ruin of a building mostly protected from the elements by a flapping tarpaulin. Samwell Tarly and the wildlings sat on one side of the long wooden table; Dany and her advisors on the other. A map of Westeros was laid between them, weighted down with heavy iron markers. They only had the markers for the forces of the living, as it was impossible to truly know where the dead were.

A few days earlier, Dany had made consultation with Rickard Ryswell and the Lord Liddle on the next stage of their plan. They had, thankfully, been in agreement then, as now. Ser Jorah took the job of explaining. “We will march back to Eastwatch-by-the-Sea,” he said, “all of us together, supported by these new forces: Night’s Watch, free folk, Northmen, queen’s men, all. We believe it is then in our best interests to sail to White Harbor—”

“I do not like this plan,” said Mors Umber, whom they called . “It would mean leaving the entirety of the North behind. Karhold, the Last Hearth… even Winterfell.”

“They are lost already,” Alys Karstark told him. “It is painful, I know, but Euron’s men were coming up from the South, and they will not have left anything behind for us to salvage. I agree with Ser Jorah. We should make for White Harbor. The Wall is short of supplies, anyhow.”

“Down to our last sack of turnips soon, lads,” said Eddison Tollett, the Lord Steward. “Then we’ll truly be doomed.”

“I will write to Lord Selwyn Tarth to make arrangements for our departure from Eastwatch,” said Dany. “There should be more than enough room for all of us aboard my ships. We had expected—” She cut herself off, about to say more and therefore no doubt invoke Samwell Tarly’s anger. She turned to him now. “If you would like to write too, Master Tarly, you are most welcome.”

He nodded but said nothing, unwilling to make a commitment either way. Dany doubted her intended reconciliation would come about anytime soon, but at least he had not blocked her path here. Judging the meeting to be finished, she rose to her feet. “Thank you for your consideration,” she said, and they left.

She found Melisandre in the hallway outside. Ser Jorah remained suspicious of the red woman’s intentions, but Dany did not let him hold her back. Together, she and Melisandre made their way through the castle’s various underground tunnels until they came to a door with two guardsmen outside.
Melisandre said, “We are here to see Lord Snow.”

The guards gave her a glazed look. More than that, they did not seem to see Dany at all, nor did they realise that Melisandre had said we. As simple as that, they continued down the corridor. At the door, the red woman turned to her. “Be wary,” she said. “You do not know what will incite him to anger.”

“Is he… often angry?”

“He did not used to be. But he is not the man he was…” When Dany nodded, Melisandre knocked on the door. There was no response, but she seemed to expect that, and opened it anyway.

The room was bigger than she had been expecting, twice the size of her own chamber, and yet barely furnished. There was a narrow bed in the corner, and a desk on the other side of the room, but nothing else to suggest that the place had been lived in at all. A half-eaten plate of breakfast rested on a table in the middle of the room. There was a fireplace, but no fire. And there was Jon Snow.

He was sitting in one of the chairs, and he had his back to her. He did not look round as she entered. Melisandre motioned for her to cross the room. Dany did so slowly, as she might when approaching Drogon, half-afraid that he might lash out at her. As she reached the chair opposite him, he looked up sharply. For a moment she froze in place, could not move. His face was pale as… well, as snow, as Marwyn had said, and entirely bloodless. But it was the eyes that struck her. They were dark grey, she realised later, but on first glance they seemed entirely black. He looked like a ghost: the sort of ghost you heard about in a book of children’s stories, entirely a contrast of black and white, with no colours in between. His face had a sort of cold handsomeness to it, as if he were carved from perfect marble. But it was so marble and statuesque that it could not possibly be real. Best not delay, she thought. She swallowed deeply, then: “Lord Snow.”

“You are Queen Daenerys Targaryen.” Not a question. His eyes never left her, and they never blinked.

“I am,” Dany said. “It is…” A pleasure? An honour? “…right that we finally meet, I think.”

“Yes, I think so too.” There was something inhuman about the way he spoke. It was like he was a creature from another world, and this was his first time learning how people talked, and how they lived.

“I hope,” she began, “that we may put the enmity between House Stark and House Targaryen aside. I know our two houses have had a difficult history. My brother Rhaegar—”

“—and my aunt Lyanna. Yes, I know. I see no reason to be bound by the actions of our forebears.”

“I am glad you think so.” Despite her best efforts, Dany could not suppress a shiver.

“You are cold,” said Lord Snow. “I will have a fire made up.” He rose from his chair. His movements were strange and skeletal. He had unusually pale, bony hands. Dany watched him as he knelt before the fire, stacking pieces of old wood among the coals. As he moved to take a candle from the desk, her eyes drifted to something glinting on the wall behind him – the only bright thing in the room.

“That is Longclaw,” he said, so suddenly it startled her. “It was Jeor Mormont’s sword.”

“I… yes.”

“He had a bear on the pommel but he changed it with a wolf when he gave it to me. Your Ser Jorah is welcome to take it back if he wishes. I have no use for it.”
“Have you met with Ser Jorah?” She had not mentioned his name.

“No. But I have seen him from the window. And from the balcony.” He sat back down, rigid in his chair. “I have seen your dragon, too. Or at least the smoke he makes.”

“Yes. Drogon is…”

“Like your child,” he said. “I understand. I had a wolf. Ghost. He was not my child, but he was like a brother to me.” He gave her a strange look. “It hurts when they are gone.”

“Yes. I lost a dragon. Rhaegal. And Viserion is… I do not know where Viserion is.”

There was a long silence.

“Why did you come here?” he asked.

Dany felt a chill go through her. “I… thought we should talk. I need an ally. In the North. Someone who can help me rally against the army of the dead…” It sounded feeble coming from her lips.

“You have Sam,” said Jon Snow.

“Master Tarly has been…” What to say without angering him? “…distracted.”

“I understand,” he said. “But you must not blame Sam. He has a tendency to take things hard on himself. He believes the deaths of the battle were his fault. When really it was you and I who came too late.”

“That is not the only reason I need your help,” she said. “Perhaps Lady Melisandre has mentioned —”

“Lady Melisandre mentions many things. And does not mention the ones that are important. Forgive me, but I am somewhat ill-disposed towards her. First, she neglected to tell me about my impending death. Second, she killed Ghost. Third, she kept my body in a freezing meat cellar for several weeks. Fourth, she cut my hair.” He smiled, but even that disturbed her. “You may laugh.”

Dany only then realised that Melisandre was long gone. She cleared her throat. “She mentioned the prophecy. The prince that was promised. She said… I think it must be because you… because you…”

“Came back from death?”

“Yes. But others say I am the prince that was promised.”

“Born amidst smoke and salt,” he said acerbically. It was the first time any sort of tone had come into his voice.

“Yes,” she said.

“Did you see Castle Black burning, Your Grace?”

“I did.”

“And do you know what might be kept in a meat cellar?”

“What?” She was lost.
“Salted meat,” said Lord Snow. He made that strange smile again. “I will not trouble you in any way, Your Grace. But nor am I able to ally with you. Because this is not right, and I do not intend to allow it to continue.”

“What are you talking about?”

He became very still. “I died, Your Grace. The Horn of Winter blew, the Wall was coming down, and Ramsay Bolton stabbed me in the heart. I remember that clear as day. But I do not know what came after. I remember darkness, but I could not tell you if it lasted one minute or one year. Then I was awake, and there was fire all around me. I was afraid of it. I cowered from it. I was crying. I did not want to die that way. I did not want to die again. I hoped that someone would come and find me. My father, maybe. He did not. So I stood up and I walked into the fire. I thought, it will not take long at all.

“I did not burn. I walked through the flames, and all the way out into the light. But that light was darkness too, in my eyes. This life I have now… can I die, Your Grace? Sitting in this room, I have often wondered. If I took Longclaw from the wall and cut my own throat with it, would I die? Would I even bleed? Or would I simply rise again, even colder than before? Can I feel pain? Probably not. I cannot feel anything else. Is it still cold in here? I cannot tell. When I woke up, at first, I did not remember who I was. Even now, I am not sure. Who is Jon Snow, Your Grace?”

Dany watched, cold, as he said all this. Every word in the same, drafty monotone. “Perhaps,” she said, “you were meant to come back.”

“Perhaps I have a destiny: is that what you are saying?”

She paused, sensing that she might need to take special care here; he sounded on-edge, doubtful. “It sounds unlikely, I know, but—”

“No less likely than a dead man returning to life,” he said.

“Something like that. A dead man returning to life… it is something that is unheard of in most of the world. All of the world, even. But I have witnessed similar things.”

His eyes remained decidedly bored. “Such as?”

“When my first husband, Drogo, was killed by Mirri Maz Duur,” Dany said, “I stepped onto his funeral pyre as it took light. Even now I am not entirely sure what I was intending. But I do not think it was suicide. I think, somehow, I knew that I would emerge from it alive and unharmed. Unburnt, with my three dragons coiling around me. I was spared that night for a reason. I am still not entirely sure what it is, but I know there was a reason. Perhaps it is the same with you.”

Lord Snow stared at her for a long time, and then shook his head. “You emerged from your pyre with three dragons, Your Grace. Those dragons are your power. They were meant to help you conquer the Seven Kingdoms. When I came forth from my pyre, I came forth with nothing.”

“Nothing but yourself. Perhaps you are your own dragon, Lord Snow.”

“I think not.” He took his eyes away from her face and returned his attention to his hands. “Will that be all, Your Grace?”

“Yes,” Dany said. “I suppose it will.”

Chapter End Notes
Okay... so everyone's favourite literal walking corpse is back, and the main change that seems to have occurred to him is a noticeably darker sense of humour and a refusal to do anything. I suppose you could say that Jon has become more brooding, but... well, that's quite difficult.

Let me know what you think.

Next chapter: Tyrion.
Small Sad Things To Die For

Chapter Summary

There are always small sad things to die for.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is something of a start-in-the-middle type affair. Just go along with it.

TYRION

They breakfasted alone, as they now often did.

“The blood sausage is overcooked,” Tyrion commented once.

“No matter,” said the girl who had been his wife. “So are the eggs.”

Did she recall that same exchange, long ago in King’s Landing, when they had argued over pease and mutton? She very well might, Tyrion thought. That was the night they had both learned of the Red Wedding. He did not think Sansa would easily forget her brother’s death. And suppose she had… the Northerners certainly had not. Father was certainly right about that, he thought wryly. Though he was wrong when he said the Northerners would never again challenge House Lannister. So much for his assurance of absolution. Here in Harrenhal, the greatest alliance ever seen in Westeros was coming into being, and it opposed, or at the very least did not support, Lord Tywin and his legacy of lions.

The Tullys, Arryns and Starks had been a start. But it was the new arrivals who threatened to enlarge the shadow. If he craned his neck and looked past Sansa, he could see through the window. All he would see from this vantage was mist, but if he angled his eye downwards…

The southrons had come up two days past. At their head they carried the standards of Highgarden and Sunspear; golden rose and pierced red sun. The Tyrells and the Martells had returned to the fray, and with their arrival they brought a thousand new complications.

Tyrion peered across at Sansa. For her own part she had hid her nervousness well – though not well enough to fool him. “That is a fine necklace you are wearing, my lady,” he said. It rested above her heart, a silver wolf’s head pin with amber-studded eyes.
“Thank you, my lord.”

“Might I ask where you procured it?”

She regarded him frostily. “Lady Olenna gave it to me, at Highgarden.”

“Ah. I thought so. It has the markings of Reachman silver.” That, and the Lannisters would give you gold only, and the other kingdoms can offer little more than bronze and iron, and certainly not worked so fine.

“Have you been admiring it long, my lord?”

“It is a handsome piece.” He forced himself to smile. “Much unlike myself. When I look at my reflection, Lady Sansa, it is always the prettiness of the glass itself that draws my eye, not its subject. Another aspect in which I am second to your Lord Willas.”

She sat very still. “I beg your pardon, my lord?”

“You need not. Your preference for Lord Tyrell is duly noted. He was, no doubt, during the brief period in which he did his duty, a far more suitable husband than I ever could be.”

Sansa pretended not to hear him.

“Wasn’t he?” Tyrion pressed.

She raised her wine cup very slowly to her lips. Tyrion watched that elegant neck move, bracing itself for the slight bitterness of the first sip, savouring the taste as it went down. A moment of resignation crossed her face, then she said, “If suitability may be expressed in terms of keeping his spouse’s best interests, then yes.”

“And dwarf children would not be in your interests?”

Her lips tightened; she looked, he thought, remarkably like Lady Catelyn – or like Cersei. “The imprisonment of my cousin might not be in my interest, for example.”

“Then, with Lord Robert’s liberation, your concerns should be resolved.” He had released the Arryn boy on the day of Sansa’s arrival at Harrenhal, and he had gone to lodgings near his cousin in Kingspyre Tower, where he was currently abed with a bad cold. Bronze Yohn Royce, meanwhile, remained cell-bound. The Vale without Royce to steady it was not only a snake without a head; it was a snake biting its own tail. The other Vale lords had arrived to Harrenhal in the past few days; Waynwood, Redfort, Corbray, and so forth. They, too, had lodged with Sansa and her court. No doubt the Tyrells would too when the negotiations would done, leaving Tyrion all alone in the Tower of Dread across Flowstone Yard.

“I sense,” he went on, “that you have greater concerns with me than the matter of Lord Arryn. I shall be sure to take careful note of the fashion in which Lord Willas addresses you today. In the hopes of proving a better...” What, now? Husband? Friend? “...ally.”

Sansa smiled, entirely without pleasure. “You need not bother, my lord. There is no contest to be had —”

“Oh, I entirely disagree. What is life, if not a contest, Sansa? Lord Willas if the lord of Highgarden, and I the rightful lord of Casterly Rock. Even if it does not concern you, we are inevitably disposed to conflict.”
“And I am just one of your battle grounds?” she said.

Tyrion did not have an answer to that, but fortunately the arrival of Podrick Payne saved him. The boy had a particular nervous way of knocking that had not changed at all with the years. “I believe that is your squire,” he said, “you might want to let him in.”

She scowled at him, though he was not sure why. Then she rose, went to the door and admitted a pink-faced Pod. “I came from Lady Waynwood,” he said, all in one breath. “She wants to see you.” He stopped and noticed Tyrion. “My lord. I mean you, my lady. Lady Sansa, that is.”

“There are no other ladies here,” Tyrion observed dryly. “Your message is not doubted, Podrick. May I ask—”

“You may not,” said Sansa sternly. “Did Lady Waynwood say that she must see me now, Podrick?”

“Yes, my lady. That’s why I ran.” He bobbed his head, something like half a bow. “My lady,” he said again. Tyrion noticed that he could not meet her eyes. *He is half in love with her too,* he thought. Though Pod could not meet his eyes either, and he doubted that was love. “Well,” he told Sansa, “you had best go at once, my lady. You wouldn’t want to be late for Lord Willas.”

She turned to him. “None of us would,” she said curtly. Without a second glance she swept out of the room. Podrick moved to follow but Tyrion called the boy back. “The Hound is out there, isn’t he? With Lady Sansa?”

Pod gave a wordless nod.

“Then there is no need for you to follow her too,” said Tyrion. “Come and sit with me awhile. Her ladyship did us the favour of not finishing her wine. You may drink what is left.”

Pod seemed to shrink. “Lady Sansa does not appreciate my early drinking, my lord.”

“Lady Sansa does not need to know. Does she?” A long pause; no response. “Does she, Podrick? You may serve her now, but I trust you still have something in your heart for me, no?”

“I – y-yes, my lord. I… I suppose so.”

“You suppose.” Tyrion was not sure why that irritated him so much. Podrick had been unquestioning, in those days. He had always been stammering, yes, but the moment of doubt had never existed. With that realisation, he was starting to understand what others might find irritating about the squire. *Speak your mind, Pod. The gods know that someone in this world needs to.* So he said as much. “Have you abandoned me too, Podrick?”

Pod paused with his cup halfway to his lips. “M-my lord?”

“I said have you abandoned me, too? I know you have served a great many masters since you left me in my cell.”

“My lord? But you – you told me to go. Or you told Ser Jaime to tell me—”

“You have been with Jaime too, or so I have heard. My blessed brother. Savior of the City of King’s Landing, and of all men, indeed. Ser Jaime Lannister, Goldenhand the Just, Lord Commander to both of his dead sons.”

Podrick’s fingers trembled as he lowered the cup. “M-my lord? But I thought Ser Jaime… I thought he helped you to… to—”
“Only to ease his conscience, I think. Suppose…” He set down his own drink. “Suppose I had been condemned for Joffrey’s murder. Suppose I was waiting to die. I think Jaime would have saved me then, too. Again, to ease his own conscience. I never did tell you about Tysha, did I?”

“T-Tysha, my lord?”

Something about the big-eyed innocent look incensed him further. “Mayhaps not. But you remember Shae, I trust? Do you know what my sister did to Shae, Podrick? I will tell you. Cersei had her strangled. As she would no doubt have done to all those close to me, if she could. My wife might have been one of them… my loyal squire too. When I sent you away, Podrick, it was for your own good. Not so you could—” He stopped. Some self-control kicked in, and he did not think it was wise to continue.

“So I could what, my lord?” asked Podrick.

Tyrion looked at him: this fresh faced youth in all his innocence, knowing nothing. “I think you should go, Podrick,” he said with a sigh.

Pod went – quickly, almost scurrilously. He slipped out quickly and quietly and the door behind him closed with only the slightest click.

It was not long before the regret set in. I have few friends here. Podrick is not a powerful one, but he is a friend nonetheless. Was. And yet… well, if the boy was going to spend all of his time feeling sorry for himself, Tyrion had no need of him as a friend.

He resolved to deal with this later. Now, his duty – whatever that meant – was calling.

When they arrived, the Tyrell host had seemed somewhat threatening; they numbered some fifty thousand, enough to outmatch Tyrion and Sansa’s followings combined five times over. But their threat was undermined by three things:

Firstly, only about one-third of that army were fighting men. The rest were camp followers and families and all manner of poor and squalid people. Tyrion even glanced some sparrows among their number, of the sort that had haunted Tommen’s early rule in King’s Landing.

Secondly, Daenerys’s attack on the roseroad had destroyed most of their food wagons, which left the force deprived of its essential resource. Willas Tyrell had appeared before them not only crippled, but thin and grey-faced, and Princess Arianne looked only a little better. As for the soldiers themselves, they were in an even worse state. Hunger naturally led to disease, and even now in the camp a worrying number could be found squatting over privy ditches, shiting their guts out.

Thirdly, and most importantly, they had come as refugees, not as conquerors. Hence it was a parley of peace that Willas Tyrell was seeking, and not one of war. And if things did change for the worse… well, he and Sansa had Lady Margaery in their custody. See how he likes that.

Sansa misliked the Hall of Hundred Hearths – it reminded her of Littlefinger, she said – so they met in the Small Hall, on a lower level of the Kingspyre Tower. Each side could have brought all manner of negotiators, but they were hoping to keep this simple, so they kept it to two and two: Tyrion and Sansa, and Lord Willas and the pregnant Princess Arianne. Sandor Clegane and Shagga waited threateningly in the antechamber, but inside the room it was only the four of them.

Tyrion was the last to arrive. The room had a decidedly funereal atmosphere, largely because all four participants had opted to wear black: for Sansa, sable stitched with silver; for the visiting pair, matching sable stitched with gold; for Tyrion, plain dark sable. It seemed that every noble person in
Harrenhal wore sable nowadays. The walls were chilly, and the heat needed to be kept in.

“You might have started without me,” Tyrion begun. He was content to let Sansa deal with the broader strokes of the negotiations. He was only concerned with the finer points.

Sansa nodded, turning to Lord Willas. “What do you desire of us, my lord?”

“An alliance.” Lord Tyrell’s speech seemed heavily rehearsed. “An alliance with… well, with whomever you represent.”

“Lady Sansa represents House Stark,” Tyrion informed them. “All branches of it, and her brothers and sisters, whether they be living or dead. I represent myself, mostly.”

“Not House Lannister?” asked Arianne Martell.

“I can represent House Lannister if you want me to, my princess,” said Tyrion. “Though given the history of our two houses – of our two peoples – such a move might prove unpopular.”

“I know this,” she said. “But Daenerys is a threat to both of us.”

“Is she? I have no reason to be angry with Daenerys. She named me as her master of coin, back in King’s Landing. Which is a damn sight more than Aegon ever did for me.”

(This was not true. Jon Connington had made Tyrion master of coin – acting master of coin, Connington would no doubt stress – but he did not want to go against Daenerys without good reason.)

“Aegon had plans for you,” said Arianne. “He told me he would have sent you to Casterly Rock, to treat with your nephew.”

She lied well, Tyrion thought, but it was still a lie. “Whatever Aegon intended does not matter. He is dead now.” And it was Viserion and I that doomed him.

“Whatever you intend.”

“To fight,” said Willas.

“She has a dragon.”

“So do you, I have heard.”

“And what do Lord Tyrion and I get from this?” Sansa asked. “Suppose we defeat Daenerys somehow. Suppose we kill her, and her kingdom is broken up. What can you offer us, then?”

“And who will rule?” Tyrion asked.

Lord Willas took a breath. “The… child… that Princess Arianne carries will rule when he or she comes of age—”

“Which will not be for another sixteen years.”

“I thought that we might have a council of regents, as there was for Aegon III in his minority.”

“Come now, Lord Tyrell. You are a learned man. You have read countless histories, I am sure. And you know that modelling our future government off Aegon III’s is an awful idea. They started with seven regents, but none of them lasted the whole five years save for Grand Maester Munkun. Are you planning to have the Seven Kingdoms ruled entirely by maesters?”
Lord Willas straightened up. “A solution could be devised. One regent, elected from each of the Seven Kingdoms.” But even as he spoke it was plain that the problems of factionalism were growing in his mind.

“This is what I understand of you,” said Tyrion. “You want us to support you in a war which is of no interest to us, against an enemy who has the capacity to burn us all on a whim. Assuming that by some heroic effort we defeat this enemy, you then want us to kneel to an infant – who may grow up to be as ineffectual as his father – and wait while the kingdoms are fought over by squabbling lords like dogs over a bone – or while seven maesters sit on a council mumbling about aesthetics and astronomy.”

“That is… that would…” Lord Willas seemed to have lost the ability to speak in sentences. “That is —”

“—in a word, stupid.”

A few moments passed in silence.

Then Sansa said, “get rid of it, then. Get rid of the Iron Throne.”

Tyrion stared at her. But even as he did so, the pieces slowly started to fall together, and as she continued talking, the pieces came together quicker and quicker.

“My father was a good Warden of the North,” she said, “but a terrible Hand of the King. He understood the Northmen, and what they would fight for, and what they respected. Similarly, your own father would have been adrift in the North, Lord Willas, but he was well-suited to understand the politics of the Reach. As he could never rule in the north, my father could never rule in the south. We were raised in different traditions, all of us. Each one of us here has our own culture and understanding of the world. It seems to me that we are all coming at this problem from very different places. The Seven Kingdoms… they were never a natural thing. Forgive me if my history is inaccurate, but it took some two hundred years for the Targaryens to appease the Dornishmen alone. It will take many years more for any ruler, Targaryen or otherwise, to bring us all back together.

“My father once told me that the lone wolf dies but the pack survives. He was right when he was talking about Starks. But we Seven Kingdoms are not a family. The Starks hate the Lannisters, the Tullys hate the… Lannisters, the Martells hate the… well, they hate the Lannisters too.”

“Everyone hates the Lannisters,” said Tyrion. “Especially the Lannisters. Which more than proves Lady Sansa’s point, I think.”

But Sansa was not done. “Perhaps we should not be united under a single banner, but we can be united in our cause.”

“Our cause being…?” Lord Willas asked.

She has them, Tyrion Lannister thought.

“Our cause is twofold,” Sansa said. “We will support you – we will support each other in our attempts to free ourselves from the…”

“Yoke?” Tyrion suggested.

“—the yoke of the Iron Throne, yes. But we require your support in another matter. A bigger matter, which Daenerys pales in the face of. The great war. The army of the dead. They are coming.” Lord Willas made to interrupt, but Sansa would not be stopped. “You may think me mad to throw that at
you like that, yes. But you travelled across the Riverlands, and doubtless you have heard the rumours by word-of-mouth, even if you thought they were little more than superstitious folklore.

“So I will tell you now, Lord Willas, what I told Lord Tyrion. The army of the dead is real. I saw them on the beaches of Seagard, massing in their thousands. And every man in my army saw the same. Ask Lord Mallister. Ask Lord Vance. Ask Sandor Clegane – there is a man who will never lie to you about what scares him. And if you still doubt, let Lord Tyrion take you up in his dragon, to see the beaches for yourself, as he did.”

As he had. When Sansa had come speaking of the army of the dead it had been difficult to believe, even when the Hound had suggested the same narrative. So two days after his arrival, he had taken Viserion and flown down to Seagard beach alone.

It was not the bodies that scared him. It was not the frost-bitten corpses with the terrified eyes, or the extinguished fires and fallen swords. It was the silence.

He turned to Willas Tyrell, made his voice solemn. “Lady Sansa speaks the truth, my lord,” he said. “But I will leave that to her.” He could do no more good here today; he would only get in Sansa’s way – and he sensed the negotiations were over.

Tyrion rose before anyone thought to catch him and drag him back to his seat for more pleasantries. He was halfway up the hall stairs when a hand suddenly fell upon his shoulder and turned him round. “Imp,” said Sandor Clegane. “Where exactly are you going?”

“To my chambers,” Tyrion told him, more annoyed than threatened. “Perchance you would like to stalk me there.”

“Have a care what you say, Imp. You’re a small man with a big mouth, but a small man nonetheless. And when that mouth gets you into trouble, it’ll be the other thing that matters.”

Tyrion half-laughed. “Very well,” he said sarcastically. “I apologise profusely if I have distressed your lady Sansa in any way. Though she has a sharper tongue now than she once did; I am sure she could rebuke me herself, if she cared to.”

“I am talking about Lady Sansa. I am talking about the boy.”

That left him utterly bewildered. “The… the boy? What boy?”

“The Payne boy,” said Clegane. “Lady Sansa is a Stark of Winterfell and well-placed to deal with you. The boy is of lower birth such that you might condemn him to death on a whim. He is not yours to torment. When monsters like you or I are angry, best find another monster to direct our anger against.” He loomed large over Tyrion, his hideous burned face contorting into a grin. “Don’t you think so?”

“You have a point,” Tyrion conceded. “Though you seem to have lost your angry bite altogether, Clegane. When did you become so sentimental?”

“Saving Starks will do that to you,” the Hound replied. “You should try it sometime.” Then he stepped away from Tyrion, and retreated down the stairs.

For his own part Tyrion continued upstairs, up the steps from the Hall of the Hundred Hearths, out across Flowstone Yard and up to the Tower of Dread. A name which is starting to suit me more and more by the minute. Sansa lives in dread of me, Podrick lives in dread of me… and why would they not?
He was close to his chambers when he first heard Penny’s voice – or rather, two tones of her voice: one high, the other yet higher. It was almost comforting to hear her talking to herself; it proved that he was not the only one who was mad. But then he realised that the second voice was not hers at all. Perhaps it had been disguised at first, but now that guise had fallen away, and Tyrion recognised the velvet-soft tones of Varys the Spider.

“My lord,” he said, aware that Varys almost certainly knew he was listening. “What a pleasant surprise.”

“Pleasant?” The eunuch arched an eyebrow. “Your countenance suggests otherwise, my lord Tyrion.” He came forwards; he wore his usual cloying perfume in even greater quantities than was normal. Does he think it will repel me, somehow?

“I did not know you had accompanied Lord Willas and Princess Arianne,” Tyrion said. “That is how you arrived here, I presume?”

“It is.”

“Then why, pray, did you attend our meetings in the Hall of Hundred Hearths.”

Varys smiled, showing small white teeth. “For the same reason that you are not still present at this moment for the refreshments. I did not think I would be welcome there. But whereas you returned here to brood, no doubt, I thought I might find some joyful pastime. Hence my meeting with your lady companion.”

Tyrion turned to Penny. “You should not have let him in.”

She blanched. “He said he was a friend—”

“Many people claim to be my friend. Believe me, I have very few. And Lord Varys is certainly not one of them. He was at the Blackwater, remember.”

“I remember,” said Penny. “But he never hurt me.”

“Oh, I do not doubt that he would be willing to.” He turned his glare on Varys. “I know that you and the cheesemonger made good use of children to carry your messages in King’s Landing. But a dwarf and a child are often indistinguishable.” To Penny: “No doubt in different circumstances, Lord Varys would not have hesitated to cut out your tongue.”

“You wound me with your accusations, my lord,” said the eunuch. “Come, now. I know there is bad blood between us, but I had hoped that we had developed a genuine friendship over the years, too.”

“You have a strange notion of friendship,” Tyrion said. “Or did you regularly betray Illyrio, too?” Strike for the heart, now. “Did Illyrio escape the ashes of the sinking ship that was Aegon’s claim, or did he burn with all the rest?”

“Alas,” said Varys, with overabundant sorrow. “Illyrio is gone. Along with brave Ser Richard Lonmouth, and the Lord Hand, and so many of my beloved little birds.”

“And Aegon himself, of course. Your long-prophesised prince. Forgive me if I do not weep at the death of your little Blackfyre rebellion.”

“Oh, but is it dead, my lord? Arianne Martell is pregnant. And if Daenerys should die while her child lives… well, then you might say that our plan proved successful after all.”
“Perhaps,” said Tyrion. “But there is still some time before Princess Arianne gives birth, I think. And even then, the child might be stillborn, or worse, born malformed, like me.”

“Oh, I do not think you are malformed, my lord. I think you are exactly the shape you need to be. And we would not use such unkind terms as ‘malformed’ to describe persons of your stature, would we?” This he directed to Penny, who gave a small, nervous, shake of the head.

“Penny,” Tyrion said. “Would you mind doing me a favour? Would you go down to the cellars and ask them to bring up some wine for Lord Varys and me? Arbor gold, if we have it.”

There might well have been Arbor gold in his cabinet, but Penny asked no questions. Varys saw fit to comment on that once she was gone. “Poor girl. She feels she is entirely indebted to you. I have no doubt that she’d lay down her life for you, if it was necessary.”

“It is a good thing I have no intention of making her do so, then.”

“Hmm.” Varys nodded. “For now.”

“I have a dragon now,” said Tyrion. “If I want something, I can get it that way. No need for Penny to sacrifice herself. No need for anyone to sacrifice anything.”

“I disagree, my lord. There are always sacrifices.” Varys picked at his hands, as if he’d just found dirt on his palms. “Everybody has to die for something, in the end.”

“And what are you willing to die for, Varys?”

The eunuch smiled wryly. “Why, the realm, of course. And what about you, my lord?”

“I lost my faith in causes worth dying for a long time ago.”

“Oh, no, my lord. There are always small sad things to die for.” He stepped out into the passage that connected Tyrion’s chambers with the Tower of Dread’s main stairs. “If you follow me, I will show you some of them.”

He did not think wandering into the unknown with Varys was the wisest idea in the world, but that at least gave him away out from his self-pity. They descended the stairs to the entrance level, and then further still to the kitchen level, and then yet further still. The wall in front of them appeared to be solid stone, but Varys clicked something into place and then pushed the wall, and it opened as a door would.

Tyrion did his best not to look surprised. “I suspected that Harren would have built his fair share of tunnels.”

“Not Harren,” said Varys, starting down the tunnel. “Else he would have been able to shelter from Balerion’s dragonfire – which, as we know, he did not. No, these tunnels were built by Lady Danelle Lothston. Do you know of her, my lord?”

“She was the one who bathed in blood, wasn’t she? They called her Danelle the Mad.”

“She also had a habit of eating human flesh, or so we are told. House Lothston was the sixth family to take Harrenhal as its seat. So far ten families have ruled from here.”

“That is six, my lord,” said Varys.

“Janos Slynt makes seven. I forget how he was dispossessed of the castle. And Littlefinger makes eight. And…” Had he missed one, somewhere back in the days of the dragonkings? “Oh. You are including Sansa, are you?”

“You might argue that her claim is merely the continuation of the Whent claim,” Varys said. “But yes. There are Starks of Harrenhal now, as there are – or were – Starks of Winterfell.”

“That is nine,” said Tyrion. “What is the tenth?”

“Can you really not think, my lord?”

Tyrion frowned.

“Why, it is House Lannister,” the eunuch said, oddly pleased with himself. “Your own lord father was briefly lord of Harrenhal, if only informally.”

“By that logic you would have to include the Boltons as well. Roose Bolton ruled here for a time. He was here when Jaime was.”

“And where is Roose Bolton now?”

“As dead as my dear lord father,” said Tyrion. “What are you implying, Varys? That the curse of Harrenhal will soon be visited upon Houses Lannister and Stark.”

“I never said that.” Varys smiled slyly. “Is that your suspicion?”

“My suspicion,” Tyrion replied, “is that House Lannister does not need the curse of Harrenhal to destroy itself.”

They went a little ways further, and then Varys stopped; the tunnel had come to an end. The eunuch felt along the ceiling, then rapped three times, hard. Tyrion felt the ceiling budge, ever so slightly. Varys hit three more times, and he realised that the eunuch was tapping out a signal. Then a trapdoor opened above them, revealing a triangle of light. A hand stretched down to help them up. Varys gestured for Tyrion to ascend first. “As it please my lord.”

“It does not please me much.” Nonetheless Tyrion took the hand, and let himself be hauled up, out of the darkness. He turned to thank the soul who had rescued him from Varys’s solitary company, but his words stuck in his throat when he recognised Ser Bronn of the Blackwater.

“Lost for words, Imp?” Bronn asked.

Tyrion recovered quickly. “I am only surprised at how much you get around, Bronn. You would do well as a Flea Bottom whore, I think.”

“You are too kind, m’lord.” Bronn reached down to haul Varys up; the eunuch found his feet, and frantically dusted down his robes, as if even the hint of uncleanliness was like to kill him dead.

“We are in the Widow’s Tower now, my lord,” said Varys. “Lady Lothston’s web runs between all five towers.”

“Whereas I am sure yours stretches quite a bit further than that,” Tyrion replied sourly. “I must confess myself disappointed, Varys. When you promised me something worth dying for, I had hoped for more than Ser Bronn.”
“What were you hoping for?” asked Bronn.

“Not you. Not some sellsword I should have left to rot at the inn at the crossroads.”

“Aye, m’lord, you should have. But that way you’d be short a head. As for what we’re showing you… well…” And then he stepped aside to reveal Numbers – Gerion, or whatever he was calling himself – in the room behind him.

Varys planned this, Tyrion thought, absently. But when he turned to glare at the eunuch he was nowhere to be found. Here he was, Tyrion Lannister, stranded between the sellsword who had betrayed him and the squire who might well be his son. Here he was, lost for words. But where was he to begin? Where?

A thought: where do whores go? An answer: it matters not where they go, or whether they were ever a whore at all. They always come back to haunt us. And here stood the boy he had abandoned at the Blackwater, and looking closely now Tyrion saw what should have been obvious from first sight. It was the eyes that saw truest. One green eye; his green eye, brimming with Lannister mischief; and one blue eye, her blue eye. Two eyes of different colours. Was that something you passed down to your sons, and to your son’s sons? It had not manifested in Lord Tywin nor in his wife, so far as Tyrion knew. But that did not mean he had not passed it down to Gerion. He remember sitting in that cave with Penny, absently humming the lyrics of Tysha’s song; I loved a maid as fair as summer, with sunlight in her hair… He remembered her absent comment; that was Gerion’s song, Number’s song. He said his mother used to sing it to him when he was small.

How many girls – or women – knew that song? How many sang that song so sweetly that for husband or son alike it would become the enduring image of her, so many years on, as bare and as plain as naked flesh even when the creases of her face were starting to fade from memory? How many—?

“You left me,” said Gerion – said Numbers, said Tysha. He spoke with her voice, small and songbird-sweet. It was a voice that begged forgiveness for the crime it was about to commit: the crime of sticking itself in your heart and never ever letting go.

Tyrion watched him for so long – it may only have been seconds, but it felt like minutes. Then his lips came unstuck. He took half a step forwards, and felt Numbers step back, felt it in his bones, and beyond that, and it stung worse than any knife-edge. “I was your squire,” the boy said, and in that word was a world of hurt and pain. “But you left me.”
Golden Bones

Chapter Summary

“We’re beyond blame now.”

Chapter Notes

Recap: At the very last moment, Jaime Lannister changed sides in the battle of Lannisport, opening the gates to Stannis’s army and his allies - Myrcella, Brienne, Prince Quentyn...

The majority of this chapter was written by Anglocat.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

JAIME

I am in a cell. Again. These were his first thoughts upon waking. His second thought was where?

A long-ago memory of his father surfaced, his cold, clipped tones, witheringly announcing, Jaime, you surprise me. You have produced a sequence of thought. He shook his head, tried to sit up. Well, then, Father mine, let’s surprise you again, and start with the correct question: Who?

Not Cersei, he decided, when his grogginess wore off. This is not Casterly Rock. If Cersei had found him after the trick he’d played, he would be dead. As it was, she must still be in the Rock, reconsidering the situation with the few allies she had left – meaning Qyburn and his golden monster.

But enough of Cersei. Where was he?

The cell was dim, but not pitch-black, courtesy of a narrow window set high in the wall. Too high for him to glance through, which proved that whoever had put him down here did not have his comfort in mind.

He had spent so much time in cells lately. Cells in Casterly Rock, in Harrenhal, in Riverrun, and so forth. Robert used to boast of making the eight based on how many women he fucked. I could make the eight based on how many prisons I have been in. The thought made him laugh, and then his laugh turned into a hacking, dry-mouthed cough. For a moment he thought he might choke, but he swallowed it down and sat there wheezing. And maybe his coughing was for the best, for just then there was a hiss of a key in a lock and the door opened in a wave of blinding light. He threw up an
arm over his face and blinked spasmodically; then the light subsided, and he made out the figures in
the doorway.

One of them was Brienne. That filled him with relief, and then dread, because if the stubborn wench
hadn’t managed to keep him out of prison, then it could only be because she had been faced with
someone even more stubborn. And Jaime could only think of one such person. The second figure
confirmed his suspicions: Stannis’s man, what was his name again? Seaworth. That was it – Ser
Davos Seaworth, the onion knight.

Jaime grinned despite the pain. “Have they sent you to escort me to my execution, Lady Brienne?”

She looked somewhat aghast. “Not yet,” said Ser Davos. Together he and the wench helped Jaime to
stand. “I cannot speak for the king, though,” Seaworth went on. “He is not pleased by you.”

“Really? I would never have guessed.” Jaime forced their hands off and staggered down the corridor
alone. “I assume I am to be put on trial.”

“Of a sort,” said Ser Davos. “The king will see you. Afterwards, you may reflect on his decision.”

It is not to be death, then. Seaworth was a straightforward man; if Jaime was to be killed, he would
put it to him straight. He let Ser Davos take the lead and fell back beside Brienne. “My lady,” he
said. “I hope I find you well.”

She stared at him as if he were mad. “This is no time to be flippant about things, ser,” she replied
solemnly.

“Cheer up, wench. This morose state suits you even worse than a gown does.” I should be dead, he
thought faintly. I should be dead, and I very well may be dead soon, so why not tell a few jokes? It
was the sort of mentality Tyrion might have had.

As it was, Brienne only glared at him. “You should save your breath, Ser Jaime,” she said in a
somewhat aloof, most un-Brienne-like fashion. “You will need it.”

They ascended a flight of steps into a long stone passage. It was then, seeing the Lannister tapestries
hanging up, that Jaime realised where they were. Lannisport Castle. Of course. It was just that he
had never seen the dungeons before. As for how he had gotten here…

Faintly, he began to recall the battle outside the gates of Lannisport. He had been safely inside at
first, but as the stream of refugees grew thicker and thicker it had seemed prudent to take up a
position outside the gate to ensure that they were ready when the living gave way to the dead. There
he and Ser Benedict Broom had held the line together, urging Stannis’s fleeing soldiers past them,
Jaime glancing around frantically hoping for a glimpse of Brienne of Tarth or—

“Myrcella!” Her name burst from his lips, unstoppable. “Brienne, did Myrcella make it—”

“Myrcella is safe, Ser Jaime, have no fear. I brought her out, along with the Princess Shireen. We
were among the first through.”

Jaime had never breathed a deeper sigh of relief. “That is good to hear,” he said. “Forgive my
outburst. My recollections of the battle are hazy at best.”

“You were knocked unconscious,” Brienne said matter-of-factly, “but some brave soul dragged you
inside before the wights reached the gate. Then—”

“Then King Stannis found you,” said Ser Davos. “And your luck changed.”
“For the better, I’m sure. Did no one speak up in my defence?”

“Oh, quite the contrary, ser. Your Lannisport men were ready to fight for your freedom. It was your… hmm, niece… that decided that the king’s actions were for the best. And given that the Lady Myrcella and King Stannis have never before agreed on anything, it was generally decided that your imprisonment was for the best.”

“And what of my sister? What of Cersei?”

They told him what he had suspected: that she was still holed up in the Rock, behind a line of impenetrable defences. “Though we must penetrate them soon,” Ser Davos said. “Our supplies are running desperately low.”

“Cersei will have stockpiled food in the Rock,” said Jaime. “No – not her. My uncle Kevan.” Cersei was too short-sighted to prepare for a siege on purpose.

“I met your uncle Kevan, at Castamere,” said Seaworth. “He seems the sort of man to make such preparations. He may just have saved our lives again.”

“If we can get inside the Rock.”

“Indeed.”

They passed through a pair of heavy iron doors stamped with Lannister lions, but flanked by soldiers in the Baratheon livery. Beyond was a tall, draughty chamber that had once served as a meeting room, but now appeared to serve as Stannis Baratheon’s solar. The king himself sat by the fire in a high-backed chair. As he turned to look at Jaime his form appeared to have been sculpted out of salt.

“Kingslayer.”

“Lord Stannis.”

“I am a king.”

“My name is Jaime.”

“You can call yourself Aemon the Dragonknight for all I care. That does not change the fact that you killed your king.”

“And you can call yourself Baelor the Blessed for all I care. That does not change the fact that even the bloody flux is better liked than your kingship.”

Stannis ground his teeth. “I did not call you here to trade insults.”

“Then why did you call me here?” More to the point, why is Brienne following the orders of a man she hates?

Stannis pointed to a chair opposite him. “Sit.” Jaime decided it was no longer worth his time to argue. He sat. From this angle he could see all the lines of his foe’s face. Disappointment has matured in Stannis Baratheon like a fine red wine.

“Are we on the same side, or not?” Jaime asked.

“If you wish to make this into child’s play, then yes, we are on the same side. But we are not children, Kingslayer.”
“No, we are not.”

Stannis gave a slow answering nod, then turned to Ser Davos and Brienne. “You may leave us,” he said. He waited for their footsteps to fade and the door to close before returning to Jaime. “My daughter Shireen succeeded in making acquaintance with your…” Stannis scowled so hard his eyebrows seemed like to snap off. “…nephew. I hope that, in the context of this greater war, we might follow their example.”

“That would be for the best, I think.”

“But I have not forgotten about what you and Cersei did to Robert and to the Seven Kingdoms. And I never will.”

“I was never under the impression that you had,” Jaime replied, straight-faced. “And if I ever forget myself, I am certain you will be there to remind me.”

Stannis scowled even more. “Do you think this is a joke, Kingslayer?”

“No. And frankly, I couldn’t give a rat’s arse about who sits the bloody Iron Throne at the end of this. You can have your metal chair for all I care, Lord Stannis. Or Daenerys Targaryen can have it.”

_She might even burn you alive along the way. Wouldn’t that work out nicely?_”

Stannis seemed on the verge of continuing his tirade, but here he managed some small resistance to his urge. “Very well,” he said. “What do you care about, Kingslayer?”

“My daughter,” Jaime replied, rather relishing the shock in Stannis’s eyes. “The few friends left to me.” And then, meeting Stannis’s eyes easily — say what you would for the man, but he was no Tywin Lannister — “and, most of all, saving the living from the dead. Surely we can agree on that, Lord Stannis?”

Stannis nodded slowly, reluctantly.

“You can’t do it alone, you know.”

The silence stretched on. _Let it stretch for eternity._ Jaime knew he must not break it.

“Aye.” Stannis’s voice was weary, but firm.

Jaime: “I meant what I said. I don’t care who sits the damned throne, and I don’t even care about the harm your bloody war has caused. We’re beyond blame now.”

Stannis shook his head. “Not quite.”

“You don’t know the Rock well enough to take it. I do.”

The king cocked an eyebrow. A formidable battle commander himself, he knew Jaime was not bluffing.

Stannis sighed. “It seems,” he said, “that I can no longer choose the company I keep.”

Jaime smiled thinly. “The compliment is mutual, I assure you. So,” he continued, “an alliance, then?”

“An alliance with you, Kingslayer?”

“Under the circumstances, what other option is there? For either of us?”
Stannis chewed that. “If you cooperate, there will be no question of you ever returning to Cersei. Your beloved sister.”

A sideways jab. Very well. “If we don’t cooperate, there’ll be no question of Cersei. Or you. Or me, come to that.” Enough of this. Jaime held out his hand.

Eternity passed. And another eternity. And another – and then, looking like he was wishing his own hand would somehow rot and drop off before it reached Jaime’s fingers, Stannis Baratheon met his hand – and then promptly fell back into his chair of state with a sigh that suggested the sweet release of death could not come to him a moment to soon. “Leave me,” he muttered. “We will meet in council on the morrow.”

Outside he found Brienne still waiting for him, though Davos Seaworth had gone elsewhere. Jaime had a quip ready – still waiting for me, wench? – but it sounded bitter to his ears. Now was not the time.

“Ser Jaime,” she said, rather stiffly. “I am to escort you to see your niece.”

Oh, wonderful. “How is Myrcella?”

“She is… not entirely happy with you, ser. I think she rather blames you for—”

“I know what she blames me for. She has good reason.”

It seemed Brienne did not know how to reply. “I… beyond that, ser, I am not sure. Lady Myrcella is not like Lady Sansa. She does not share her thoughts freely.”

Oh, Brienne. You must be naïve to think that Sansa Stark shared her opinions any more freely than Myrcella does. “Well,” he said, “I suppose I will have to see her for myself.”

They walked a while in silence. Then Brienne choked out half a question, tried to swallow it again, and then resigned herself to saying it. The question was, “Are they yours?”

“Are what mine?” asked Jaime, who knew full well what she meant.

“They are.” He was pretty sure Brienne knew anyway, as surely as he knew that she was a virgin maid. “Joffrey was… when you do something like what we did, there is always the danger that things will go wrong. Barristan the Bold used to tell me that Jaehaerys the Second had a saying about madness and greatness being two sides of the same coin. As for Myrcella and Tommen… well, I suppose I can claim proper fatherhood of them, not just as a matter of seed as it was with Joff. Myrcella is difficult. Tommen less so. But you never met him.”

“I did meet him,” Brienne said. “At Joffrey and Margaery’s wedding. He walked past me. I don’t think he had ever seen a woman as tall as I was.”

“How tall are you, Brienne?”

“Six-and-three, Ser Jaime.”

“I am six-and-two. I don’t think I have ever met a woman as tall as you, Brienne. Rhaella Targaryen stood at six feet, but I think that was mostly her shoes.”

Unexpectedly, that made her laugh. But she quickly sobered as they reached the door to Myrcella’s
rooms, and so did Jaime. He was wearing a solemn face such that he might wear to meet his daughter, but that was quickly cast aside when he opened the door as his aunt Dorna was stepping through it.

Ser Kevan’s wife – widow, now, he supposed – was as insipid as ever. She gripped the arm of a terrified-looking girl of about ten years: their daughter, the last of Ser Kevan’s children. If Myrcella, Cersei and I were all to die, this child might inherit the Rock. And I cannot even remember her name.

Lady Dorna did a curtsey. Jaime replied with a small bow. For a moment they both stared awkwardly at one another, neither of them quite sure which of them was supposed to defer to the other. Then his aunt stood up very straight, and said “Nephew” in a strained voice.

“Aunt. And my cousin… uh…”

“Janei,” said Lady Dorna. “Our youngest. And our last.”

Jaime inclined his head. “I was sorry to hear of your sons’ death.” Though honestly he was not quite sure what her sons had been called either, saving Lancel. “And of your husband, of course. I am told…”

“That he died well, yes, yes. So I have been informed, many times.”

There was a tense silence. “How are you?” Jaime asked, faintly aware of how stupid that question was.

“Oh,” his aunt said. “Well enough. It is good to have you on our side.” With most Lannisters there would have been a hint of malice there, but Lady Dorna was too naïve to even suggest it. Even more naïve was her assertion that “the Seven will deliver us victory. I am sure of it.”

Jaime did his best not to frown at her. We do not even know what victory will look like. He was suddenly struck by how similar the blind belief of his aunt in the gods was to the blind belief in Aerys of his pyromancers. And in the wrong hands, each may be as dangerous as the other.

“Myrcella is inside,” Lady Dorna said. “If you are looking for her. She.. she is a difficult girl, ser. Forgive my boldness, but she is not as far from her mother as she likes to think.”

“I shall keep that in mind,” Jaime replied, his dread growing by the minute. He said a pleasant farewell to his aunt and cousin whose name he was already forgetting – was it Janei or Jeyne? – and proceeded ahead.

Immediately he saw that his aunt had been right. There was definitely something of Cersei in the room. Myrcella had substituted a high-backed chair for her mother’s gold-and-scarlet throne, and her clothes were less austere than Cersei’s were. Yet there was something about those eyes that betrayed her similarity to her mother – though while Cersei’s green eyes were fire, Myrcella’s were ice. They threatened to freeze the skin to your bones, and make you shrivel up inside.

“Lord Commander,” she said. That was Cersei, too. Not “uncle”. Not even “Ser Jaime”. But “Lord Commander.”

I backed down before Cersei and suffered for it, Jaime thought. I will not back down before Myrcella. “If you are going to call me ‘Lord Commander’, then what should I call you?”

“‘My lady’ will be fine.”
"I had the impression that you intended to reclaim the Iron Throne. Not ‘Queen Myrcella’, then?"

"The Iron Throne is a thousand miles away. Right now I only call myself a queen to deny my mother. And she claims to be only Queen of the Rock, not of the Seven Kingdoms entire.” She paused a moment. “I apologise, though, for presuming to call you Lord Commander. Would Lord Hand suit you better?"

"You may call me whatever you like."

"Lord Hand would be the most accurate, of course. It was what you were to Mother, and you are always true to her, it would seem."

"Myrcella—"

She turned her eyes aside to Brienne. “Thank you, my lady,” she said curtly, “but I would like to see my uncle alone now.”

Brienne gave Jaime a somewhat pitying look, then left the room. As soon as she left the room Myrcella’s gaze became even colder.

Better to get the first word in, Jaime thought. “You are not pleased with me,” he said.

“That would be an understatement.”

“So tell me why.”

"Why?" She seemed to inflate, like a balloon, first with disbelief, then with anger. “You ask me why?"

“I do. Forgive me, but my experience with your mother’s tirades is that they are usually ill-formed. So if you intend to prove yourself so different to her, then I ask to do so now. Take your time. I am in no hurry.”

He half-expected spluttering, stammering; Cersei, in a word. But Myrcella stopped; her eyes turned very pale and cold. Then she began with his worst sin of all. “You let my brother die.”

Of course. She was entitled to think that. After all, the first duty of a Kingsguard was to defend the king with his life. And Jaime had failed to die in their defense four times over now. “I did what I could, Myrcella, but—”

“I spoke to Eleyna. She says you did not come around from Mother’s side until the night before. You were Cersei’s man almost to the last. And I know it was you who told them to open the gate to let her across—"

“That was Tommen’s decision in the end.”

“Because you told him to!” The coldness went; her anger burned hot again. “Don’t you lie to me. I know what you did – I’ll bet you forgot about what you were fighting for altogether as soon as she started walking across that bridge. That explains why you didn’t go back to them.”

“Your mother took me captive.”

“Despite your many attempts to escape, I’m sure.”

“It wasn’t like that.”
“How was it, then? I wonder, when the time comes, will you even be able to take her captive in return? Or will you stand there before me and beg for her life and do everything in your power to save her?”

“You will not kill your own mother, Myrcella,” said Jaime.

“No,” she replied, “but Stannis might. Cersei has cost him dearly. It was her sins that started all of this. But…” She dragged the next pause out for an age, “…it takes two to make a child.”

“What are you asking?”

“I’m asking whose idea it was.”

It was a long time before Jaime answered. “Hers. Of course it was hers.”

“And you had no part in it?”

“I… I did my duty – what I perceived then as my duty – by my sister. And my queen.”

“But you knew it was wrong.”

“Of course I did. But Cersei… with Cersei you… she seemed so broken, Myrcella.” He felt quite angry. “You could not understand.”

“I don’t understand?” She laughed, humourlessly. “Me? Are you serious?”

“How could you? To have gained a son, only to lose him.” To have the pain such that you wish you had never gained him at all. “To see him realise that in three years of kingship he came to wish he had died instead of Joffrey?”

“That’s not true! He hated Joffrey!”

He tried to keep his voice even, but it was hard when she sounded so much like her. Like Cersei. “You do not understand. It was not for hatred of Joffrey. It was for hatred of that crown. That throne. Power.”

He must have been a fool to think that his lesson would change her. It had never worked for Cersei. “Leave it to a Kingsguard to spin a moral out of anything,” she muttered, “and one which conveniently gives you absolution at that. No. My brother died because of you. You are dismissed.”

“Myrcella—”

“You are dismissed, ser. Do not make me repeat it again.”

It was no use.

Nobody was waiting for him outside this time. No Brienne, no Onion Knight. No one, save, turning a corner—

“Ser Jaime,” a voice he could not place pursued him.

“That I was,” he answered, and turned.

“I know.” Quentyn sounded like he had heard this line a thousand times before. “I thought the same of you – well, that is, until you were—”

“Safely caged?” he growled. Apparently, a little of the Kingslayer carapace he had worn for so many years could still be summoned at need.

But Martell was surprisingly unruffled. “Yes, though I’m glad to see you out and about. We’ve had quarters prepared for you.” Seeing Jaime’s frown: “Normally the steward would take you to your room, but I wanted a word with you, particularly when I heard you’d been shown in to see Myrcella.”

“Oh?” He followed the young Martell down a half-familiar hallway. Stranger in my own city.

“You mustn’t give up on her, you know.”

“Mustn’t I?” Is this the part where you tell me it is all happy families again?

“No. She’s angry. And hurt. And—she misses her brother.”

You are young and stupid. “She blames me for it all.”

“She blames her mother a damned sight more than she blames you. But you’re here. She can punish you. Cersei’s safely ensconced in Casterly Rock, where we need to be, and seemingly willing to let us all be killed by wights.”

“So I’m just—handy?” I am old and full of bad japes.

“Well.” The prince chewed his lip. “I think she must hate you a little, too. But with reason, wouldn’t you admit?”

“Oh, certainly. She hates me. Along with everyone else in the Seven Kingdoms. Are you here to tell me something that is not obvious, ser, or just to prattle at me?”

Abruptly – unexpectedly – Martell stepped in front of Jaime, and put his hands on his shoulders. Jaime could not hide his mild surprise. Death has made you bold indeed, Prince Quentyn.

“Look,” Quentyn began, very evenly, “she is not lost to you—not yet. I know it. She got a taste of power, and that’s given her a taste for power, if you see. But she is not her mother, and she does not want to be her.” The lip wobbled again, the absurd little moustache quavered. “I know it. Trystane knew it.” More lipchewing. He means it.

“And Trystane’s idyllic Myrcella is in there somewhere?” Jaime said, perhaps a little cruelly. “Is that what you are saying? Perhaps there’s a better man inside all of us, a free spirit grown fat and happy on gingerbread and blackberry wine?” He shrugged out of Quentyn’s grasp.

“You can help her,” the prince called after him.

“Why me? Because I am so good at knowing right from wrong?”

“No, ser,” Martell answered. “because you struggle, too.”

Jaime did not have an immediate answer for that.

They trudged on a little in silence until they reached a door. “This is yours,” he said, we’ve had your things placed here—your sword, and all that you had on you. We’ve found some clothes for the morrow. Do you want to sup in the hall tonight or should I have them send you up some food?”
“Send it up. No wine, just water tonight,” he said. Then, remembering that Prince Quentyn – naïve fool or whatever – was still an ally, he added, “my thanks.”

The younger man left him at the door. The room appointed for him was adequate. The bath was lukewarm. The meal was edible. The bedsheets were serviceable to keep out the chill.

The next morning, Jaime, having dressed grudgingly in the colours of House Lannister – appearances must be kept up, after all – shouldered his way into Stannis’s over-crowded solar five minutes late and searched for a seat. His gaze raked the room, sweeping over Martells, Lannisters minor, Lannisters major (—dear gods, was that Addam Marbrand over there?—) and then a very major one indeed: Myrcella, cold contemptuous eyes meeting his own. Quentyn Martell’s pleasant face smiled at him, and then – Brienne. For a moment, just a moment, the homely, honest face beamed a subtle welcome that comforted him. He would join her, he decided. But first he must squeeze by his new ally.

“Ser Jaime.” Stannis’s greeting was civil, at least.


The small quirk of the lips that passed for a smile from Stannis briefly manifested. “I appreciate the courtesy, Ser Jaime,” he said flatly, “but I’d rather you save that particular courtesy until you mean it.”

He squeezed in beside Brienne as Stannis resumed the council. “We do not merely seek admission to Casterly Rock,” the king said. “We seek to take it from the false queen, Cersei Lannister, first and surely last of her name.”

Oh, good. Some inspiring drivel for the masses. Let them slobber it up.

“Cersei Lannister has proven that she is not fit to rule,” Stannis declaimed, continuing, “She has shown herself to be a kinslayer, traitor, tyrant, a false wife—”

“Very good of you to remind us,” Jaime said. “There is also the little matter of her having abandoned us to the army of the dead by locking us out of Casterly Rock.”

Stannis nodded. “By closing off the Rock to us, Cersei Lannister has shown that she sides with the dead against the living. We must not fail to gain entrance to the Rock, or we shall become as they are—corpses fighting to extinguish life.”

He was wondering whether Stannis was ever going to get to the bloody point when he saw that the dispositions of the figures on the map, the encircling ships—Cersei’s dromonds, he had no doubt—and the bridge connecting Lannisport to the Rock set out that plan exactly.

A two pronged attack. Storming the bridge and the gate, while at the same time sailing up in Cersei’s stupid dromonds, which the Baratheon host had now commandeered, and turning them on the Lannister forces protecting the Rock, and Cersei’s throne. A neat pincer movement. Well planned. And horribly inefficient.

Leave it to Stannis to find a way to shed the most blood, take the most lives on both sides, and then expect the survivors on both sides to band together against the forces of the Others.

Although perhaps he was being too disingenious here. After all, what else did they have? A single-pronged assault on the Rock from one side only would inevitably fail, and if they used anything less than their full force all at once they stood the risk of being picked off one by one. Which, Jaime realised, explained why Stannis was currently flouting this high diction – these words about Cersei’s
treachery and evil and such. Because if anyone looked at the actual fabric of his plan, they would see that his intended victory could be nothing less than pyrrhic. And from the looks on their faces – and the gimlet gleam in the eye of the hell-bent Myrcella, whose agreement was the most important of all – the plan would go ahead. Only Jaime, Brienne, and a couple of others saw the obvious problem – but they also saw Stannis’s reasoning for it, and so they all, him included, remained silent. What else do we have?

And so the plan was drawn up, to no one’s particular satisfaction. When the meeting was done Jaime barged his way back out, into the corridors, thinking that surely there must be some way around this, and yet knowing at the same time that there was not, how else—

And then he heard his voice called: “Ser Jaime.”

He looked around, but the only person here was Stannis’s greyscale daughter, and it surely could not have been – no, wait, she was looking his way.

And there they were, the Kingslayer, and the last heir of House Baratheon, a girl so insignificant he could not even remember her name.

Maybe she suspected the same, because she took the liberty of introducing herself. “I am Princess Shireen Baratheon.”

“I know,” Jaime lied.

She was quite alone: no guards, no retainers.

“May we talk?”

“I—” Jaime frowned. Nothing about this seemed quite right. But so be it. “Someplace private, you mean?”

She nodded to a side door off the hallway. “This should suit.” Still somewhat baffled, Jaime followed her in.

The room was dark, with no windows, the sort of place you only went when discretion was your primary intent. If they found the pair of them in here, it would require a great deal of awkward explanation.

“Ser,” the princess began. “You are no doubt wondering why I am talking to you. It is because I have a plan. A plan that is not my father’s. It is a plan that may doom us, but I do not think it is any less likely to do so than my father’s.”

It would be an understatement to say he was curious. “You do not think we need to attack the Rock?”

“Oh, we need to attack Casterly Rock, indeed. But not necessarily with violence.”

“Forgive me, my lady,” Jaime said, “but that sounds awfully naïve.” Sounds like something Tommen would say.

She went on: “There is the matter, of course, of why I am raising this with you. Well. If my father is to accept this plan, it must be supported by both sides. Ordinarily I would try Lady Myrcella, but I fear her desire is vengeance before all else. Understandably, perhaps. But… well…”

“You are of a different worldview.”
“Yes, ser. She wants vengeance against her mother. I am more like her brother, your nephew. Lord Tommen and I both hoped to achieve a reconciliation. And if we fight your sister here and now, that chance of reconciliation will be permanently endangered.”

Jaime nearly flinched. She sounded too familiar. “You and my nephew would have worked well together.”

“Yes, ser. But that is not to be. So I am asking you.”

His brain thought, this is folly. She is a child. His lips said, “Tell me your plan.”

Chapter End Notes

Before anything else, I have to thank Anglocat, without whom I could never have gotten anything resembling this chapter onto the page. You may remember that the last time I updated, I mentioned that I would need a little help getting a bit more of KOTN onto the "printed page". It's all up there in my head, but I really had no more energy to get it down. It is very difficult to write in someone else's voice (GRRM's), and it took me a long time and a lot of effort to get back to it.

I'm intending to get a few more chapters down over the next couple of weeks, which will bring the story up to a nice stepping-off point. It may well be that we never get the entirety of KOTN - or at least not the blossoming epic story that I've been building up to all this time. I have spent quite a lot of time trying to build the best ending for you guys, while not sending myself insane, and I think I have finally hit upon it.

So. Chapters have been cut. Ideas have been pared back. The ending is not going to be what you expect, at all. Many of you will not be happy. But some of you, I hope, will be. I don't know how long it's going to take me to get there.

And yet we will reach it, somehow. The road has an ending, somewhere.

Welcome back.

-SGH
No Words for Dead Men

Chapter Summary

Recap: After the Battle of Castle Black, Jon Snow returns to the land of the living. The combined army of the Night's Watch, the Northerners and Daenerys Targaryen is now preparing to journey to Eastwatch, where Daenerys's fleet is moored.

Chapter Notes

Co-authored with dandy23.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

THEON

Theon Greyjoy was going to die.

He could feel it, growing in his bowels like some fungus, eating him from the inside out. Only— it did not hurt, not at all. Maybe it was that he half-expected that he might survive, even if he knew that was impossible – but he had survived everything else, hadn’t he? He had survived the dungeons of the Dreadfort, the horrors of Winterfell, captivity in Bolton and Greyjoy hands alike, the scorn of all Northmen. How, then, could a mortal wound kill him? Sometimes he wondered.

But it would. He was mortal, if only barely. It was just that he no longer felt pain, or fear. Unless…

Unless pain and fear were the only things that gave you humanity, in which case, he was not.

The Northmen had found him out in the yard, covered in soot and blood, his side torn open by the wound Ramsay had given him – or rather, the wound he had accepted as the price for killing Ramsay. It was a price well-worth it, Theon had decided. At least now he could say without a doubt that he had died for something.

But he was dying, that was inarguable. All that remained was the question of whether his death would come that way, or the other way. The other way being a block and a sword. The Northmen, after what seemed like an eternity spent spitting on him, had finally decided that Theon Turncloak must die.

It seemed absurd, at first. Not only was Ramsay dead, but the Greatjon Umber and both his uncles, and Maege Mormont, and Big Bucket Wull, all those great paragons of Northern justice, were dead.
and gone. But Rickard Ryswell and Galbart Glover remained. Theon had thought that they might leave him alone to die of his wounds, but instead they had him dragged up before the court in the ruined Shieldhall. “You are accused,” they said, “of the betrayal of your king, Robb Stark, of the murder of numerous Winterfell soldiers, of Ser Rodrik Cassel, Septon Chayle, Goodman Mikken the armourer, Goodman Joseth the horsemaster, Maester Luwin…” They continued to read a list of names which they must have taken from someone in Winterfell. Theon recognised each in turn. Among them were names he had no responsibility for: Ser Rodrik Cassel had died to Ramsay’s men, and he hadn’t killed Chayle outright, only thrown him down the well.

He had Bran Stark’s implicit forgiveness, of course. He could say “your lord released me from my cell the last time I was here. He sent me back to the Iron Islands, because he knew I could do more good there.” But he was tired of lies, and of half-lies. So instead he said, “and the miller’s boys.” He watched them with his haunted, cold eyes. “You must not forget the miller’s boys.”

They were plainly surprised by this. Maybe they had wanted him to resist, so that they might argue back against him, and in pursuing justice against the Greyjoy criminal they might establish the rule of law which had been shattered in the mad defence of Castle Black. Instead here he was, nodding along with them. “I betrayed Robb,” he said brokenly. “I betrayed my king, and his House, and his lord father who raised me. I murdered those people. I did.”

When he told them that, the lords of the North seemed to soften, somewhat. “Well,” said Galbart Glover, sitting up. “I suppose…” He frowned, unable to comprehend what he had heard. “You have nothing to say in your defence?”

“There is nothing to say,” said Theon Greyjoy.

“Then we must sentence you.” He sounded almost regretful. He looked at Rickard Ryswell, as if he wanted him to pronounce the sentence; when no reply came, he cleared his throat. “Theon Greyjoy,” he said, “in the name of the late King Robb, you are hereby sentenced to die on the morrow, with your head to be struck from your body.”

On the morrow. Theon was not sure he could last that long. But he went back to his cell and resolved to wait. And what did it matter if his time ran out before that? He would die either way.

Suddenly he felt a light fall across his face. He looked up, and saw that it was coming through the door, in a narrow, bright yellow beam. A moment passed, and another, and then the door opened wide and Jon Snow was silhouetted in the doorway, black against yellow-white.

Theon felt his legs give way. “Lord Snow,” he croaked.

Jon did not reply. His eyes were so dark they seemed black. As warily as one would approach a snake, he advanced across the threshold and into the room. He paused for another few moments, surveying the scene before him, and then he sat.

Theon did not think Jon was going to speak first, so he took it upon himself. “I’m supposed to die tomorrow.” As good a way to start a conversation as any.

“I know.”

It occurred to Theon that there were things he could ask Jon he could not ask anyone else. Maybe it was meant to be this way; maybe I was meant to ask. Otherwise I would have died in the Grey Keep. He cleared his throat. “What was… what was it like?”

“What was it like?” Jon sat on the ledge, opposite him. “You mean dying?”
“Yes.”

The eyes went blank and black. They stared past Theon, and it seemed, for a moment, that they
could see nothing closer than infinity, than that other world. “Quick,” Jon said. “Easy. Not without
pain, but… the pain does not last long. And it hardly seems to matter. At least not…” He stopped;
swallowed; debated with himself. Then decided, for whatever reason, that if there was one person he
could tell this to, it was Theon Greyjoy, who had been condemned for years. “…at least not the
physical pain. Not the stabbing. What hurts is… all the things that go unsaid or undone. Things you
should have done, and now never will.”

Theon stared at him. Something about Jon’s tone did not match his words. “Do you wish,” he said
hesitantly, “that you had stayed dead?”

“I don’t wish anything about that. Only… dead is dead. I fought my battles. I lost my battles. That
should have been that. That should have been all.”

Theon nodded. “Sometimes I wish I had died at Winterfell, before… before Ramsay. I could have
done it myself. I could have fallen on my own sword. It would have been easier. It would have been
kinder.” He looked up at Jon, but he was thinking of someone else in Winterfell. “The night before,”
he said, “Maester Luwin came to me. He told me that there was a passage out of the castle which I
could use to escape. I could go to the Wall, he said. There, a man’s crimes would be forgotten. I told
him no. I told him ‘I am not going to Castle Black, where Jon Snow can murder me in my sleep.’”

Jon’s face betrayed no emotion. “You are asking me whether I would have done so?”

“Yes.”

“I was not at Castle Black when Winterfell was sacked. I was beyond the Wall, with Mance and…
—most likely you would have taken your vows by the time I returned. By then, there would have
been nothing I could do against you.”

“But would you have, if you were there?”

Jon considered this for some time. “I was young, then, and rash. When… when I learned that Lord
Eddard had been executed, I thought to desert my vows and ride south, to Robb. I thought… we
could have fought together. I was wrong, of course. My brothers brought me back, and they did so
rightly. But if I had gone…”

“You would have fought by Robb till the bitter end,” Theon said. “As I should have. You would
have died at the Red Wedding.”

“Would I have?” Jon’s eyes had been solemn their whole conversation, but now they became
haunted. “Would I have, though? It is no secret that Lady Catelyn felt no love for me. The bastard,
the reminder of her insecurity. And Robb… would he have sacrificed his mother’s contentedness at
the cost of his half-brother’s? Especially when it would mean angering all of the Tullys. When I rode
south, I harboured notions of being what Aemon the Dragonknight was to his kings. I would make a
name for myself as a fighter, and be indispensable to Robb. They would give me a name in return.
The White Wolf, perhaps.” He smiled humourlessly. “I was young then. But now I think and I
realise I could never be what Robb was, or anything even close to that.

“I was jealous of Robb, Theon. I was jealous of him my whole life. He was better than me at
everything.” He paused a moment, as if listing those ‘everythings’ in his head. “I was jealous of you,
too. For your birth, for a start; for you would be lord of the Iron Islands someday, and I would
always be nothing. And I was jealous because Robb could see you as a companion, whereas he
would only ever look upon me with pity. Stark, Greyjoy, Snow: one of those is not like the others, and never can be. And yet someday, I know, I would have tried nonetheless. That would have been my undoing.”

“As it was mine,” Theon said. “But you would never have betrayed Robb, Jon. Not as I did.”

“Not as you did, no. But I would have betrayed myself. I would have sat by Robb’s side, pretending everything was alright, living a half-life until the end of my days. At least here at the Wall I could make something of myself. It sounds selfish, but…”

“You’re glad you didn’t go south.”

“Yes.”

“You’re glad you didn’t die beside Robb.”

“…Yes.”

“You thought you wanted to be a Stark, but really you just wanted to be someone.”

“…Yes.”

For a long time neither of them spoke. Jon shifted in his seat, uncomfortable. Theon sensed a question was coming. He was right. “You and I should not be here,” Jon said. “I should have died when Ramsay killed me. You should have died at his hands, too. A man cannot help but wonder…”

“If there is a reason to any of this?”

Jon nodded. “Lady Melisandre talks about the Lord of Light and his plan. She thinks my return was part of something. Azor Ahai reborn, she thinks. She has never said it outright, but I know she suspects. But the Lord never spoke to me. Not while I was living, and not while I was dead. No one spoke to me. I am not some prophesised hero, and I do not intend to be.”

“What will you do, then?” asked Theon.

“I will fight.” Jon said this uncertainly, as if affirming it to himself more than anything else. “I will fight the Others, until either they are dead, or I am. But I cannot lead. No longer. I cannot send men to their deaths, not even for the common good. And when all is done… I suppose that will be all for me. My fight will be over.”

“As mine is,” said Theon.

Jon hesitated. “You could… if it were up to me, I might be tempted to spare you. But…”

“You do not want to go against the Northmen. Not now, when we need unity more than ever. I understand. I am ready to die.” There. He had said it. No going back now.

Jon nodded. “Come the morrow…”

“How will they do it?”

“Quickly. Cleanly. A sharp sword. One swing.”

“Will you…?”

“My father taught me that the man who passes the sentence must swing the sword.”
“But you did not pass this sentence.”

“No… and yet…”

Theon understood before Jon understood himself. “You feel that I am your responsibility, somehow.”

A pause, then a nod. “It is strange, still. Before, I was the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. Now… nothing. All I have to cling onto is the fact that I was raised in Winterfell.” He did not say Stark, Theon noticed, nor Snow, only raised in Winterfell, that distant lonely place. “Which means I am left with you.”

“I do not envy you,” Theon said.

For the barest second it seemed that Jon might laugh. Instead he just shrugged. “I cannot kill you, Theon. I cannot see the point in killing you either, truth be told.”

“If you are not here to kill me or to save me, then why are you here?”

Jon thought about that for a long time. “Because Ramsay Bolton took something from both of us,” he said at long last. “There is a hole in both of us where our hearts once were. We were broken, both of us. We stood back up, both of us. But neither of us is the same as we were. We were not fixed the same way, and maybe we never can be. I feel… like a shattered sword, melted back together. The blade looks whole, aye, but you can still see the joins and the cracks and it will never be as strong again.” He paused a moment. “Surprising eloquence is another one of the gifts of my resurrection.”

“Was that a joke?” Theon asked, disoriented by the suddenness of it.

“I think so.”

Theon’s mouth twitched in the barest of smiles. “It suits you.”

Jon paused, as though to say something else, but instead he stood to leave. He reached for the door handle, just as Theon called to him. It should have been you, after all.”

Long pause. Jon’s face scowling. “What do you mean?”

“You should have gone south with Robb. It should have been you. Because you might have been jealous of him secretly… But you would have never given up on him. And I was wondering… wondering why Euron sent me back to Castle Black, instead of just killing me then and there. I think… I think it was because he wanted me to give up. To kill hope. To remind me that no matter how hard I – we – fought, it meant nothing.”

“He was wrong,” Jon said.

“Yes. We had hope.” Theon felt a spasm go through him; was that hope, there? “We need hope.”

Jon stared back. Might have said more. But what was there to say? Theon understood that. So he stared back, and stared those grey eyes back, watching all the way as the door closed between them and darkness returned.

He leaned back against the wall with a sigh. Something swelled in him; he felt lighter; freer; bird-spirit. One burden on his shoulders shrinking. And as for the other burden…

One fatal blow that he would scarcely feel. He had heard of cases where it took two or three strokes
to sever the head. But he wouldn’t feel it. I won’t.

That night he dreamed of Winterfell. A wooden sword in his hands. Laughter as Arya’s arrow sprouted in the bullseye instead of Bran’s. Robb, Jon, grey shapes across the courtyard, dead, alive, what did those words even mean? Winterfell bleeding under Ramsay, Bolton blood streaming down those stone walls, but it never belonged to you, Bastard, it never belonged. It was always theirs. Always mine. Always ours. He thought, for the first time in a while, of Lord Eddard Stark, with one hand firm on the pommel of Ice because he that passed the sentence should swing the sword, and one hand on Theon’s shoulder – when had that been? Had it really happened? Did it even matter? It could have happened.

I could have been one of them. Could have been. And yet – I could not have been. Could never have been. I am a Greyjoy too. A Greyjoy and a Stark, almost. I just never knew it.

The guards arrived a little after dawn. They did not bring chains. They let him walk out onto the snow unbound, on his own. Brave. Let me be. Teeth chattering. Fingers shaky. But he didn’t have to feel it. Not if he didn’t want to. Barely felt the eyes of the crowd on him. He saw Daenerys Targaryen, gowned all in snowy white wool – so this was her, then, the great dragon queen – and yet she did not matter in the slightest.

They laid him down gently. No block. He would die kneeling. The death of a nobleman. Noble man. For me, some mercy. Mother’s mercy. Undeserved. Felt almost bitter. Taste of iron. Her red hair. Salt. Snow. Jon Snow watching, turned his head, saw. A nod. Executioner. Galbart Glover? Is it? He could never tell the Glovers apart. But no time for them now. Time dripping away bittersweet and sticky like honey gloopy dragging on and on and on and the tall stone cliffs and his mother scratching her knitting needles and saying his name, “Theon,” my name is Theon, I know that now, it always has been, I know my name, my name is Theon, I know my name I know my name I know my name I know my.

Chapter End Notes

Thus ends Theon Greyjoy.

I think it is a trope of many fics that Theon goes out in this way, but I couldn't see any other way of doing it. Originally I had planned for him to die during the Castle Black battle, but this final conversation with Jon was the real ending I was always going towards.

On this chapter I would like to credit dandy23 as co-author, for filling in all the gaps I left.
Note: The text above is a portion of a larger story or novel and contains content that is not relevant to the question. It is included for context and to ensure the natural text is a coherent and complete representation of the material.
They asked her, do you want to say a few words, do you want to light the pyre? She wanted neither. Get it over and done with, she wanted to tell them, but she just shook her head and hoped they understood. So Robett Glover and Lord Howland Reed said the words. And they were exactly that: words, just words.

He did not take long to burn. And afterwards the Northmen went in to drink away their sorrows or to drink secret toasts to his memory, but Arya did not join them. Instead she walked through the castle, and found a secluded rampart, facing the dark waters of the Bite and the pale grey gloom of cloud beyond. The wind, which had been keening loudly most of the day, had died down to a whisper. That was strange: an absence of sound in a place where she was certain sound was meant to be. But it was just that. Mist and clouds.

Then the sound came. But it came not as a storm wind but as footsteps, quiet behind her. Arya turned, and came face to face with Edric Dayne and Gendry. Lord Edric – for he had introduced himself to her as Lord Edric, not as Ned Dayne, as he had the first time they met – led the way. He and Gendry both wore somber funeral black, but Edric wore it more comfortably, while Gendry seemed awkward with even the slightest touch of the ceremonial.

And so Edric began: “Lady Arya,” he said, very stiff and formal as ever. “We saw you leaving the feast.”

“It wasn’t much of a feast.” The idea of a funeral feast was very strange to her. What were you supposed to be celebrating? The life, or the after-life? Neither were worthy of it. The person’s life was over, and the person’s after-life was nothing. Which, she knew, wasn’t better or worse than anything. Nothing is just nothing.

“Yes,” said Edric. “I reckoned you might say that. Only… well… we came wondering if—”

“If I was all right?”

“Yes.”

How the hell was she supposed to reply to that?

“I’m fine.”

Edric nodded. “I thought you might say that, too.”

He could talk in circles like this for hours. “What do you want? Say what you mean.”

“I…” He looked taken aback; he shouldn’t have been. “Well, I… we—” (Again the strange ‘we’, which made her think Gendry wasn’t really a part of this at all.) “We only thought you might be glad of some company, my lady.”

“Your company?” Arya looked away from them. “And what will either of you do for me?”

Another pause. “I don’t know,” Edric said at last. “It was just an idea. When I lost my father—”

“No one cares about your father,” Arya snapped. It was harsh, of course, and she knew that, but right now she wanted both of them to go away. She glanced back out to sea.

They did not leave. She could feel their presence – though nervous – right behind her. She could hear Gendry shifting from one foot to the other. Arya was about to turn and give them something to
run from when a voice said, “Might be for the best if you do as she says.” Then: “Aye. Definitely for the best. Before Lady Arya gets it into her head to cut your hearts out.”

“We were just—” she heard Edric Dayne say, but he either silenced himself or was silenced, and without another word he withdrew. Arya listened to his footsteps fading, with Gendry’s following close behind. But Asha Greyjoy, new-arrived at the top of the tower, did not leave her. Instead she came to Arya’s side, and they looked out over the battlements together.

“Dying’s shit,” Asha said.

Arya nodded. “Yes.”

“Happens to all of us sometime. You’d have thought that would have made it less worse, but it still creeps up on us.”

“Yes.”

“My father’s death. That was sudden. Not sad, but it came from nowhere. Not what we expected. My uncle Harlaw, that hurt worse. Still fresh in the bones. And my mother and my brother. I don’t even know about them.” She paused, bit her lip, iron-taste of blood. “You must think I am doing a poor job of quelling the hurt.”

Arya said nothing. Felt nothing. Had no feelings eitherwise.

“When an ironman dies, they are sent out to the sea on a raft, with a coronet of driftwood and seaweed pressed to their flesh. How do you do it for your people?”

“We just bury them.”

“Hmm. I like that. Simple. Myself, I’d sooner just be put in the earth than sent seaward, or my ashes scattered over cliffs as the dragonkings would have it done. The quicker we get over it, the quicker we can get back to things.”

Arya looked at her. She is not telling me to forget Rickon, but there is something… would that be best, mayhaps? She chewed her lip. He used to chew his lip too when he was small. Surely. Did I remember that, or did I just make it up as probable? Possible. She looked up. “That’s a good way of thinking about it. Forget about it all.”

“No,” said Asha Greyjoy, the older woman. “That’s not what I’m saying at all. Burning, sailing, it’s all ceremony. All a way of trying to transmute your feeling as something that’s not really true. It was my father that died, and a tradition does nothing but tie him to a dozen grandfathers and great-grandfathers I cared about even less. Your brother is your brother. And you need to mourn him, here and now, in your own way – once, fateful, now, else you will be half-mourning him evermore in someone else’s tongue.”

“And does that work?” Arya asked.

“For brothers?” Asha gave a strange twitchy shrug. “It has for me. You mourn the little things. Things that have no significance for them, but they do for you.”

Arya did not think it would work, not really. But she figured there was only one way to find out. And besides, it made sense, didn’t it? I am a ghost torn between here and there, she thought, maybe all I have to do is commit myself to here or there. And choose.

So, under Asha’s careful eye, she went down from the tower and back to the quarters that had been
made up for her in the Sea Dragon Tower of the Merman’s Court. It was a proper lady’s bedchamber with hangings of seafoam green, only she did not use the bed, preferring a pallet on the floor. There she sat, and thought back, searching out lost time. The frosty seaways beat about the tower base and sussurated images into her head: she thought of snowballs thrown, and Rickon scooping up the dissipate particles of snow, but being too young and too unskilled to form them into proper balls. So there he was, with his unmade balls of snow-dust, tossing them her way. And Robb ran into the image, and helped his little brother to mould them into some proper ammunition he could lob back to his sisters. Here were memories. *Treasure them*, she thought; or someone thought to her. *Treasure them*. And then she felt the tear slowcreeping, for the first time in what felt like years, tracking sweet and sugary down her face, and she remembered the first time she had heard Rickon’s gurgling sweet-baby laugh (or was that Bran’s? It was so long ago.) And Jon Snow’s fingers mussing her hair, unarranging the messiness, their grey eyes, thinking, am I a bastard, too? (Of course you aren’t, Lady Catelyn said). And the taste of lemoncakes, the sweet sugary confections Sansa loved to taste, so sweet, so sugary in the mouth.

Then she looked up, and she realised the sound was in the room. Right there. Because of course he was. Of course he bloody was. And somehow, she knew it was inescapable, formless. Always had been. *Stupid. No family. I can be your family*. And she was about to say his name, to say “Gendry” – she never said that – but then he came forward, and suddenly her tongue was gone, she could not speak at all.

He, too, had been on the cusp of speaking, it seemed, but then – he stopped – stopped dead. His stupid gormless face. His stupid gormless warm face. And he said, “Arya.” Which he never said, hardly.

“What?”

“You’re crying.” Something else he never said, either.

“It’s nothing,” she said. But even as she spoke something swelled within her and she found her feet moving forward found her arms wrapping round him and his arms wrapping round her and holding her firm against him firm as a pillar as a firm pillar as a firm fast pillar of blackened battered iron, bone, and flesh.

Chapter End Notes

*Alas, poor Rickon. We hardly knew ye.*
Valonqar

Chapter Notes

This one may seem a little confusing at first, because it starts in the middle and then works backwards. Read along carefully, though, and I think you'll get what has happened.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

CERSEI

Through darkness the ladder descended, lit only by the faintest of lights from Ser Robert Strong’s torch. The golden giant had gone ahead, while Qyburn brought up the rear. She could hear him in the kitchen larder above, moving the barrels back to their original position over the secret trapdoor, or as near to it as he could manage. Then the flap was closed above them, and the darkness grew thicker.

Abruptly, the ladder ended. Cersei stumbled, and nearly fell, but Ser Robert caught her arm and kept her upright. She blinked twice, three times, adjusting her eyes to the feeble light. They were standing on a shelf of rock, about fifty feet wide from the stone wall which it clung to the wide, dark chasm below.

“Your Grace,” Qyburn said, loud enough to make her jump. “If we follow the ledge, it will lead us to a tunnel. That tunnel will lead us out to the harbour, where with Ser Robert’s help we may procure a boat. That can take us upshore as far as Faircastle, perhaps.”

“Not in this weather,” the queen said. It had been storming for the past three days. She saw no reason why it would have stopped now.

“There is another tunnel that would take us to Lannisport,” said Qyburn. “We would have to find horses, or…” He saw her face. “Unless Your Grace has no intention of leaving.”

“I do not,” Cersei said. Simple as that. Yes, Jaime and Myrcella remained in the Rock, but Jaime and Myrcella now were not as they had once been.

_I know you did once_, Myrcella had said. That summarised everything. Maybe the names of her brother and daughter had meant something once, but they had been fleeting and inconstant. And what was there to say that Qyburn’s loyalty would not change, once they escaped? True, she had Ser Robert, but he was of Qyburn’s creation, and doubtless the maester held some power over him. No, the only thing she was sure of was herself.

She might still escape, in truth. Qyburn seemed bound to her every command, so she could leave him down here with a torch and the cache of his substance, and give herself an hour, two hours, to find
the tunnel to safety. But something told her that was all pointless, too. Her sons were dead, her father was dead, her uncles and aunts were dead. What do I have out there? Tyrion? Possibly not even that. No. Cersei Lannister would die here, in Casterly Rock, tonight. Maggy the Frog and her prophecies be damned.

Perhaps the most curious thing was that she knew she did not have to. There were ways out of this. The easiest would be to return to her cell as if nothing had ever happened, and await Stannis’s justice. She knew that Jaime was too weak to let anyone kill her. But it would still mean a life with the silent sisters when they returned to civilisation, if they ever returned, or imprisonment for the rest of her days. At least this way, she was going out on her own terms. And if she must go, then she was not going quietly. They would remember her, make no mistake. The sins and hypocrisies of House Lannister and House Baratheon both would be burned to ashes and dust.

As they should be. As they must be.

If you cannot win, Lord Tywin had told her once, then do everything in your power to make sure you do not lose.

And losing had all happened so quickly.

They had come that morning, in that stormy grey morning, and they should have known from the first that something was wrong. But the strangeness of it was irresistible. Cersei had risen early from bad dreams of Maggy the Frog and the valonqar with Tyrion’s grinning face. Below her balcony the city of Lannisport was faintly aglow, like a hive of fireflies waking after the long winter. Cersei had watched as the lights merged, converged, multiplied, diminished, and so on. Mist shrouded the upper levels of the Rock so as to obscure the subtleties of the action below, but on the bridge that spanned between Lannisport and the Rock there were no lights. The city, which had been at battle only so many nights before, had resigned itself to peace.

And yet, as she watched, something had changed. One of the lights had separated itself from the pack, and had advanced, so slowly, across the bridge that connected the city and the Rock by way of the Lion’s Mouth. She knew, now, that it was impossible that she could have seen such a light – she had been too far up – but she had seen it nonetheless. As if by divine providence. He wondered if he, at the bottom, had looked up and seen the lights of her chambers. Twin lights: his and hers.

Qyburn had arrived shortly afterwards, begging her pardon, but she did not need him to tell her what was occurring. “Your brother,” he said, before Cersei cut him off. “Alone?” she had asked.

“No,” said Qyburn. “There is an army on the drawbridge. A few hundred only, but—”

“Theyir numbers must have been thinned out,” the queen said. More than I had hoped.

“It matters not,” said Lord Qyburn. “Your brother may have an army, but he has come for you alone. His men have stationed themselves on the drawbridge. Regrettably out of range of our scorpions, but —”

“But Jaime himself is alone?”

“Alone, yes.” Qyburn nodded.

She had quietly bathed and dressed and come down to this throne room, attempting to ready herself for this meeting that was long-overdue and inevitable, and knowing that he, like her, must have spent the entire week doing the same. It was, in a word, destined to be. We came into this world together. We cannot leave it apart.
And so it was that she, Cersei, found herself here, armoured in the same gilt-breastplated gown she had worn that night on the city walls, while Ser Jaime Lannister, late of the Kingsguard and the Queensguard, former Hand of the Queen, former counselor, former brother, made his echoing passage down the long empty hall towards her. The stones and the marble of the hall amplified his every step, and each echoing reverberation met the previous one and echoed off that in turn, and again, and again, and it seemed the room would never be still.

Then he stopped.

There were about fifty feet between him and the throne. She could see, in the brazier light, that he had abandoned his Kingsguard armour – not only that, he had abandoned armour altogether. Jaime wore a jerkin of dark leather, and breeches the colour of spilled wine, and the sword that both of their sons had sometime held. The faint light made it hard to discern his expression, but she knew her brother so well that the way he stood was enough to understand it. Defeat, she thought. He is defeated. The thought maybe should have pleased her, for his defeat was her victory, but instead it left her oddly hollow, too.

“Cersei,” he said. He had said it a thousand times before, a thousand thousand, but never with such broken pain.

The queen did not reply.

“We need to talk,” said Jaime.

The queen did not reply.

“Please…” he said.

The queen did not reply.

“We can’t go on like this.” She could see, in his eyes, whatever resolve he had possessed coming in abandoning his body entirely. The lips, lover’s lips, parted in silent prayer—

“The dead are coming,” Cersei said. One of them stands before me. “Is that what you have come to tell me, ser? The dead are at our gates, and only by fighting alongside you and Stannis Baratheon can I stop them and save our people.”

He heard her bitterness; he flinched, but did nothing more. Only: “Yes.”

“He stole my son from me. He stole my daughter. And now he’s stolen you.”

She knew that any of those statements would draw some reaction from Jaime, and they did, a weak, “That’s not true.”

“Oh?” Cersei said.

“You know it’s not true.”

He was wrong. More than that, he was lying. “Prove it, then. Say it. Say it’s not so. Tell me what happened. Your queen commands you.”

Jaime looked like he was on the verge of saying it. But in the end, whatever new moral code had grown inside him refused to let him speak. His teeth ground together, fighting one another – as Stannis’s did.
Cersei turned away, disgusted. “How did he convince you of this? Did he talk to you himself? No – not that. Stannis has all the charisma of a rock. Myrcella, then?” She saw Jaime stiffen a little in anger. *A little more.* “Or was it that wretch Brienne of Tarth?”

The mention of the Tarth woman made Jaime snap, as she’d known it would. “He didn’t have to convince me,” he said.

“You thought for yourself?” the queen said dryly. “Oh, well done, ser.”

He shook off her mockery. “Cersei, this is mad. It has to stop. And it has to stop today.”

“I will not stop. I will not yield. It is you who needs to stop your madness, Jaime. Because if you do not, you, Myrcella, and your precious wench of Tarth will die because of it. I will not open those gates. You hear me, Jaime? *I will not yield.*”

“He won’t kill you. I won’t let him.”

“You think *that* is what I care about?” Did he know her at all? – did he think she was so shallow that her life was what she was protecting? “Jaime, if he enters this castle, I will prove that the reality is anything but. My life is not what I am protecting.”

“What do you mean?” he said, frowning – but in his frown there was a suggestion that he already knew.

“Yes, Jaime,” she said, “and how will you live with that on your conscience? One more crime to add to the rest.”

His eyes widening: “You wouldn’t—”

“I would. All my life, I have only ever wanted one thing. To keep this family together. I have lost Joffrey. I have lost Tommen. I have lost Father, I have lost Myrcella, I have lost you. You know what remains, though? The idea. The legacy, Father would call it. House Lannister, as it is. Lions. I will not let you hand our House over to Stannis. If I have to burn this kingdom to the ground to protect what remains, then I will.”

“You won’t,” he said.

“Are you going to stop me, Jaime?”

“I will if I have to.” But he was looking at his feet as he spoke. Could not say it to her face. Some lies were too great.

For some reason that pleased her. And yet it annoyed her. *So weak.* “You don’t even believe that yourself,” the queen said. “Look at me, if you believe it. Look at me!”

He did not look. And she knew he couldn’t. “You need me,” she said, “you need me too much. If you want to stop me, Jaime, for good, you know what you have to do. And we both know you can’t do that.” A pause: a sadistic pause, some might call it, but if you could not be cruel to traitors, they would never learn a thing. “How does that make you feel?” the queen asked.

After the longest time her twin finally answered. “I hate it. I hate that I need you.” When he looked up there was something in his eyes – or rather, there was the absence of something. The green light was gone. That look was a defeated man. Gone. “Without me,” Cersei said, “you are nothing. A one-handed knight without a cause. Gods help you, Kingslayer. You must be truly lost, now. You’ve been searching for a cause all your life. Honour. Duty. A king you believe in. Love.” That
made her smile: flashes of a memory. Stab him, and twist the blade. “The things we do for love, eh? That’s the difference between you and I, Jaime. You are weak enough to need that sort of thing to believe in. You were never truly weaned off your heroic stories. Their insipid, heroic blatherings. And there’s so little left now…”

She stared down at her twin. “Kneel, then. Kneel before your queen.”

Was it her imagination, or did he bend a little, at the waist? As if it were old age, of all things, that plagued him? Then, with remarkable resolution – or so he no doubt thought it, the damned fool – he rose up tall, and said, “I will not.”

“You will not?” It was almost enough to make her laugh.

“No,” he said. “I will not. Because I do not want to.”

Imperious. Childlike. And yet – something about the simplicity of his words made them all the more affective. She decided to play along. “And what do you want, Jaime?”

“I want—” For a moment his words failed him, and he had to start again. “I want Mother back, so she can put a thousand doors between us. I want Father back, so he can banish you a thousand miles away. And I want my son back. I want my boy back. As it was, before you took him away.”

Is that supposed to win my heart? Spare me your bloody tears. “That was you,” she said.

“No, Cersei. That was you. And I won’t let you hurt anyone else.”

He turned his back. As if he really meant to walk to the doors, and straight out of the room, through all the guards, with their spears and swords, all these men loyal to her. But as was his wont, Jaime Lannister again presumed too much. All she had to do was wave her hand, and the men at the doors stepped into his path, stopped him dead then and there.

Cersei lifted herself, gently, from the throne. Her footfalls rang high and proud in Casterly Rock’s hall. And as she advanced, Jaime had no choice to turn, to face her, to see her, watch her, hear her roar. He looked at her, she thought, with something strangely akin to… was that disappointment?

“No one walks away from me,” Cersei said. As she did so, Robert Strong’s looming shadow came in from her left. One word, the queen thought, one word, Jaime, and I could kill you now. And—

A loud creaking sound filled the hall. It took her a good few seconds to realise what it was. The doors. But why are they opening the doors? A moment more, and then, all at once, she knew. “Qyburn,” she began, but by then the first bars of the song of steel had been struck; somewhere, out of her view, swords were clanging, smashing together, and shields. Quarrels flew; one of the knights on her right went down, caught in the neck, the blood pulsed out surprisingly quick before the queen’s very eyes. Ser Robert Strong turned to face her assailants, and in that instant Jaime leapt towards her, caught her round the arm, and wrenched violently backwards. The move was such a surprising one and her heeled feet so unsteady that she had no choice but to flail along with him, sliding sideways across the floor – Qyburn and even Ser Robert too slow to react. She moved for a dagger that had been dropped on the tiles, but someone kicked it aside and then someone else had her pinned; she was dragged backwards, held fast, and only then (and then only partly) did she comprehend what was happening.

She learned, later, how it had happened. Qyburn was the first visitor to her cell, communicating by means of a secret message sent down by one of his little birds. They came in while you were with your brother. Using your dromonds. Landed at our harbour. Did not hear them because of the
After that she figured most of it out. Jaime’s arrival had been a mere distraction – a clever, calculated one, but a distraction nonetheless, which was all Jaime was really fit for. But then there was something she had to admit she was impressed with. It was not only an army, Qyburn had written, they brought children to the front of the lines. Our men could not fire on them. In the end they had to open the gates, because the wights were starting to climb the bridge. And her guardsmen – her ‘loyalists’, could not let children die. How noble of them. Well. They would see, now. Those children will fare no better than any of the rest of them.

And yet she could not help some residual bitterness. Was this how Ned Stark had felt, as his men died around him, betrayed by the gold cloaks? Ser Robert was still fighting, and Qyburn was clinging close, but they had been pushed, in a matter of seconds, into one back corner of the room. Everywhere else was carnage. Lannister men were everywhere, but it was impossible to tell loyalist and traitor apart, and indeed, half the men seemed to be doing nothing at all. They were coming in through the front door of the hall, but up the back steps too, and those men mingled with soldiers in the livery of Baratheon and Bracken, Blackwood and Tyrell and even Martell here and there. It was all too fast to be properly comprehended, and then, all at once, there was nothing left to comprehend. The battle had stopped. The floor was littered with bodies, but the swords that had cut them down were put away. It was bizarre, grotesque, made no sense.

The ring of men closed in around her. Jaime was there, but he said nothing more to her, only “take her away” to one of his men.

Then they had taken her down to a cell. By the time they slammed the door on her she had quite regained her wits, and it must have worried them, seeing the captured queen so calm and collected. But she had known from the first that Qyburn would get her out, sooner or later. It was just a matter of waiting. And of receiving whatever guests they saw fit to send her. Because there would be some.

After a time, she heard footsteps, out in the hall. There came a moving of bolts, a creak and a shudder, and then the great wooden door swung inwards, and Myrcella came in.

She had wondered if, on seeing her in this state, Myrcella was thinking about their uncanny resemblance, too. Mother and daughter alike were dressed in red and gold, though where Cersei’s gown was armoured with mock golden plate, Myrcella’s armour was limited to a pair of peculiar silver-and-gold bracers, halfway down her arms. She did not so much fight the battles as she did look the part. That made sense.

They sat, for a long time, in silence. Then Cersei spoke up. “The children were your plan, weren’t they?”

Myrcella nodded. “They were.”

“I thought so.” A pause. “Your grandfather would have been proud.”

“My brother would not have been.”

“Are you surprised that it worked?” Cersei asked.

“Somewhat.”

“You should not have been. I suppose you sorted through them, and found which ones were the sons and daughters and wives of the gatehouse soldiers, and sent them to the front of the column.” Myrcella said nothing, perhaps a register of her surprise. “You should have done,” Cersei went on. “No father could resist.”
Still her daughter said nothing.

“You would like to think I am heartless, wouldn’t you?” Cersei said. That pained her, somewhat. “After all, it is always more difficult to defeat a foe that is undeniably the root of evil, and nothing more. A queen who takes the throne to consolidate her own power, nothing else.”

“What did you take the throne for, then?” Myrcella asked.

Cersei gestured for her to sit. It took a while, but eventually her daughter acquiesced. “Sometimes,” the queen began, “I am still not sure. But power alone can buy you nothing. For my father, it was his obsession with legacy that convinced him to seek power, but that is as selfish as it gets. But…” She changed her tone. “You understand that if you had stood on that bridge alone and set the wights after you, I would have opened the gates to you.”

Sarcastically: “Of course you would have.”

“I would. Believe me, I – there is a story—”

“I have heard enough stories—”

“Only the one. Blood and Cheese.”

Myrcella frowned. “From… from the Dance of Dragons?”

“Yes. Blood and Cheese, and Queen – I think it was Helaena Targaryen. I misremember. A butcher and a ratcatcher. Anyhow, one of Rhaenyra’s sons had died over Shipbreaker Bay, so Prince Daemon Targaryen sent these men, Blood and Cheese, into Queen Helaena’s bedchamber in the Red Keep one night, where she was with her sons. Jaehaerys and Maelor. Cheese, this thin-faced weaselly man – or so I perceive him – told her that she must choose a child to die. When she offered herself, he refused him.

“So she had to choose, and all the while the massive man Blood was standing above her with his great cleaver, and he would surely have raped her, and her daughter, too, if he wanted to.

“I heard this story first when you were about eight or nine, I think. And, as many would, I took to thinking how I would answer Blood and Cheese’s dilemma. I realised… well, later on, I tried to dismiss the problem, but it always came back to me. I could not escape it. ‘You must choose’, Cheese said to me. He had the voice of my lord father. And—

“I knew, at once, that I could not choose Joffrey. He was flawed, yes. He was always… difficult. But he was her firstborn, and a mother can never love anything so purely as she loves that first fruit of her body – he came, you understand, in a time when I still thought everything might resolve itself; even if he was Jaime’s, I naively believed that he might bring some reconciliation with Robert – even if I was not his queen, at least I would not be so reviled, and… you will never understand it, Myrcella, and no one ever will, but Joffrey stood for something good, in my eyes. So I could never choose him.

“Then there was Tommen.

“That might have made sense. After all, that was Helaena’s reasoning when she chose little Prince Maelor, at long last; ‘he is young, he may not even remember’. And if I chose the same, it would leave me with a son and a daughter. A son to strongly uphold my honour, and a daughter who I could… reveal myself too. Yet… I could never choose Tommen.

“It is strange how our hypocrisies always come back to haunt us in the end. Tyrion tore my mother
open on his way out of her. She bled to death in minutes. And though Tommen never came close to killing me, there were places where I, in my paranoid delusions, was worried that I might die that way. They told me there was a boy, and I wondered, maybe, if this was fate coming full circle, and soon my mother would be there holding my hand, and she would say ‘do you see now, Cersei? Do you see?’ And in my imaginings, he was crying. Joffrey was screaming for Blood and Cheese to kill one of you, and Tommen was just silently weeping. And I knew that if I chose him, I would never forgive myself.

“Which left you. You standing there, not so much behind me as beside me, knowing that you must die, knowing that you dying would kill me, and yet knowing that if either of your brothers died it would kill me worse. So you volunteer. You sound many years beyond your age, and I am crying, no, Myrcella, you must not, but I do not wholly mean it, and I hate myself for it, and I know I cannot choose you either.”

All the while Myrcella had been watching her with eyes that were not quite believing, and not cold either. She had not swallowed the story as her brothers would have done. “So which of us would you have chosen, Cersei?” she asked, and did not flinch from saying her mother’s name outright. “Because I don’t think you are telling the truth. Not the whole truth.”

“If you have a suspicion, why don’t you tell me?”

“You wouldn’t have sacrificed me, I know that. I remind you too much of you.”

She was about to reply with denial, but a little voice in her head said: *She is right and you know it.* It sounded irritatingly like Tyrion. “I did think that once,” Cersei said. “Can you blame me for making the comparison? My father and my mother had three children, and so did me and Jaime. It is only natural to draw lines and match them, one to one. I thought you and I would be a natural fit. Jaime and Tommen – that was not my first thought, but now I realise their shared affliction of… morality. And Tyrion and Joffrey, because they always sat alone. But things are not so simple. You have Tyrion’s wit, Myrcella, and I think you have Jaime’s conscience too, only you do not respond to it.”

“And what do I have from you?”

Cersei considered. “The same frustrations. You and I are fated to live the same lives, Myrcella.”

“I am not like you.”

“No? I was you, once. There is a tapestry in the hall, outside my chambers. Look at it, and you will see yourself there, I am certain. It will be difficult for you to believe, but there was a time when I played at dolls and on the harp and in the gardens, and all these things you did not so long ago. And then, as you did, I realised that life is not a song. For you, it was Trystane’s death—”

“—which you caused.”

“—and for me it was my marriage to Robert Baratheon. As for Trystane, you may have loved him at first, but Dornishmen are fickle. You might have spent years with him, but he would not have spent them with you. And when you grew old, or too cold, he would have tossed you aside in favour of some tavern whore, as Robert did for me.”

Finally, that brought something out of her: a sort of impassioned plea. “Is it so hard for you to fathom that I loved Trystane?”

“I loved Robert, on our wedding day.” *Until he rolled over in his sleep, and whispered ‘Lyanna’. But people like you and I can never truly love anyone in this world, Myrcella, and we never truly}
will, save for our children. Love no one but your children, I once told Sansa Stark, and now I am
telling you the same.” She sensed that things were coming to an end, now. “If I can offer you one
piece of advice, it is that.”

There was a long, fraught pause. Then, slowly, Myrcella rose to her feet, and turned to the door. The
audience was done. Neither of them had won, but—

Love no one but your children.

“Myrcella!”

The queen said it perhaps too loudly, her voice filling with some unintentional fear. It was not
Myrcella leaving that she was afraid of. It was that this was it, and she knew so. This was the end.

Her daughter turned back to her.

It was not often that Cersei Lannister was lost for words. But what did you say here, now, with
everything falling apart around you?

You said what mothers said to sons and daughters everywhere.

“I love you.”

Myrcella looked back at her. Her eyes are without pity, Cersei thought. Her eyes are mine. “I know
you did,” she said quietly. Then she went through the doorway, and she was gone for good.

She wondered now, venturing through dark tunnels with only Qyburn for company (for Ser Robert
was a long way ahead), how much of that she had meant. Had the last been a panicked outburst? Or
was it more than that? Because if things went right, she might never speak to Myrcella again. And
the same if they went wrong.

It had been past midnight when Qyburn finally came for her, followed by the golden giant, whose
fists were mailed and covered in blood from all the men he had killed on the steps, of whom there
were six. He had brought her a great wool cloak to hide under, but it was not far to the tunnel, so she
did not really lead it. Once they were inside Qyburn had unshuttered his lantern and told her his plan.
Faircastle, he had said. But by then the queen had little interest in Faircastle. And so here she was;
here, now, wondering when the best time might be to disappear and make her way down to the
caches, where she could fulfil that promise, brokered by the voice in her head. Burn them all.

She had no doubts that Jaime would soon be after her; if he was not already alert, the six dead guards
would tell him the situation quickly enough. But Casterly Rock’s catacombs were vast, and besides,
her brother could not have brought a whole army down here. Even if he had already reached the
caches, he could hardly have many friends willing to venture that far down into darkness. That, and
he will not kill me anyway. He cannot. If he could, I would already be dead. Stannis would have
brought me out, and cut my head off by now.

All she had to do was overpower Jaime. If he was smart enough, or stupid enough, to come down
here at all.

Not long now.

Qyburn pushed through the next door. “Only a few more rooms left, Your Grace.” Was that a tremor
in his voice? Was he doubting, or was she imagining?

Either way, Cersei followed him through the doorway.
The room they had entered resembled a cavern, with a ceiling a hundred feet high and a hundred feet wide across. Yet its walls were not the artless edges and corners of a natural cavern, but purposely hewn out of the rock, the angles smooth and careful and deliberate. And along the walls…

Tombs.

Hundreds and hundreds of tombs.

Large tombs, small tombs, ornate tombs, simple tombs, stone, marble, gold, and everything in between. And within them: Lannisters old, Lannisters new, Lannisters beyond counting. Some of the names had worn away from the tablets at the base of the tombs, but others had weathered the years well, down here in the dry and dark. LANN, she read on one. On another: LORENT. On a third: CERENNA.

“When I was a little girl, I could have told you all their histories and lineages.” Cersei told Qyburn. “Back to the Age of Heroes, even. And here they all are down here. Ghosts with green eyes and golden hair.”

“Your Grace,” Qyburn said. “It is this way.”

“A moment.” She had, in the darkness, seen a golden glimmer. Many of the tombs were gold, but this one burned brighter than the rest, most of which were covered with a film of dust: brighter and newer. She could not say what impulse drew her towards it, but she advanced nonetheless, one slow footprint after another. There was a stone figure lying on the tomb. As the gloom around her softened it became obvious that it belonged to none other than her father.

TYWIN, it said, in tall, stone lettering at the base of his throne. The figure did not look entirely like her father. Somehow in life he had managed to be more stone-cut than his tomb statue. His eyes were accurately cold and lifeless. Fragments of ‘The Rains of Castamere’ trickled through her thoughts: And who are you, the proud lord said… only a cat of a different coat, that’s all the truth I know… and now the rains weep o’er his halls, with not a soul to hear?

“Stannis has come to the Rock,” she said quietly, to her father’s empty sarcophagus. “He will not have it, Father. The rains will weep here for the ages. If the Lannisters cannot have Casterly Rock, then no one will.”

A loud wailing breeze blew in from the eastern end of the tombs, and the tombs rattled in its path, and made loud, pitched noises, not a thousand miles from speech. She heard her father’s voice – higher-pitched than usual, but still unmistakeably his cold tones. “Live a lion,” he said. “Die a lion.”

“I will, Father,” she promised. “I will.”

“Your Grace,” Qyburn said, startling her out of the silence. For a moment she said nothing, hoping he would go away and the voice of her father would return, but then the maester spoke again, louder and more insistent. “Your Grace!”

Cersei spun round. “What is it?” she hissed, but even as she did so, she saw what had caught Qyburn’s attention. He was standing in front of a tomb: TYLOS, she half-read, or maybe TYTOS, but that was not what shook her. It was the fact that the tomb was open. Something had broken through the white stone, revealing a jagged dark abyss beneath.

“It is a broken tomb,” she said, curiously quiet. “Nothing more.”

“It is not the only one, Your Grace.” He pointed. “Look.”
She looked, and what she saw made her skin go ice-cold. The next tomb along was similarly defaced. A dark fissure had opened in the stone below the name **TYGETT**, and the hole underneath contained only emptiness.

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*One moment. Tytos and Tygett…* Lord Tytos had been her father’s father, a fat weak old man who featured in so many of Lord Tywin’s parables. And Tygett had been her uncle Tygett, a bitter, unsmiling man with whom she had little familiarity. And her father so close to them…

They bury them in order. Which means…

She began to walk down the row. Tytos, Tywin, Tygett, she counted in her head. Stafford, Daven, Damien… no, this is the wrong way. Along the rows now. Tybolt, Gerion, Gerold the Golden… She turned and walked back the other way. Through Tybolt and Tytos, Tywin… and Tommen.

Cersei saw the fissure. A horrible chill coursed through her, making her whole body shiver. “What have they done?” she said, aloud. “What have they done to you? Qyburn, they have—”

She stopped.

Where was Qyburn?

She turned to look.

Silence. Still silence. She knew, without looking, what that silence meant.

And then footsteps.

They came out from among the tombs.

At first she thought they might be children, so stooped and bent were their bodies, their arms and legs stiff with rheumatism, dragging along the stone floor. They wore the heavy armour and robes they had been buried in, eaten away by moths or scratched to death by rats. Their flesh, where it remained, was painted-pale; their eyes, so many of which had surely been green, were now bright blue. She heard their bones cracking as they moved, their sinews stretching, their mouths opening for wide, silent wails. *But they cannot scream,* she thought, and the idea was so absurd it nearly made her choke.

Then she saw something else.

The tomb wind picked up again, but this time it was Maggy the Frog’s voice that carried over to her. *And when your tears have drowned you, the valonqar will wrap his hands around your pale white throat and you shall know no more.*

He came with his arms outstretched. It was half a parody of embrace, and half a fulfilment of what Maggy had promised so long. Cersei was frozen to the spot, unable to move, as the pieces came together in her head.

It had never been Tyrion. But how could it have been? Tyrion had been born into the world beside her by little more than happenstance. Whereas this, the prophecy and the rest, was something she had created. Something that had lived with her from its very first breath.

Maggy the Frog’s final revelation. Proof that prophecy, wherever she lived, played the darkest tricks ever single time. Proof that death did not come to you in hooded robes with a scythe, but dressed in regal black-and-gold raiment, with a golden crown set lopsided in its ash-blond hair and dead black sapphires in place of its eyes which had once bled so green over the face from the tapestry she had
put up in her chamber, a line cut straight from his left ear to the right side of his jaw, clotted with
black blood.

And here he was.

Her death.

Her son.

Her valonqar.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading.

This is one of the hardest chapters I've had to deal with structurally. Originally it was
planned as a three chapter sequence - Cersei-Myrcella-Cersei, but that turned out to be
far too much going on in far too short a space of time, so I reworked it like this.

The final moments of this are something I've been set on for about two years now. I
think it's a horribly fatalistic twist, and though Cersei is not yet finished... well...

Let's just say that there are some characters I've had trouble killing off for good.

I'm currently considering options of how to end TCOS. It's clear that it's not exactly
going to go the way I'd hoped it would go. But this, in a way, is a good thing.
Whenever you write something like this, it's very easy to get bored of it. I suppose the
task that remains is to figure out where the actual ending is.
JAIME

He was in the bowels of the earth now. Casterly Rock stretched for miles above him, its caverns for miles below. The underground web of tunnels which bound the Rock together numbered in their hundreds, in their thousands. He knew that if he did not mark his way, he would never find it back to the surface again. Even so, his desperation to head after Cersei was such that he nearly forgot to bring chalk with him to mark the walls. Not that it would help him, if it started to rain.

So be it. The only comfort about being lost down here was that Cersei was probably lost, too. Oh, Qyburn might have memorised his way to whatever caches he had stored, but Qyburn was dead. Jaime had found him in an antechamber not too far from the Hall of Heroes, ripped half to shreds, but still barely recognisable by his cowl. So. The wights had found their way in, somewhere. Stepping around Qyburn, he continued downwards. He was pretty sure the caches would be deep beneath the earth, and somewhere reasonably central. There was, he remembered from his days of boyhood exploration, a great central column which pierced the Rock from base to top. Blowing that apart, he reckoned, would bring the whole bloody thing tumbling down. He could only hope that Qyburn had been intelligent enough to realise the same thing, and that Cersei was foolish enough or flustered enough not to have come to the same conclusion.

Rounding the curve of the next rock, he came upon a sight that gave him hope one second, and the quenching of that hope the very next second. First: a torch, burning in a human hand. Second: that human hand belonged to Ser Robert Strong.

The golden giant stood astride a rock platform about twenty feet wide, with a sheer black drop on both sides. In his hand he carried a massive iron-and-gold greatsword. Jaime, for his own part, had Lawbringer; the Valyrian steel caught the light well, and refracted it around the cave. But even so…

_I am nothing more than a fly against him. I will stand no chance killing him like this._

_Count your strengths_, Ser Benedict Broom had often told him, in the yard of Casterly Rock, as he trained Jaime and a dozen other boys with swords. There were certain laws. _Yes, he is fast, but he hits lightly_, Ser Benedict would bellow. _Yes, he is bloody strong, but he is bloody slow._ That wasn’t the case with Ser Strong, but…

_The man is a walking corpse. Wits are not his strong-point._

In a few moments he had a plan. It was hardly the best-formed plan in the world, but time was of the essence here. Without hesitating, Jaime stepped out onto the bridge, and began to loudly whistle and shout. “Over here! Look over here, you brainless oaf!” He got a certain satisfaction from pretending it was Robert Baratheon, drunk out of his wits. That Robert had been similarly single-minded.
Single-minded enough to, upon seeing Jaime waving, not question that as suspicious for one moment, and instead coming blindly lumbering after him.

*He is fast. Remember.* That thought struck Jaime a moment before the golden giant reached his full speed. Awkwardly, he turned on his heel and ran, and got away just fast enough. He did not bother looking back. *If he catches me, I die, simple as that.* So all he did was run, and run, and pray the blow did not come, though, of course he would not feel the blow, only he would hear the feet getting louder and louder and rumbling louder and louder and—

Jaime dived to his right. He had picked precisely the right moment. Unable to slow himself, Ser Robert Strong thundered past; Jaime crashed into the wall, but there was no time to think about it, a hundred dizzy thoughts swirled in his head, but the one that predominated was *get up, get back up,* Tywin Lannister screaming it; he stood, whirled, ran back the way he’d come, back towards the stone bridge, even faster than before.

He could hear Ser Robert Strong gaining behind him. Clearly the distraction had not been for long enough. *Well,* Jaime thought, *that hardly matters any more.* He leapt onto the bridge, kept going, faster, faster, and now he could feel the bridge shaking and rumbling and threatening to crack—

*Could this work?* It had been the plan of three seconds. Insane. And surely not enough to—

Jaime leapt, and timed that precisely right too, for half a moment later the bridge broke underneath him, and had he left it half a moment more, he would have gone tumbling into the abyss. As it was his feet barely made the strong rock on the other side, he tumbled, fell onto his face, fell forwards, his feet kicking in empty air. With a monstrous effort he heaved himself up, and turned to lie on his back. He half-expected to find Robert Strong looming hellishly above him, but the golden giant was gone. *As planned. As sort-of planned.* Though the bridge had been enough to withstand him stationary, the giant’s run had been enough to overwhelm its precise balance; both knight and bridge had fallen together into the darkness.

But there was no time to admire his handiwork. *Cersei is still down here,* he knew. *And her wildfire too, have no doubt about it. No time to rest.* Jaime scrambled back to his feet, breathing hard.

*Which way now?*

Ser Robert’s presence surely proved that he was going the right way; Cersei would not have left him to guard the bridge otherwise. With nothing more than this assertion, Jaime continued forwards. Down the tunnel. But his plan had its flaws, he quickly realised, for after some minutes the path came to a fork – right or left? He stared down both tunnels, hoping to discern some clue, but it was only darkness. And down here, a step into darkness might mean stepping off a cliff. The only problem was the darkness was equally indecipherable on both sides, nothing to distinguish—

Except. For a sound. A thin wailing sound, coming from the right? No, the left. Jaime crept towards it. Definitely louder. *But is it wights, or—?* He stared deeper. Still nothing. And then the wailing again. Could be wind through the caves. Or… it could be one of those prisoners who were rumoured to abide deep in the Rock, who no one had ever seen in twenty, thirty years, his father’s greatest foes. Did Cersei keep anyone down here? Jaime stepped closer to the tunnel, trying to hear more clearly.

And then, with his attention diverted left, something came out of the passage on the right and crashed into him.

There was a second, a long, endless second, where they just stared at one another: he covered in chalk dust and dashed with blood from Seven-only-knew-where, she bleeding from one arm, with
the train of her dress torn apart, haphazardly waving a torch. And then Cersei began to scream at him – quite literally screaming. She spoke a garbled language and told a garbled story; here something about Qyburn dying and there something about her being chased and here something about Tommen, a rambling, nonsenscial tirade that went on for maybe half a minute, till, with his hand gripping hers, she abruptly stopped.

“Jaime,” she said, very strangely, as if only just realising that he was here and what that meant. “You… you made it down here.”

“I made it past Ser Robert, if that is what you mean.”

She nodded; she did not seem to care. “He’s one of them, isn’t he? One of them. The dead. Like Tommen and Uncle Tygett and—”

“Cersei, what are you talking about?”

“They chased me,” she said. “In the Hall of Heroes. They killed Qyburn. They… I lost them.” Her eyes had a manic life in them. She looked as mad as Aerys ever had, watching one of his burnings. Which, of course, was not an entirely unreasonable analogy.

“And found me,” said Jaime.

“Yes,” she said. Abruptly her eyes changed, and she reverted to something more familiar and less animal. “Are you here to stop me, Jaime?”

He saw no need to be unreasonable. “I am here to return you to your cell,” he said. “I trust you will come quietly.”

There was maybe half a second where he hoped, perhaps naively, that she might acquiesce and decide that there had been enough madness for one night. But then the fire overwhelmed her again. “Let me pass, Jaime,” she said, in a strangled whisper.

“I cannot,” Jaime replied.

“Why?” She stood on tiptoes, trying to peer past him. “The wildfire is through there, is it not? I am going there. Are you going to stop me, Jaime?”

“I will if I have to.”

“As you stopped the Mad King,” she said, and gave a small, humourless laugh. “Will you put your sword through my back if I try to run, as you did with him?” She nodded down at Lawbringer, hanging in Jaime’s belt.

“I will do what I must,” said Jaime.

She laughed again. “Look at you. Thinking that you can still play the hero, after all you’ve done. After all we’ve done.” She stepped forwards, and though he desperately wanted not to, he had to retreat, one hand still on his swordhilt. Her eyes transfixed his. “The things we do for love,” she said. “The things we do to save ourselves, and the people we love.”

“How is this for love?” Jaime asked her. “Burning Casterly Rock… that will save nothing.”

“It’s not about saving it!” she screamed. “It’s about solving it! And this will solve it! Burn it all. Burn us all. If we burn, we all burn!” She shook her head in disgust. “You were always weak, Jaime.”
“If weakness is preventing the deaths of hundreds where I can, then I will gladly be weak,” Jaime said. “Cersei… Myrcella is up there. Your own daughter.”

“I have no daughter,” she said. “And I have no brother either, it would seem. The Jaime I knew died in a cell in Riverrun.”

“The Cersei I knew had a heart.”

Cersei made a thin, angry sound that threatened to tear his eardrums. “You think you ever knew me truly, Jaime? You think I was ever anything but this, that I have ever been anything but this? You think we – any of us – are anything but this? Look at you, standing there. You have a ‘Ser’ in front of your name, but when you strip that away, you are this.” She waved frantically to herself. “You, Tommen, Myrcella, Father, all thinking you were so high and mighty with your civilised ways and your golden armour and your ivory towers and your sacred books and your fucking white cloaks? This is what we are, Jaime! This is all we are! Animals! Hear me roar, we say, a Lannister always pays his debts, we say, and we think ourselves so much better than everyone, but the Targaryens had the right of it, Aegon the Conqueror had the right of it, a man is nothing but fire and blood trapped in the shell of civilisation and begging to be let free. This is what we are when everything is taken from us!”

He could no longer tell if she was crying or laughing. But seeing it, he wanted to cry himself. She was always like this. I have spent forty years on this earth, and I have spent thirty-nine of those deluding myself. “Cersei,” he began.

She leapt. He never stood a chance of reaching the sword, though his fingertips were merely inches away. She leapt upon him, her hands gouging his eyes, her teeth savaging his neck, her legs – now scrabbling through his, now running, and him stumbling to his feet and running after her, down the long precipitous walkway. Lawbringer was forgotten, he had only his feet now, and Cersei running ahead of him, half-blinded, towards the wildfire barrels, closer and closer and—

He reached out and caught the hem of her dress; the pair of them crashed into one another, tumbled sideways, she screaming and laughing and crying and both of them rolling over and over and over until the abyss suddenly reared up to meet them and then Jaime was on the platform and she was not, and she was left like that, hanging over the drop, her hands clutching his, her feet dangling in empty air. Jaime was left lying on his belly, holding her, the only thing holding her. For his own part he was full halfway over the gap; his feet were the only thing that still kept him holding on.

Cersei flapped, wind-swept, in the empty black air. She looked up at him. “Are you going to let me fall, Jaime?” she asked.

“No.” He said it without thinking. Once he had said that, he knew he could not change his mind.

“We’ll both fall if you don’t let go,” she said. She did not seem at all concerned by the darkness below her. “But I suppose it was only ever going to end like this. We came into this world together, Jaime. It makes sense that we would leave it the same way.”

Jaime knew what was about to happen a moment before it did. He tried to drag her back to the ledge, but too late. She gave such a pull to send them both tumbling into the abyss – she backwards, he forwards, locked in each other’s arms forever.

But the Jaime she wanted to take with her was the Jaime of her youth. The Jaime she had fucked a hundred times behind Robert’s back, the twin who had shared in her everything, devoted to her, undoubting of her, who would fight any man for her, a sword whirling in his right hand.
His golden hand.

Cersei never screamed. She just fell, clutching Jaime’s golden appendage to her chest like one last beloved child, and plummeted, down, down, down, till the darkness swallowed her up and there was nothing left for anyone or anything to say and the only sound left was that of the wind howling hoarsely through the caves and the sea booming in some distant place below. Jaime lay on the ledge, and did not speak, and did not speak, and did not speak.

Chapter End Notes

Listening to "Light of the Seven" while posting this, because, you know, it's appropriate.

So. The big five are down to the big four. Cersei is gone.

I think compared to canon, Cersei being out at Casterly Rock necessitated her to take less of an active role. But over these four(!) years, I have loved writing her nonetheless. And Lena Headey has done even more wonderful things with the character in the show, moving her from occasionally cartoonish into a fully-fledged portrait of sanity and insanity in equal measure.

Re: valonqar:

It had to be Jaime. A few people posted on the chapter before, perhaps thinking that I’d killed Cersei off then and there, but it was always and only ever going to be Jaime. This was how it was going to end from pretty much day one - and I really do mean that; even going way back to 2015, I knew that Cersei was going to go out like this. Maybe not in the same way, but certainly in the same place. And though I had the trick of the wights up my sleeve as well, this is the clincher.

For reference, though, I'm not a big believer in staunchly sticking to the valonqar theory; yes, Cersei can have whatever feeling she likes, but the thing about the theory is that it is entirely self-created. Hence Myrcella's survival. Cersei's destruction is entirely her own. And we can go through all the nuances of it - gold shall be their crowns and gold their shrouds - but if you ask me, it doesn't really matter.

***

I'm not sure when the next post will be. Make no mistake, I have it all planned out, and I know now exactly how this is going to end. But as is so often the case, thinking it up and writing it up are two very different things.

So if I do not see you before then, I hope you all enjoy Season 8, and whatever else is to come. I get the feeling this is going to be a very good month for ASOIAF/GOT fans.

SGH
BONUS: Some More Scripts

You may recall that a long while back during The Sunset Kingdoms days, I put up something vaguely resembling a script for "Battle of the Bastards", where Jon, Ramsay, Mance, Tormund and others fought the onslaught of the wights.

I don't have any new chapters for you as Season 8 starts, but I do have a couple more scripts for your perusal. The first, titled "Family, Duty, Honor", occurs in the first third of A Coat of Gold, and has a few changes from what we saw in the final version - interesting changes, in my opinion. Call it an alternate universe. The same goes for the second, titled "The Tower", which takes us right up to the final struggle of Jaime and Cersei, and the departure of the NW from Castle Black. It's maybe slightly spoilery, but it's all obvious stuff, I think.

Episode 504: Family, Duty, Honor

Episode 707: The Tower

Hope you enjoy these.

SGH.

End Notes

Thanks for reading. Comments are, as always, very much appreciated, and please leave kudos if you enjoyed it. Don't forget to subscribe for reminders on updates.

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